

Female College Athletes' Perceptions on Gender Stereotypes and Discrimination in Collegiate Athletics

Brandi Rayburn

Dugout Media

Steve Chen

Clarenda Phillips

Morehead State University

Abstract

Forty years later under the provisions of Title IX, there are still many criticisms concerning the lack of actual gender equality in female athletics. This study examined 63 NCAA Division-I female athletes' perception of the effectiveness of Title IX and gender stereotypes related to their athletic experience through a qualitative survey. The results indicated that female athletes still experienced performance- and behavioral-related stereotypes and biases, while participating in athletics. Participants also expressed the existence of gender differences in how athletic achievement was perceived and recognized. Researchers attempted to detail the need to continuously reduce the existing stereotypes and biases and offered practical suggestions for pursuing greater gender equality.

Keywords: Gender equity, female sports, stereotypes, discrimination, Title IX

Introduction

Women demanding gender equity from their male counterparts in sports has been a controversial social challenge in the latter half of 20th century. Due to gender inequity, women are often faced with stereotypes that are imposed on them by the society. According to Sage and Eitzen (2013), the American Society historically demonstrates the pervasiveness of male privilege. To maintain this unique "unjust" gender relation, people in society generally believe that men and women should fulfill specific gender roles. Stereotypes are laid out for a purpose to preserve social order (Sage & Eitzen, 2013). Males are perceived to be strong, dominant, independent, and athletic, whereas females are perceived as quiet, obedient, and nurturing. This social perspective is clearly demonstrated and heavily embedded in the sport realm.

As athletes, women are often perceived as inferior to male athletes due to the gender-related sports images and stereotypes (Sage & Eitzen, 2013; Castle, 2013; Vadhera, 2012). These misconceptions some what portray that women are more appropriate to participate in sports such as figure skating and tennis, because these sports tend to have a feminine appeal (Mayeda, 2011). Female athletes often have to prove themselves on the court to overcome barriers, stereotypes, and notions about their physical appearance and athleticism.

Although legislation such as Title IX has been established to improve and alter the level of inequity, many scholars believe and argue that there is still a long road to achieve actual gender equality in sports (Sage & Eitzen, 2013; Jones & Greer, 2011; American Association of University Women, 2010; Carty, 2005;). In this study, the researchers addressed common gender inequities in sport and surveyed the viewpoints of collegiate student-athletes toward those highlighted gender stereotypes and discriminations in sports. Researchers intend to provide more useful insights to athletic administrators, so they can avoid and reduce further biases, discriminations and gender stereotypes while monitoring their athletic programs.

Review of Literature

During the 1960s and 70s, the Civil Rights activists began to expose the gender inequity in many areas of the laws and society (Zimbalist, 2003). Prior to 1970s, girls and women faced numerous barriers and discrimination in an attempt to receive higher education (Davies, 2004).

One of the greatest accomplishments of the women's movement was to help the enactment of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibited gender discriminatory practices by any federally funded organizations (Byrd, 2012). Although the original intent of Title IX is to help females gain access to higher education and academic fields such as auto mechanics, medicine, and law (U.S. Department of Education, 1997), a great surprising benefit resulted from this legislation is in the area of athletics and sports. After the enactment of Title IX, popularity and opportunities for female sports participation have increased exponentially from 294,000 in 1971 to 2.8 million in 2004 (Brake, 2004; Garber, 2002). In 2008-2009, 182,503 women competed in college athletics, which made up 43% of college athletes nationwide (National Women's Law Center, 2011). Title IX has also been credited for its strong influence on the development of many female professional sports, such as pro-basketball, beach volleyball, and soccer, (Garber, 2002; National Women's Law Center, 2011; Robinson, 2012) and a record-high number of female athletes in the 2012 London Olympic Games (Killion, 2012).

Research shows that participation in sports is associated with better self-esteem, better grades, and higher academic aspirations in female athletes' overall life (Sage & Eitzen, 2013). Additional benefits of participation in physical activity and sports for girls and women include reducing the risk of obesity, ceasing smoking behavior, developing greater confidence dealing with life challenges, earning better grades, and experiencing less depression (Cano&Sidransky, 2006; Eitzen & Sage, 2013; Withycombe, 2009; Withycombe, 2011; Yarbrough, 1996). The increased participation trends and numbers clearly show the successful impact of Title IX in female sports and individual wellbeing. The aforementioned positive factors imply that sport participation may bring a lot of benefits to the female athletes. Unfortunately, as women and girls continue to participate in sports and physical activities, the issues and trend of gender equity and discrimination also surface to the scene.

Gender equity in sports and athletics is a heavily discussed topic and a complex issue because of a lack of standards and policies to enforce the actual treatment (Hoeber, 2008; National Center for Policy Analysis, 1999). Hoeber (2008) attempted to better understand the meanings of gender equity in athletics by conducting in-depth interviews with 11 coaches and administrators and 17 athletes. Hoeber (2008) concluded three perspectives in viewing gender equity: (1) universal equity, (2) conditional equity, and (3) a women's-only issue. The "universal equity" concept is about having equal access for both genders to play sports and be encouraged in sports. According to the "conditional equity" perspective, although providing males and females with same opportunities and funds is noble, it is not always practical under some circumstances (American Association of University Women, 2010). For those who see gender equity as a "women's-only issue", they simply think the focus should be helping women's programs stay even with men's.

Regardless of the differences in each of the gender equity perspectives, all these perspectives exemplify the inferior status of female sports. Gender equity reminded us not to ignore the hegemonic masculinity ideology embedded in sports that served to privilege males over females (Hoeber, 2008). Cunningham and Sagas (2008) clearly illustrated the gender issues and discriminations existed in sport organizations at various levels (macro, meso, and micro). Many discriminatory symptoms and practices can easily be found in financial decision-making, creation of schedules, equipment and supplies, travel and per diem, number of coaching staffs, use of locker rooms and other facilities, and medical and training facilities and services (Priest, 1994; Robinson, 2012). More importantly, minority women's rights and participation were severely impacted since the feminist movement within interscholastic and intercollegiate athletics did not concern much about them (American Association of University Women, 2010; Yarbrough, 1996).

The essence of Title IX helps ensure that institutions are free of gender-based discrimination and harassment across all programs; however, gender stereotypes do not leave the mind of public, spectators, and female participants. Sports and athletics have always been associated with male superiority, masculinity, and the masculine domain. Females are perceived as the weaker gender in various aspects such as physicality, mentality, and emotion (Sage & Eitzen, 2013). Even if they can compete, they are not perceived as feminine (Jones & Greer, 2011). Men are heavily encouraged to participate in aggressive and competitive team sports, while women are steered to individual aesthetic appeal sports such as figure skating (Schmalz and Kersetter, 2006). Because of these stereotypes, many women did not participate in sports.

Mass media is one of the most influential agents in society that glorifies the masculinity and muscular image of sports (Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999). Media may not purposefully marginalize or trivialize women's sports, but there are many evidences documenting that media favored and emphasized men's sports and masculinity (Cooky, Messner & Hextrum, 2013).

If female sports had received any significant media coverage, the representation was often flooded with sexism, racism, homophobia, and ageism (Pye & Stroud, 2011; Fisher, Withycombe, & Prewitt, 2010). Male athletes are pervasively shown on the front cover of magazines in their uniforms, athletic equipment or naked body, while female athletes are often portrayed by showing their body with sexy and glamorous poses. Lindsey Vonn's Sport Illustrated cover picture clearly demonstrated this biased trend (Pye & Stroud, 2011). Olympian weightlifter, Sarah Robles had a very hard time getting sponsorship because of her large physique (Marcotte, 2012). Strong sport-women would need to maintain a "beautiful" and "acceptable" appearance in order to conform to the heterosexist norms of society. This notion depicts the need of maintaining a balanced feminine image (Krane, 2001). Female beach volleyball players, divers, marathon runners would get a lot of media attention with their outfit rather than their actual sport performance or competition (Marcotte, 2012; Kane, 2011; Yu, 2009; Jones et al., 1999).

As spectator sports, female sports are not well respected, and are secondary to men's sports (Carty, 2005; McClurg & Blinde, 2002; Jones, et al., 1999). Past studies showed male sports received far more media coverage, broadcasting airtime and fees of broadcasting rights (Yu, 2009; Wann, Schrader, Allison, McGeorge, 1998). Despite the significant amount of progress has been made, according to the current amount of media coverage of female sports (less than 5%), it is easy for anyone to assume that women's sports are not popular and almost non-existent (Martinson, 2014).

Female athletes are not only being stereotyped by their ability and appearance, but also by their sexual orientation. Lesbian, homo, dyke, queer, tomboy, and butch are slang terms that are commonly used to stereotype female athletes as homosexuals (McClurg & Blinde, 2002; Griffin, 1998). Research has found that on average, one in every 10 Americans is gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Gorjestani, 2010). There are homosexual individuals in every profession; however, women in athletics are more likely to be labeled as a homosexual (Gorjestani, 2010). While competing sports that used to be the males' domain, female athletes tend to suffer from the notion of homophobia. The media puts even more pressure on female athletes by creating heterosexual femininity as a socially acceptable image. By utilizing the compulsory heterosexuality framework, Sartore and Cunningham (2009) identified how gender and sexual prejudice could impact female athletes' decision-making in sport participation. They found that female athletes were reluctant to participate, if their coaches were labeled as a gay or lesbian. Their parents would not allow them to continue to play for a homosexual coach as well.

According to Withycombe (2011), both gendered and racial stereotypes have dynamically impacted African American female athletes' athletic experience. Those negative stereotypes often trivialized African American female athletes' effort and achievement and triggered a sense of racial oppression. Therefore, Withycombe (2011) suggested that more studies should explore the sexist, racist, and classist incidences of African American female athletes' experiences at all levels sport participation in depth. From the academic perspective, Harrison, Stone, Shapiro, Yee, Boyd, & Rullan (2009) specifically pointed out that female college athletes were threatened by the notion of the "dumb-jock" stereotype. However, male athletes tended to care less about the association of the "dumb-jock" image.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

It is researchers' strong belief that athletic participation should be a means for females to break off inaccurate stereotypes and prejudices, build their body, skills, confidence and self-esteem, and empower them to freely express ideas and identity including sexual preference and orientation. Although progress has been made through education and enactment of Title IX to achieve the goals and benefits for athletic participation, while looking at college athletics from an economic and social perspective, there are still many stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory practices in existence that prohibit female participants from reaching those ideal goals.

At the juncture of 40th year anniversary of Title IX, this study once again explored female student-athletes' perception on the stereotypes toward the female collegiate sports and the impact that Title IX has on women's sports in collegiate athletics. It is researchers' intention to utilize the findings to reiterate the existence and exploring the level of those traditional stereotypes and discrimination in female collegiate sports.

Methods

Participants

The participants of the study include 63 female student-athletes from two National Collegiate Athletic Association-affiliated Division-I schools, who participate in volleyball, softball, basketball, tennis, golf, and cross-country. Both institutions are members of the Ohio Valley Conference located in the eastern region of Kentucky, with quite similar amounts of participants representing each school (33 and 30 respectively).

Instrumentation and Procedure

Participants were recruited with the support of surveyed institutions' athletic directors and coaches. After the Institutional Review Board of both institutions approved the project, the researchers brought blank surveys to many team meetings and invited the athletes to complete the survey. They were given the instruction concerning their rights of participation before giving their consent. The participants were recruited through a convenience sampling method.

The researchers surveyed participants with six open-ended interview questions that solicited participants' perceptions and opinions toward the traditional gender stereotypes and discrimination experienced by female athletes in collegiate athletics. Those stereotypes and discrimination were perceived by the media or experienced personally. The last two questions specifically examine participants' perception toward the effectiveness of the Title-IX and level of gender equality in collegiate sports. The survey questions are formulated based on the framework and concepts of past literatures relating to gender stereotypes and discriminatory issues in athletics and sports (Marcotte, 2012; Fisher et al, 2010; Cano & Sidransky, 2006; Krane, 2001; Miller & Heinrich., 2001; Yarbrough, 1996). A panel of sport management and sociology faculty members (n = 5) further reviewed the questions to ensure the quality of the instrument. Table 1 displayed all of the question items of the survey.

Table 1: Interview Questions

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1. Do you believe there is a certain stereotype for female athletes? (For example, how you act on the playing field, how you dress, etc.) If so, what are they?
 2. What are some stereotypes faced by female athletes?
 3. Do you feel that as a female athlete, you have to fight certain stereotypes, whether the stereotypes are racial, religious, body image and sexual in nature?
 4. Do you believe there's a difference in team or individual recognition based on gender?
 5. Do you think that Title IX has been effective? Do you believe that most institutions are in compliance with Title IX? State your comment.
 6. Do you believe there will be gender equality in sports? State your comment.
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Data were collected between February and October of 2013. Participants were informed that their participation for the interview was strictly voluntary, and their survey responses would remain confidential. The researchers were able to approach and contact student-athletes in person to administer the survey with the support of their coaches and athletic academic advisors. Each participant was given the purpose of the study and instruction to complete the survey. By completing the survey, they had given their consent for the participation.

Data Analysis

Each response of all qualitative questions was reviewed by at least two reviewers (researcher and researcher' project director or additional reviewer). The reviewer read the responses and summarized the responses by using key words to code the main themes. The reviewers compared the coded notes to consolidate similar key themes and terms together and tabulate the frequency of the appearance of those created terms or themes. If a consensus could not be reached, a third reviewer would be brought in to code the responses and to provide suggestions for formulating coherent themes. This process was adopted to ensure the reliability of the data collection process.

Results

The first two survey questions dealt with common gender stereotypes or discrimination perceived by the female student athletes. In general, researchers categorized all the responses into two main themes. One theme is related to the perception on females' athletic performance. The other theme is concerned with the females' social behavior and image.

For performance related stereotypes, the most common phrases or terms that described female athletes included: (1) ladies are not as good and strong as male athletes, (2) ladies are less tough and competitive, and (3) female sports are not popular and profitable. When dealing with the behavioral and image-related stereotypes, the most common responses were associated with terms such as: (1) being too manly, (2) not feminine enough in appearance (including the ways they act or dress), and (3) being perceived as lesbians.

The researchers further examined if the participants experienced any stereotypes and discrimination that they have fought against. Apparently, issues related to body image and sexual orientation were the main challenges faced by the athletes. Team athletes such as softball and basketball players tended to express these two types of issues more intensely. However, runners and tennis players were more likely to indicate that they had not experienced those types of issues personally. Please refer to Table 2 and 3 for detailed results on the summary of participants' qualitative responses.

Table 2: Behavioral, Performance-Related, and Image-Related Stereotypes

Theme	Frequency Count
<u>Top Performance-Related Stereotypes</u>	
1. Female athletes are not as good or strong as men	(49)
2. Female athletes are less tough and competitive	(17)
3. Female sports are not popular and profitable	(6)
<u>Top Behavioral and Image-Related Stereotypes</u>	
1. Being too manly and masculine	(47)
2. Being perceived as lesbians	(35)
3. Not feminine enough in appearance (including the ways they act or dress)	(29)

Table 3: Personal Experienced Stereotypes

Theme	Frequency Count
Body image	(11)
Sexual orientation	(10)
Not enough recognition	(4)
*No personal experience	(10)

There are a couple of unique points worthy of mentioning. Female athletes who participated in individual sport tended to express lesser degree (i.e., tennis and cross country) of prejudice and stereotype based on their sport experience. Minority athletes who played team sports (such as soccer and basketball) would comment that they had experienced severe degree of prejudice and stereotypes due to their appearance and race.

Nearly 80% of the participants agreed that there was a difference in popularity and recognition in sports based on gender. Some open-ended comments specified that the male sports received far more recognition than female sports. They believed that more recognition was given to the male sports regardless if they are team or individual sports. It also seemed that female athletes believed that have to fight for the spotlight and support constantly regardless of the level of their success.

The researchers asked the participants to describe the effectiveness of Title IX in terms of promotion in gender equity. A little more than half of the participants believed that most institutions were in compliance with Title IX in terms of offering the number of scholarships and opportunities for female athletes. Despite giving positive comments toward the effectiveness of Title IX in promoting gender equity, participants did not perceive that actual gender equity in sports existed. About one fourth of the responses indicated that gender equality in sports would never be achieved. They were pessimistic about the chance of achieving actual gender equality in sports. On the other hand, there were six responses that showed that "things" will get better.

Discussion

After reviewing all the entries and responses provided by the participants, it was evident that many female team sport athletes still perceive and experience common gender stereotypes and biases. Based on participants' individual experience, about 16% of individuals expressed they had experienced prejudice or were stereotyped due to their appearance (body image related issues) and sexual orientation.

Although Title IX has made a huge stride in changing the number of female sport participation and promoting gender equity, this study still shows that female athletes are not so optimistic about the existence of actual gender equality in sports. Female athletes must deal with stereotypes concerning their appearance and body image. Past literature indicated that body image and appearance are extremely important and has a lot of impact on female athletes' self-esteem (Sage & Eitzen, 2013; Sears, & Tracy, McBrier, 2011). Perhaps due to this notion, participants expressed that female athletes couldn't wear certain attire or outfits (i.e., baggy clothes, tight outfits, or something that exemplify sex appeal) and fear to look too muscular. Interestingly, some softball players expressed that they must wear make-up and bows in their hair to avoid being labeled as "lesbians". Female basketball players are afraid of being too masculine and manly, or exposing tattoos on their arms.

Despite the traditional stereotypes concerning female athletes' appearance and sexual orientation were well-recognized (Griffin, 1998), some runners, tennis, and volleyball players specifically indicated that they did not personally experience those stereotypes, nor were they being conscientious about those issues. In general, athletes of individual sports of current study tended to express lesser degree of stereotypes or prejudice than those of team-sport players did. This may be good news to see those individuals can be free from those types of stereotypes and discrimination. However, it seems individual-sports or certain team sports athletes (i.e., volleyball) were less likely to get stereotyped based on the nature of the sports and their physique that was built for their sport. They are often viewed as lean, agile, aesthetic and skillful rather than masculine and powerful. Certain participants' thoughts seem to confirm the acceptable cultural norms and beliefs about how female athletes should be look like (Mayeda, 2011; Schmalzand & Kersetter, 2006)

The stereotypes related to female athletes' performance on the court were probably the most detrimental factors that hurt female athletes' dignity. The findings of this study reaffirmed many problems identified by several past studies. Female athletes' performance and accomplishments were often devalued, under-recognized, and under-appreciated (Withycombe, 201; Carty, 2005; Jones et al., 1999; Wann et al., 1998). If audiences do not appreciate that ladies can be strong, powerful, athletic and competitive, how can they obtain any popularity and respect from general public and media? Interestingly, runners and volleyball player were also less likely to express that male athletes tend to receive far more media recognition. This phenomenon may be caused by lack of the media attention for male runners and volleyball players. Female basketball and softball players would strongly purport that male basketball and baseball players got far more recognition and budget on travel and equipment. Male athletes would tend to glorify their individual contribution and performance. This is opposed to some of participants of this study who would credit their success to teamwork.

Self-Reflection

The primary researcher played collegiate basketball at both National Collegiate Athletic Association Division-I and Division-II level. She personally observed great level of gender inequality at both of these institutions. Media attention and fan support were clearly favored toward men's basketball teams despite the success level. The gap was even stronger at the Division-I institution than the Division-II school. People would assume that female basketball players were likely to be homosexual because they were usually stronger and less feminine than female non-athlete students (McClurg & Blinde, 2002). Many aforementioned studies and reports had pointed out that the primary researcher's experience was not a unique individual case. Many female student-athletes are competing extremely hard to break those stereotypes and show the world that they can be feminine and athletic at the same time. As a lesbian, the primary researcher could understand and sympathize with others alike who are struggling to fit in and try to conform to the social expectations and norms daily.

Conclusions

For more than 40 years, Title IX has given females the opportunity to play and participate in sports like their male counterparts. This legislation laid the foundation of women's athletics in American history. Progress has been made in both education and sports. Since Title IX was instated, there has been a shift in the American culture that has begun to treat women as equals. Despite the progress that Title IX has made in promoting female participation, there is still a long road for our society to achieve actual gender equality. The primary researcher's personal participation in collegiate basketball gave her many amazing learning opportunities. She also encountered criticism and stereotypes challenging her femininity and sexual orientation, and appropriate appearance and image as well. Women in sports will face many stereotypes thrown at them.

However, it is important not to let those stereotypes defeat them, but to use them as motivators to change society's perceptions.

Undoubtedly, today's collegiate female athletes still greatly impacted by sexual stereotypes. They must be very conscientious about how to behave and dress themselves in front the eyes of public. They would need to be careful about expressing their sexual orientation in order to avoid homophobic related conversations or criticisms. According to McClurg & Blinde (2002), more female athletes began to believe their participation in sports did challenge society's perception and acceptance of women in sports. They tended to dissociate themselves from traditional feminism and gender issues because of the negative perceptions society associates with the team. Female gymnasts and softball players had embraced their athleticism and practiced the concept of "selective femininity" by not performing femininity in some social contexts (Ross & Shinew, 2008). For example, they would choose to put little effort into appearance to maintain a feminine image. This is a great way to express female athletes' free will and empower them to be their true self. Female athletes should be encouraged to fight the misrepresentation by the media (Fisher et al., 2010).

Apparently, no direct comment from the participants of this sample group indicated their concern on the association of "dumb-jock" notion with the athletic identity. Although this study did not reveal the similar finding as Miller and Heinrich's (2001) study, this is probably a positive sign, since they did not associate their athletic identity with a negative image of poor academic performance. Wrisberg, Withycombe, Loberg and Simpson (2011) suggested the proper services provided by sport psychology agency can help student-athletes dealing with performance-related and life-related problems. At this moment, the support on life-related issues such as managing a balanced athletic-academic life, handling stereotypes, prejudice, and pressure, and adjusting social life seemed to be less valued and underutilized. It would be ideal if the institutions can educate female student-athletes about the existing implicit social and gender biases and stereotypes. With the help of the athletic coaches, athletic administrators can implement educational workshops and counseling support to help student-athletes develop proper perspective to fight against prejudices and stereotypes

Women have tackled the stereotype that they should not participate in sports, show aggressiveness, or compete. Instead, they began to embrace physical strength and athletic prowess within the purview of femininity. Title IX should not be viewed as a rule that just deals with unequal number of scholarships or funds in gender. Nor should it be viewed as a cause that chops down men's programs due to lack of funds (Zimbalist, 2003). We should continue to inform general public, especially young females, about the impact of Title IX and be aware of its shortcoming as well (surprisingly, there were four respondents that did not know what Title IX is). The inequality and sexism are masked under the struggling economy. The pervasiveness of gender stereotypes, biases, and sexism are at the root of cause that prevent the achievement of actual gender equality. The researchers strongly insist that institutions of higher education have the obligation and responsibility to educate the essence of gender equality to every student. Furthermore, female athletes should be given the training and counseling to empower them face and break those ignorant gender inequality and stereotypes. The researchers' institution has a student club named "Student Association for Gender Equality" (SAGE). This organization should be a great partner to team up with the institution's athletic department to involve female students in training for awareness and activities for empowering oneself.

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