Let's (Not) Talk Sex: An Analysis of the Verbal and Visual Coverage of Women's Beach Volleyball during the 2008 Olympic Games

Kim Bissell, Lauren Reichart Smith

Journal of Sports Media, Volume 8, Number 2, Fall 2013, pp. 1-30 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/jsm.2013.0011

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/523031

For content related to this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=523031
Let’s (Not) Talk Sex
An Analysis of the Verbal and Visual Coverage of Women’s Beach Volleyball during the 2008 Olympic Games
KIM BISSELL AND LAUREN REICHART SMITH

This study represents a content analysis of five matches of the US women’s beach volleyball team during the 2008 Summer Games. Play-by-play commentary and between-play commentary were analyzed for all five games, and all court shots and camera angles were coded. The main objective of this study was to observe the visual and verbal aspects of the prime-time broadcasts of the women’s beach volleyball games to determine if the US female athletes were portrayed in a sexualized nature or determine if the athletes were reported on in a way that emphasized sexuality or gender first and athleticism second. Findings from over 1,500 comments and 2,500 camera shots were contradictory to past research, suggesting viewers were shown coverage of the games that often emphasized the athletes’ strength and athleticism. Practical considerations and implications are discussed.

Introduction

The Beijing Games secured a first place finish as the most watched event in television history, scoring 215 million viewers who tuned in over the 17 days of the games (Molloy, 2012). The Olympic Games are a multisport, multinational event showcasing summer and winter events. Participation in the Olympic Games now includes competitors from almost every nation. Currently, the Olympic program consists of 35 sports, 53 disciplines, and more than 400 events between the Summer and Winter Olympic Games (International Olympic Committee, n.d.).

The Olympic Games may be the one event that truly is worldwide. Rather than turning to the media to view the latest news on a conflict somewhere in the world, people turn to the media to watch the struggles and triumphs of athletes from all over the world. Nielsen Media Research reported more than two out of three people tuned in to the games—4.7 billion people worldwide (Associated Press, 2008).

Even though visitors from all around the world traveled to watch the
splendor of the Olympic Games, most viewers experienced the games through their television sets, making the experience a mediated one. Bryant and Rainey (2000) suggest that televised sports are infused into modern life in the home, the office, and beyond. The mediated nature of the games allows for the broadcast commentators and announcers to play an important role in the way the game, the players, and specific teams are represented and viewed by audiences. Viewers must rely on the visual coverage and verbal commentary in order to experience the games, since they cannot experience them firsthand.

Beach volleyball began in the 1920s in California, and by 2000 beach volleyball became an official Olympic sport for both men and women (Beach Volleyball Database, n.d.). Beach volleyball was selected for examination for this study because the sport was most likely to air during prime time, would be more likely to feature women as athletes (rather than teenagers as athletes, as in gymnastics), and arguably contains implicit and explicit sexual undertones with the close-up shots of players’ bodies and the small attire worn by the athletes. Therefore, the main objective of this study was to observe the visual and verbal aspects of the prime-time broadcasts of the women’s beach volleyball games from the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games to determine if the US female athletes were portrayed in a sexualized nature or determine if the athletes were reported on in a way that emphasized sexuality or gender first and athleticism second.

**Literature Review**

**The Gendered Nature of Sports**

Mass media play an important role in the world of sports because of the large number of spectators who watch sporting events via the mass media (Koivula, 1999). Researchers have demonstrated that a woman’s perceived athleticism is primarily based within cultural values of femininity and sexuality (see Hargreaves, 1994; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Lenskyj, 1986, 1992, 1994). Media researchers have criticized media coverage of sports with regard to gender because of the dominance of males on the sports pages (Hardin, Chance, Dodd, & Hardin, 2002). Female athletes in the media have been shown to consistently take a runner’s-up status. Sports media have helped define male athletes as strong, courageous, and competent while emphasizing female athletes’ sex appeal, femininity, and purported physical weaknesses (Bissell & Duke, 2007; Daddario & Wrigley, 2007; Kane, 1996).
Past research is rich with examinations of both print and broadcast coverage of professional leagues, the NCAA, and high school sports. Early findings have been consistent across all studies—print examinations of newspapers and magazines have concluded women receive fewer photographs than men, and the photos selected showcase sexual qualities rather than athletic performance (see Alexander, 1994; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Theberge & Cronk, 1986). Television commentary has been studied extensively across several different sporting events, including NCAA tournaments and the Olympics, and findings suggest evidence of what Messner, Duncan, and Jensen (1993) called “gender marking [and] a ‘hierarchy of naming’ by gender” (p. 125). Such gender marking means that women’s events are more likely to be promoted as “women’s events,” rather than just “events,” and commentators continuously point out the gender of the females (Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1993). Though many studies focus on language and commentary, other studies take in to account actual coverage time and reach the same conclusions: women’s teams typically receive less coverage than men’s teams, and the coverage women receive is marginal (see Coakley, 1998; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Kane & Parks, 1992; Tuggle, 1997). Coverage of women and women’s teams is greater when the sport is considered traditionally feminine or socially acceptable, like figure skating or gymnastics (Bissell & Duke, 2007). Women who participate in sports deemed to be more masculine, like soccer and rugby, receive less coverage (Cramer, 1994; Fink & Kensicki, 2002).

Recent research examining televised sports has found continued evidence with respect to the gender gap. Tuggle, Huffman, and Rosengard’s (2002) analysis of the 2004 Olympic Games and Tuggle and Davis’s (2008) analysis of the 2008 Olympic Games found that although coverage has increased for women, men still receive the most prime-time coverage, and that prime-time coverage for women still exists in socially acceptable sports, such as gymnastics, diving, swimming, and track. Billings (2008) concluded after a longitudinal study of both Summer and Winter Olympic Games that the time spent on coverage of women’s events had not improved significantly. However, examinations of photographs in print media have shown some promising conclusions—equal story amounts, photo amounts, and story prominence (Kinnick, 1998); equal coverage and comparable language (Vincent, Imwold, Masemann, & Johnson, 2002); and equal photograph numbers as well as more neutralized frames (Hardin et al., 2002).
Gender and the Olympics

Even though the present study does not make comparisons across gender, it is important to briefly mention findings that have examined the existence of differences in coverage based on gender. Despite the overall success US women had during the 1996 Olympic Games, men received more coverage time, and coverage given to women indicated a bias. For example, individual events were more likely to be covered than team events or events that contained physical contact (Tuggle & Owen, 1999). Studies of more recent sporting events have also had mixed results. As a point of illustration, some studies indicate that women have received more coverage in the Olympic Games in the past 12 years than ever before (Higgs & Weiller, 1994; Higgs, Weiller, & Martin, 2003; Phillips, 1997; Tuggle, Huffman, & Rosengard, 2002). However, Tuggle, Huffman, and Rosengard (2002) suggested coverage of women declined from the 1996 Olympics to the 2000 Olympics, with coverage of sports that contained power or contact going almost solely to men. Findings from studies of the Olympic Games since 1996 also indicate that men dominate over half of the airtime (Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings & Eastman, 2002; Higgs et al., 2003). Further, Billings, Angelini, and Duke (2010) found coverage differences for men and women in both clock time and commentary, with the difference in clock time increasing from 2004. Beach volleyball, gymnastics, and cycling were three exceptions in their analysis where women received greater coverage amounts. Men received substantially more coverage or airtime in track and field, swimming, and volleyball; and Billings, Angelini, and Duke (2010) further report that men garnered more airtime in general across sports than did female athletes.

While coverage of female athletes and their respective sports remains relatively low during non-Olympic years, female Olympic athletes have garnered a little more media attention in general newspaper coverage (Bruce, 2006), in photographs within newspapers (Hardin et al., 2002; Vincent et al., 2002), and in photographs online (Jones, 2004). However, many of these increases have been seen in individual sports, although in sports such as beach volleyball, successful teams have seen an increase in media coverage as well (Hardin et al., 2002; Tuggle et al., 2002; Tuggle & Owen, 1999). Despite the gains witnessed in overall airtime during Olympic years, the question about the quality and type of coverage still remains. Thus, this serves as one of several justifications for the present study. More specifically, when female athletes are covered by the media, is the coverage biased or sexist?
Verbal Coverage of Women’s Sports

Carroll (1956) remarked very early on that the structure and tradition created by society can be seen and created through language. Parks and Robertson (2000) advanced Carroll’s observation, concluding that males and females receive different treatment (within the culture of the United States), with males being granted privilege and females not attaining status. Often this differential treatment can be seen in the form of sexist language, language that exists within sports media and serves to reiterate gender-specific stereotypes and expectations (Bissell & Duke, 2007). Furthermore, several studies have revealed that the language commentators and reporters use when referring to male and female athletes in a mediated form emphasizes gender inequities (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988).

The language used by commentators and announcers when featuring athletes and their performances can help shape beliefs, attitudes, and values of the viewers (Lee, 1992). Weiller, Higgs, and Greenleaf (2004) suggest that viewer perceptions of athletes and sport in general can be shaped by the way commentators discuss the sport and the athlete. A viewer’s attention can be directed through narratives of background information, stories, and characterizations of the action on screen (Weidman, 1998). Language used by the announcers to convey the previous aspects becomes an important factor when considering how a viewer sees the athletes portrayed.

Studies of coverage during the Olympic Games have found commentary to focus on the athleticism, physicality, and commitment of men and on the appearance (both physical and apparel) and personal lives of female athletes (Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings & Eastman, 2002; Higgs & Weiller, 1994; Higgs et al., 2003). A descriptive analysis of the 1992 Winter Olympics found female athletes were trivialized and infantilized through the use of sexist language and emphasis of feminine characteristics, and the female athletes’ drive was attributed to human connections rather than competitive desire (Daddario, 1994). Female athletes have been described as “fun to watch,” “beautiful,” and “nice” (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988) or as “beautiful,” “elegant,” and “enchanting” (Daddario, 1994). Jones, Murrell, and Jackson (1999) note that female athletes are frequently compared to their male counterparts, and Eastman and Billings (1999) report that commentators spend significant amounts of time discussing a female athlete’s appearance and family life compared to a female athlete’s style or level of play. Higgs et al. (2003) have found that commentary about female athletes emphasizes physical traits and the athlete’s fashion or sense of style, and their study further suggests that this type of com-
mentary helps viewers form stereotypes or beliefs that a female athlete is a woman first and an athlete second.

Given the previous findings, the following research question that examines the verbal commentary of the women’s beach volleyball event from the 2008 Olympic Games is advanced:

Research question (RQ) 1: How do sport commentators verbally account for the athletic performance of Olympic women’s beach volleyball?

Visual Coverage of Women’s Sports

Though there is not as wide a body of research on the visual production aspects of sports (Krein & Martin, 2006), the research that exists points again to gender differences in the ways athletes are represented visually. Duncan (1990) analyzed sports photographs of women and concluded that photographs that showcase a woman’s physical appearance utilize the most ‘glamorous’ female athletes, pose an athlete in a sexual manner, showcase emotional displays, and showcase sexual differences (such as females being passive participants and males being active competitors), all of which contribute to the framing of female athletes as something other than an athlete. As previously mentioned, most fans experience sports through their television sets, making the experience mediated. “Between us and the event stand the cameras, camera angles, producers’ choice of shots, and commentators interpretations” (Clarke & Clarke, 1982, p. 73).

The most visually interesting medium in which to watch sports is television. Fitch and McCurry (2004) noted, “The picture is the story” (p. 107), and Greer, Hardin, and Homan (2009) asserted television is a medium defined by and remembered for its images. Previous studies have examined the relationship of camera shots, angles, graphics, and slow motion to viewer interest (Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999; Hanjalic & Xu, 2005; Messner, Duncan, & Cooky, 2003; Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1993; Messner, Duncan, & Wachs, 1996). Conclusions from these studies suggest more camera shots lead to the perception the event is more exciting (Higgs et al., 2003; Millerson, 1990). A faster-paced event is a more exciting event, and specific camera shots can emphasize a specific player or a specific body part. Zettl (1999) explained how camera angles can make subjects seem more powerful, feel more personal, and give a different feel to the action by using slow motion. All these factors combined have the ability to engage viewers or cause them to lose interest.
The examination of men and women’s Olympic track-and-field events by Greer et al. (2009) found coverage of the men’s track-and-field events to be presented as a more visually exciting event, using a wider variety of camera shots and angles and more motion special effects per minute. They concluded these differences could contribute to perceptions that women’s sports were less interesting than men’s. While limited evidence exists documenting the specific visual coverage of women’s beach volleyball, two studies examined the visual coverage of the 2004 Olympic Games. Bissell and Holt (2005) found in their analysis of visual coverage of female athletes published on NBC.com, ESPN.com, SI.com, and CNN.com that much of the coverage in general emphasized the female athletes’ attire, personal styles, and family history. Throughout the games, still frames from the beach volleyball games published in print publications and on the web focused on the backside of a player as she bent down to receive a serve (Bissell & Duke, 2007). Bissell and Holt (2005) found that two specific shots from the games (one of the US women’s players lying in the sand after falling on top of one another following a win and a second of Kerri Walsh bent over with her fingers near her buttocks signaling May of the play) were repeatedly run and reposted on the websites. Bissell and Duke’s (2007) examination of women’s beach volleyball from the Olympic Games found camera angles and camera shots to be used in a manner which objectified the female athletes by focusing on specific body parts, such as the chest or buttocks, instead of the entire body of the athlete, again suggesting a female athlete’s sexuality was more important than her athleticism. In contrast, Reichart and Bissell (2008) found that greater coverage, commentary, camera angles, and airtime were given to the women in an analysis of men’s and women’s beach volleyball from the 2008 Olympic Games; additionally, findings from an analysis of more than five and a half hours of playing time suggests that if any sexual difference was evident, it was on the part of the men’s team.

Given the limited body of specific research on sport production, the following research question, which focuses on the visual coverage of the women’s beach volleyball from the 2008 Olympic Games, is advanced:

**RQ2:** How do sport producers visually account for the athletic performance of Olympic women’s beach volleyball?

Additionally, the following question that examines how the visual and verbal coverage may work in tandem is advanced:

**RQ3:** How did verbal and visual coverage work in tandem to account for the athletic performance of Olympic women’s beach volleyball?
Method

Procedures

Content analysis was used to analyze several networks’ coverage of women’s beach volleyball during the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. During the 17 days of coverage of the Olympic Games, all women’s beach volleyball games were recorded and saved on DVR to be analyzed and coded at a later date. The purpose of this project was to analyze the play-by-play commentary, color analysis, and visual coverage of the US women’s beach volleyball teams throughout the course of the Olympic Games.

Following the work of Billings and Eastman (2002), Billings, Halone, and Denham (2002), and Bissell and Duke (2007), the researchers analyzed the on-air speech of beach volleyball commentators and the camera angles and court shots aired during game play. It is important to note that the coding categories used in two of the earlier studies were not created specific to beach volleyball but rather designed to analyze commentary of other women’s sports. However, Bissell and Duke (2007) used modifications of the Billings and Eastman (2002) and Billings, Halone, and Denham (2002) categories for their study of beach volleyball during the 2004 Olympic Games. Thus, it is argued these categories are applicable and appropriate in another study of the same sport. The 2008 games were televised on multiple networks, but the sample for this study came from NBC’s primetime broadcasts. All commentary under analysis included the start of the network’s coverage of beach volleyball (prior to the first serve) to the end of the game (showing players’ celebration after a win), before the network cut away to the host and transitioned to coverage of another sport. Each game was coded four separate times to ensure all commentary, camera angles, and court shots were coded properly; however, each was coded separately such that specific court shots were not linked to specific statements or sentences. All commentary and visual coverage for each unit of analysis was included on a single row within the spreadsheet. Comments were recorded as “between-play 1” or “between-play 2,” which meant that the first statement was assigned into one of the coding categories (described below) in the first column and the second statement was assigned into one of the same categories in a separate column.

Coding Categories

The unit of analysis was play between each serve, meaning all commentary from the start of one serve to the start of another serve. Broadcast
commentary was analyzed by employing several criteria: game status (preliminary pool games, round of sixteen, round of eight, semifinal, final); team 1 (name of country playing); team 2 (name of team playing against); game sequence (first of three sets, second of three sets, third of three sets); broadcast announcer gender (male, female); play-by-play commentary, which included commentary from the start of the serve to the end of the point; play-by-play commentary valence (positive, negative, neutral); between-play commentary, which included all commentary made from the time the point was over until the next serve began; who the statement was made about; between-play valence; camera shot; camera angle; and replay shots.

In the coding of all of the beach volleyball play, researchers coded all statements that were made while the ball was in play and from the time the ball was called dead until the start of the next serve. However, for the purposes of statistical analysis, the first five statements made were included in the analysis. It is important to clarify the unit of analysis as future researchers might want to employ the coding categories used here. Since the unit of analysis was the time from the start of one serve to the time of the start of the next, several comments or statements could be included within a single unit of analysis. The purpose of this was to see how or if commentary changed as a specific point evolved. The average number of comments made while the ball was in play was 2.3, and the average number of comments made between play (after the ball was out of play but prior to the start of the next serve) was 3.2. The unit of analysis employed in this study may seem broad and is certainly broader than what Billings and Eastman (2002) used, but it is argued this method allowed for a comparison of commentary made during play and after the play had come to an end within the context of a single point being played. It is argued here that the purpose of coding the play-by-play and between-play commentary allowed for greater analysis of the verbal coverage of the games and the athletes. While the play-by-play commentary might largely be relegated to the actual game calling, the between-play commentary could be anywhere from a few seconds to a minute or longer. This kind of airtime allowed the commentators greater ability to discuss the athletes in general, discuss their backgrounds, their attire, and their play.

On the coding sheet, each comment was coded into one of 14 categories and then was assigned a valence code of positive, negative, or neutral (see Tables 1–3). Each of the coding categories employed in the present study was adapted from Bissell and Duke (2007). One additional category, “other,” was added to the present study to account for commentary not appropriate for one of the other 13 categories. Each comment was also assigned
a code indicating the player the comment was made about. For example, a comment could have been made in reference to one of the two teams in general, one of the specific players on either team, or made in general, such as “Ball in play, score 14–10.”

The visuals were coded in a similar way by recording the camera shot, the camera angle, and each zoom shot used between the start of one serve to the start of another. Using an earlier game between Australia and Russia to check intercoder reliability, an overall reliability score of .88 was obtained using Cohen’s kappa. It is important to note that US commentators’ coverage of a non-US game may be very different from their calling of a US game; thus, the coders examined 20% of US games and rechecked intercoder reliability to ensure that the coding categories were appropriate. This yielded a .91 using Cohen’s kappa. Reliability for each individual coding category was conducted, and the coefficients ranged from .78 to 1.00.

Chris Marlowe and Karch Kiraly, a former men’s beach volleyball Olympian, were the play-by-play and color commentator’s for the women’s games, and Heather Cox served as the sideline reporter for the games.

While one objective of this project was to analyze the commentary during women’s beach volleyball play, analysis of the visual coverage of the game was also important because the researchers thought contradictions in coverage in the two forms might be found. Given the findings of Bissell and Holt (2005) in their analysis of still frames of the Olympic Games published on three websites and the findings of Bissell and Duke (2007) in their analysis of coverage of the women’s beach volleyball games during the 2004 Olympics, three categories of visual coverage of play were analyzed in the current study. While the videographers are not being criticized for camera shots that might feature a player’s back end, it is argued that the director for each game had multiple camera angles to choose from throughout the live coverage of the games, and the director would instruct videographers to pan up a player’s body or get a close-up shot of a player’s body. It is not argued that the visual coverage of the game should only include a wide shot of the court; however, given that multiple cameras were surrounding the court to get different camera angles and camera shots throughout the game, it is argued that if a tighter shot of a player was shown, it could have been intentional on the part of the director. Therefore, the three visual aspects of each game coded were court shot, zoom shot, camera angle, number of replays, and then during a replay, the court shot, zoom shot, and camera angle were also coded using the same categories listed above.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Commentary Code Categories for Play-by-Play and Between-Play Commentary and Visual Coverage of Women's Beach Volleyball during the 2008 Olympic Games</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Physical/Behavioral Comments about individual players (e.g., “good athlete,” “springs off the sand”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>mental/cognitive Comments about intelligence, mental skill/mental toughness (e.g., “reads the line well”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>affective comments about hard work/effort, determination, (e.g., “pushes herself through pain”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>dominance about the team as a whole rather than individual players, and comments related to a combination of attributes above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>leadership e.g., “strong leader,” “leads the team well”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>background 1 commentary about an athlete’s background related to personal or family issues (e.g., “May says her mother is with her in each game.”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>background 2 commentary as it relates to health, physical issues, training, practice, advantages, hardships as it relates to training, health, etc. (“May-Treanor’s black tape that covers her arm is for a shoulder injury.”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>game play e.g., “puts it away,” “May for the spike,” “Walsh serves”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>game comments reporting of current or past score, comments updating viewers on score of current or earlier game, weather, strategy, history (e.g., “US up 13–10 with May ready to serve.”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>other team all comments related to the other team (e.g., “Jie is up for the block.”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>personal information comments made regarding current personal life of an athlete (e.g., “After winning the gold, each talked about wanting to start a family.”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>looks, personality, sexuality comments about body shape, general looks and appearance, hairstyle, body art (e.g., “So many questions surrounding the black tape she’s worn on her arm, but it isn’t an endorsement or decoration. It’s for a nagging shoulder injury she’s had.”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>attire comments specifically regarding the attire worn by athletes during play (e.g., “The athletes have said they like the smaller uniforms and have no problems with coverage [laugh].”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>other e.g., “The diehards with their coolers at the ready sat through the relentless rain to watch the gold-medal match between the US and China.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Descriptives

Over the course of the two weeks of broadcasts of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games, a total of five Team USA women’s beach volleyball games were coded and analyzed. A total of 1,699 play-by-play or between-play comments made about the US team or US players were coded into one of 14 coding categories, including categories related to the team or a player’s physical/behavior skills, mental/cognitive abilities on the court, the showing of emotions on the court, leadership style on the court, dominance on the court, player background, player attire, and game play. All the televised portions of the games between the following teams were coded: the United States vs. Argentina, the United States vs. Switzerland, the United States vs. Brazil, the United States vs. Germany, and the United States vs. China.
In sum, a majority of the play-by-play comments were related to the
calling of the game or were related to updates on the score. While the
play-by-play calling often focused on the actual calling of the game, it was
in the between-play commentary where statements or comments about
individual players, their backgrounds, their personal lives, or their attire
would be mentioned. It was also in this area of the commentary where
more negatively valenced comments were found. In the analysis of the vi-
sual coverage of the games, the court shot (full court, half court, etc.) and
the camera angle (how much of the player’s body was shown) were exam-
ined. A total of 1,737 court shots were coded across the women’s games,
and a total of 1,487 camera angles were coded throughout coverage of the
women’s beach volleyball games. What follows is a discussion of the spe-
cific research questions posed earlier:

RQ1: How do sport commentators verbally account for the athletic per-
formance of Olympic women’s beach volleyball?

In an analysis of the first five comments or statements (all within the
same unit of analysis) made from the time the ball was put into play un-
til the time when the ball was ruled out of play, 850 play-by-play com-
ments were made during the five Team USA games. Of the 850 play-by-
play comments made, 9% (77) were comments about players with regard
to play (e.g., “Walsh is dominating the Chinese women”), 5% (44) of the
comments were about a player’s background (e.g., “Her nagging shoul-
der injury may be a problem for her today”), and 76% (650) of the com-
ments were game calling or about game play (e.g., “May-Treanor serves
the ball” or “The US team is up one set and leads the second 13–11”). Com-
ments made about the other team could have been about a player’s style
of play (e.g., “Jia needs to step up her play here to win at the net”), a play-
er’s mistake (e.g., “Cook completely lost her focus there”), or a player’s
background (“Rocha has tremendous experience and comes into this
game prepared”). Commentary about one of the 10 opponents (individu-
al players) Team USA faced represented 8% of the total play-by-play com-
mentary. None of the play-by-play commentary was personal information
about a player, and only 1% (12) of the 850 comments were about players’
looks, personality, attire, or sexuality. The remaining 16 comments were
coded as “other.”

In sum, the commentary made while the ball was in play often reflect-
ed what was happening on the court. The valence and the commentary
did shift after the ball was put out of play and commentators were wait-
ing for the next serve to begin. Of the 849 between-play comments made,
from the point the ball was ruled dead to the start of the next serve, only 44% (379) of the comments were game comments compared to 76% made while the ball was in play. Announcers made 132 comments (15% of 849) about players with regard to play (e.g., strength or dominance), and significantly more comments were made about a player’s background (8%, or 66) and about the other team (25%, or 213). Along these lines, the number of comments made about a player’s looks, personality, attire, or sexuality increased in the between-play commentary, with 24 (3%) of the 849 comments coded into this category. In analyzing the comments made about a player’s personality, looks, or attire, a large percentage of them (81%) were made in reference to the US women’s team or US players. Another 6% were made about the players for Brazil, and 4% were made about the Norwegian players.

Chi-square tests run to compare the category of commentary by the individual/team the comment was made in reference to indicated that 228 (71%) of the first comments made between play were about one of the US players or about the US team, and this includes commentary made when the US team played all other women’s teams. While the total number of statements made during the second between-play category was lower, the percentage of statements made about a US player or the US team was the same (71% of 268, or 190). The majority of statements made about the other team were game calling or game play (“Walsh serves the ball” or “May-Treanor is ready to receive the serve”).

Chi-square tests run on the first five comments, along with the respective valence codes for each, indicated a significant Phi and Cramer’s $V$ values for each (see Tables 4–6). Results indicate that announcer commentary made during play-by-play that was coded as game calling or game play was often neutral in valence (see Table 4). However, when the between-play comments were analyzed, different patterns emerged with regard to the coding category and the valence of that commentary.

The valence of between-play commentary also was largely neutral; however, the percentage of positive and negative statements was higher than during play-by-play commentary (see Table 4). Play-by-play commentary was then used with commentary valence in chi-square tests to determine what types of comments were most likely to receive negatively or positively valenced codes. When the chi-square tests were run, the first comment was analyzed with the valence code it received. Separate reports were run for each statement that followed; thus, the findings reported below represent a sum of the first five comments.

In an examination of all the first comments made while the ball was
being served, 8% were negative comments, 83% were neutral comments, and 9% were positive. Chi-square tests indicated that game comments received the greatest percentage of negative codes. Exactly one half of the negatively valenced comments were coded as calling of the game or game play. The same chi-square test indicated that the negative comments about the game were often comments made in reference to the other team’s poor play. Chi-square tests indicated that most of the positive comments made were about the players with regard to their specific play (e.g., physical dominance or mental toughness). Tables 5 and 6 present the results of the chi-square test examining the first play-by-play and between-play comments with the valence code it was assigned. Observational analysis of the games suggested that when a particular team started a game by dominating all aspects of it, the commentary would start off favorably toward the winning team, and then once the game was clearly in hand, the commentary would shift more toward the neutral category.

In sum, the commentary between play was more diverse across the coding categories and was more revealing in terms of commentary about a player’s background, about an individual’s style of play, and about her characteristics and attributes as they related to the sport.

### Table 4. Valence of All Play-by-Play and Between-Play Commentary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NEGATIVE</th>
<th>NEUTRAL</th>
<th>POSITIVE</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PBP1</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBP2</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBP3</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBP4</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBP5</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>total</strong></td>
<td><strong>5%</strong></td>
<td><strong>84%</strong></td>
<td><strong>11%</strong></td>
<td><strong>320</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BETWP1</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BETWP2</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BETWP3</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BETWP4</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BETWP5</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Play-by-play commentaries were made from the time the ball was put into play until the ball was ruled dead and the point over. Commentaries between play were made from the time the ball was ruled dead and the start of the next serve.
RQ2: How do sport producers visually account for the athletic performance of Olympic women’s beach volleyball?

In coding the visual representation of broadcast coverage of beach volleyball, several different types of shots and angles were coded. First, we coded the shot on the court. This included what the viewer saw whether it was the full court (often from a side view), a half court, a medium shot of a player, a tight shot of a player, a zoom shot—representing several other types of shots—or other. In addition to coding the view of the court, we also coded for the camera angle or the specific focus of the camera on the players—full body, a shot from the waist up, a shot from the chest up, a

### TABLE 5. Play-by-Play Commentary by Commentary Valence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NEGATIVE</th>
<th>NEUTRAL</th>
<th>POSITIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comments about players</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player background</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game play/game comments</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other team</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal information</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks, personality, attire</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

26 257 25 Total: 308

*Notes. Commentary 1 denotes the first comment made by announcers at the start of each serve; Chi Square = 52.41; Phi = .50; Cramer’s V = .36, p < .001.*

### TABLE 6. Chi Square Tests of Between-Play Comment by Between-Play Valence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NEGATIVE</th>
<th>NEUTRAL</th>
<th>POSITIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comments about players</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player background</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game play/game comments</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other team</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal information</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks, personality, attire</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15 269 36 Total: 320

*Notes. Chi Square = 87.85; Phi = .52; Cramer’s V = .37, p < .001*
chest-only shot, a buttocks shot, a face-only shot, a shot from behind a player, or other. Findings from an analysis of more than 1,700 court shots (multiple court shots could have been coded within the same unit of analysis) suggest that the visual coverage of the ’08 women’s beach volleyball games was slightly different than findings from the ’04 analysis conducted by Bissell and Duke (2007). In sum, 1,737 court shots were coded in all of the women’s beach volleyball games. Of the shots coded, 8% were coded as full-court shots, 16% were coded as half-court shots, 10% were coded as medium shots, 54% were coded as tight shots on one player, and 10% were zoom shots (see Table 7). While coding, we did not code camera shots to match specific comments.

Based on observation, live game-play shots tended to focus on all four players, while replay shots were more devoted to close-up shots of the athletes and plays being discussed. For example, if commentators were talking about a ball wet from the rain, the replay shot would focus more on the ball than the players. If commentators made a comment about the height and reach of Kerri Walsh, the camera angles in the replays tended to focus on the player’s upper body, specifically the arms reaching for the ball or blocking the ball. When the comments focused more on the personal life of the athlete, the camera shots were typically from the chest up. Kerri Walsh had special kinesiology tape on her left shoulder for most of the games. When discussing her health and training as it related to her injury, camera shots were mainly tight shots of her shoulder and the tape.

In analyzing the camera angle or the placement of the lens on players during each shot, 1,487 camera angles were coded. The camera angle could show the full body of a player, show a player from the waist up, show a player from the chest up, show a player’s chest only, show a player’s but-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF SHOT</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-court shot</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half-court shot</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium shot</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tight shot</td>
<td>942</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoom shot</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,737</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
tocks, show a player’s face only, show the player from behind, or be coded as other. Of the 1,487 camera angles coded, 35% of the shots were shots showing the full body of a player. Just over 45% of the shots showed players from the waist up or from the chest up, and fewer than 10% showed only the player’s face. Fewer than 5% of the shots were specific shots on a portion of a player’s body (see Table 8).

One type of camera shot not analyzed in earlier studies was the type of zoom shot used in visual coverage of beach volleyball; therefore, we coded several different types of possible zoom shots during and between play: wide-to-tight shots of the court; wide-to-tight shots of the players or of a player; a shot that moved up the body of a player; a tight-to-wide shot of a player or players; a tight-to-wide shot of the court; and a shot that shifted from one player to another. Of the 257 zoom shots coded during the women’s games, 46% were wide-to-tight shots on a specific player; 44% were tight-to-wide shots on a specific player; and 10% were camera shots that moved up a player’s body.

What isn’t revealed in the descriptive and frequency reports of the visual coverage of the beach volleyball games is the action being captured within the lens itself. For example, the wider, full-court shots were often ones used while the ball was in play. When a player was serving the ball, the court shot was a wider court shot. However, as the point progressed, the court shot and the camera angle would often get tighter, in many cases focusing on a single player. Often, if a player were going to the net to spike the ball, the court shot would be a medium shot with the player shown either full-body or from the waist up. When the athlete was in action, the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAMERA ANGLE</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full body visible</td>
<td>516</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waist up</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chest up</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chest only</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buttocks only</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face only</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From behind</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,487</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Frequencies of Camera Angles Used in Broadcast Coverage of Women’s Beach Volleyball Games during the Summer 2008 Olympic Games
court shot and the camera angles were ones that would showcase the athleticism of the athlete. The camera angle would often be a low-to-high angle, which would allow for the athlete being featured as a prominent and dominant figure on the court. In contrast, the tighter shots of the players or the shots that focused on a player’s specific body part were often found during the between-play commentary, after the ball was no longer in play. After the ball was out of play, one player might walk to the other and high-five her, and it would be during this type of situation when the court shots were tighter and the camera angles were focused on a player’s upper body.

RQ3: How did verbal and visual coverage work in tandem to account for the athletic performance of Olympic women’s beach volleyball?

While relatively few court shots or camera angles were specific to a player’s body, even fewer comments were made about the player’s appearance, attire, or sexuality. In some cases, the court shots that were tighter shots on a player’s chest could be construed or interpreted as an emphasis on physical appearance; however, the commentary made during those shots did not necessarily emphasize physical attributes. With that said, it is difficult to come to the conclusion that the combination of commentary along with the visual components of coverage led to an emphasis on sexuality or physical appearance. It is important to note that viewers are more likely to focus on the visual aspects of the game, especially when the players involved are wearing small bathing suits and have toned, muscular bodies. In this case, we would argue that a camera shot held on a player’s chest or buttocks, even for a few seconds, could lead a viewer to focus on those player attributes rather than on how hard a ball is served or how agile a player is on the court. As Bissell and Duke (2007) reported, it only takes a few tightly focused shots on a player’s behind before a viewer might become distracted from watching the game or wind up thinking of the players as objects rather than subjects. These and other findings are discussed below.

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that viewers were presented with nonsexualized coverage of the women’s beach volleyball event from the 2008 Olympic Games, which is a finding somewhat contradictory to earlier studies. Women’s beach volleyball has been featured in primetime broadcasts in previous Olympics, and the sport has become increasingly more popular with viewers over time. Even without the viewers’ atten-
tion being drawn to the tanned, toned bodies of the players, it is hard to overlook the spectacle when watching the Olympic Games. The present study was a content analysis examining primetime coverage of US women’s beach volleyball during the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. As Billings, Halone, and Denham (2002) report, on-air broadcast commentary is often characterized in two ways: as an “evaluative content . . . employed to characterize athletes, and . . . [as] specific language use employed . . . to characterize athletic performance” (p. 202). In the present study, we focus more on the second item as a means of understanding how commentator language could shape or influence the way viewers perceive an athlete or her sport. Earlier studies examining the specific language used to describe male and female athletes indicate that female athletes are more often described by their first name, are described as being good in a female sport (e.g., women’s tennis), and are often described or discussed in more negative terms than male athletes (Halbert & Lattimer, 1994). Based on previous findings indicating the existence of gender inequities in terms of broadcast coverage of women’s sports and given the nature of the sport itself, it was expected that coverage of the game might emphasize gender difference and might further accentuate the appearance attributes of players rather than their physical strengths. Findings suggest that coverage of the 2008 beach volleyball games was not reflective of special attention to the players’ bodies, their attire, or other appearance traits. Furthermore, the 2008 Olympic female athletes were referred to by their last name rather than their first name. Findings suggest that much of the broadcast coverage was game related and that discussions about the athletes were often centered around their physical and mental dominance on the court.

RQ1 examined how the commentary accounted for the athletic performance of the female athletes. In sum, a majority of the play-by-play comments were related to the calling of the game or were related to updates on the score. While the play-by-play calling often focused on the actual calling of the game, it was in the between-play commentary where statements or comments about individual players, their backgrounds, their personal lives, or their attire would be mentioned. This is an important finding because this finding suggests that the outcome of the game, or how successful the game was for the US female athletes, dictated the way commentators called the game. Since the US female athletes were ultimately successful in winning the gold medal, it is difficult to know how or if commentary would have been different had the game outcomes been different. However, it is important to note that the commentators were not reluctant to call out non-US players when a mistake was made or if it
appeared mental focus had been lost. This could also be explained by a nationalist bias.

Commentators were more likely to deviate from game calling after the ball was dead but before the start of the next serve. Very few of the play-by-play commentary represented personal information about a player, and only 1% of comments were about players’ looks, personality, attire, or sexuality. It is important to note here that while the ball was in play, the commentators were often calling the game as if viewers were not watching but listening. As the ball was being served into play, an announcer would often recap the score or recap the set the game was in and then would transition to comments about the game while in play. Examples of these types of statements include “May up for the spike” or “Walsh with a dive keeps the ball in play.” When the ball was in play for a longer period of time, announcers might mention a player’s specific characteristics with regard to the game. For example, comments such as “May is physically dominating this game” or “Walsh is such a strong leader for this US team” were coded while the ball was in play.

In the analysis of the comments made in reference to a player’s looks, personality, attire, or sexuality, very few comments were made during play-by-play or between play. Approximately 3% of the comments coded during all women’s games were coded as being about a player’s overall appearance. It is important to note, though, that none of these comments were made about players from another team; it was only the US players that had comments regarding their appearance, most of which was focused on the athletic tape that was worn by Kerri Walsh during the games. It is very possible announcers made a conscious decision to eliminate sexist language from the commentary and made a concerted effort to avoid commentary that might be interpreted as being specific to gender. When broadcast commentary of women’s beach volleyball is considered in light of the Billings, Halone, and Denham (2002) findings, we can report that the obvious gender distinctions found in previous studies—referencing female athletes by their first names and describing them in context of women’s sports rather than sports in general—were not evident in the present study. The commentators also did not refer to the female athletes by their first names, and Walsh and May-Treanor’s sport was described as beach volleyball rather than women’s beach volleyball. It is important to note that until the 2008 Olympic Games, the male beach volleyball team had significantly less success than the female team. Given that the commentators included a former pro (male) beach volleyball player, it is possible he was well aware of the overall weakness of the men’s team when compared
to the women’s team and was not about to make comparisons between the two. Earlier studies, such as the Billings, Halone, and Denham (2002) study, report that broadcast coverage of women’s sports has often included discussion about female athletes’ appearance or personality. For example, the researchers found that 12% of the discussion about female athletes in the NCAA final four was coded as comments about players’ appearance. We found significantly fewer comments in this category; however, it is important to note that recent media and academic attention to the issue may have prompted this change.

RQ2 examined how sport producers visually accounted for the athletic performance of women’s beach volleyball players. One objective in examining the visual coverage of women’s beach volleyball games was to determine how or if the visual coverage might have emphasized aspects of the game or features of a player that might not receive the same kind of attention via commentary. Bissell and Duke (2007) found in their analysis of coverage of women’s beach volleyball from the 2004 Olympic Games that visual coverage of the game did include coverage of a player’s backside. They reported that up to 25% of the tight shots of a player were camera shots of a player’s chest or buttocks. In this analysis, the amount of chest- or buttock-specific shots dropped by 20%.

Analysis of the visual coverage of the games indicate that an overt emphasis on sexuality or physical appearance was not evident but that some shots or angles may indirectly or unintentionally draw the viewers’ eyes to a player’s chest, face, or backside. Given the athletes’ general appearance and the amount of body on display, it is possible the network was showcasing what Tuggle and Owen (1999) describe as a physically attractive sport. The commentary certainly emphasizes the power and physical dominance of the athletes, but the visual coverage emphasized what Jones, Murreel, and Jackson (1999) call “the pretty.” The director for the broadcast of the game is viewing live feed from all the cameras around the court and will make the decision regarding which court shot viewers will see. The sports photographers or videographers for the game may do very little to vary their own camera coverage of the game, short of using a zoom shot or shooting an occasional pan of the audience. Most professional videographers and broadcast directors are not going to intentionally direct a camera to accentuate a player’s body of the players; however, as is the nature of covering sports, it is difficult to have a broadcast without some tighter shots of athletes. Bissell and Duke (2007) found what they considered to be direct or purposeful attempts to showcase the athlete’s
body part, such as a camera shot from behind the player when she bent over to receive serve. The researchers also reported identifying several shots that panned up the athletes’ bodies. While those types of shots were far fewer in number in the present study, we do acknowledge they were present at times.

Although data from games when non-US teams were playing other non-US teams was not included in the analysis presented in this study, other women’s beach volleyball games were coded and analyzed. Some of these non-US games were coded as a means of gaining intercoder reliability, and other games were coded to identify how or if a US bias might exist. It is important to note that data from these intercoder reliability tests found that the camera angles used in those games did have a slightly higher percentage of shots that were body focused. For example, 93 of the 1,339 camera angles were shots of a US player’s face; but in the game between Brazil and Norway, 31 of the 129 camera angles from that game were face shots. Similar patterns were observed in the camera shots featuring specific body parts such as a player’s buttocks or chest. In the same game between Norway and Brazil, there were significantly more camera angles focused on a player’s body. For example, in the games where the US team played, 1% of the shots were buttocks-only shots, another 1% were chest-only shots, and 1% of the shots were camera angles from behind the player. In the Norway-Brazil game, 8% of the total camera angles in a single game were shots of buttocks or a player’s chest. In short, the players that might be considered especially attractive may have been covered through closer camera angles and tighter shots.

What we feel is important to point out is that certain shots may resonate in viewers’ minds more prominently than other shots. As previously mentioned, the sport arguably contains sexual undertones with the close-up shots of players’ bodies and the small attire worn by the athletes. From a viewer’s perspective, it would be easy for the shots that focused on a player’s specific body part to be remembered compared to the numerous other shots of the ball in play. It is quite possible that what resonated most with the viewers were the shots that emphasized sexual difference or that emphasized the sexuality of a player, even though fewer in number. Thus, even though body-part specific shots may account for only 5% of the total shots across the entire set of primetime broadcasts, those shots may be what viewers remember most about the game. It is also noteworthy that viewers may be tuning into the primetime coverage of the sport because of the implicit or explicit sexual nature of it. The athletes wear small uni-
forms, and it is difficult to not notice each player’s body on the court, even if the player is shown playing in a way that demonstrates her athleticism. The question becomes, if a viewer sees the power and strength of a beach volleyball player but also sees her wearing a small bathing suit, will the viewer remember the athleticism or the toned body? Empirical studies examining effects of exposure are needed to answer this question, but it is argued here that if viewers are primed or cued to think about a player in an objectified manner via the nature of the sport and the attire worn by athletes, it is possible the implicit sexuality of the sport may be what resonates with viewers most.

RQ3 considered how the verbal and visual coverage worked in tandem. It is important to note that when the games were televised live, the play-by-play commentators were watching the game live, calling the game live, and might not have been aware of the visual coverage being televised to millions of viewers. The announcers were not necessarily calling the game based on the recorded coverage of it. Thus, it is difficult to make direct correlations between the verbal and visual coverage of the game. However, viewers heard the commentary and saw the videotaped coverage of the game at the same time; thus, a viewer could make assumptions about how the two were related. That said, it is relevant to note that there were obvious and almost overt attempts to focus on a specific body part of a player, such as a player’s chest or buttocks, and that the camera angles from behind a player when she was bent over to receive serve also seemed to be evidence that the player was objectified in the visual coverage of the game. When all the coded camera angles are considered, the small percentage of shots seen from behind a player do not seem to be significant; however, it is important to note that from a viewer’s perspective, this could easily be playing into the sexualization of female athletes in general. As it relates to the commentary of the game, it may be easier for viewers to remember the medium or tight shots of the players that might show more of the player’s body, even if the commentary itself doesn’t direct the audience’s attention to it. As Bissell and Duke (2007) report, the cases when sexuality or appearance were emphasized may direct viewers’ memory and perception of the event. It is not our intent to overstate the case as it relates to the overt sexuality evident from the quantitative analysis of game coverage; however, it is important to point out that even if the instances of sexualized camera angles are few and far between and if commentary is largely related to the calling of the game, viewers may still attend to the visual appeal of specific court shots and camera angles.
Practical Contributions

It is important to continue studying broadcast coverage of women’s sporting events, especially events that are viewed by so many people worldwide. We have identified changes in the coverage of women’s beach volleyball between the 2004 and 2008 games; however, the specific reasons for the changes remain unidentified. It is possible the industry received a backlash following broadcast coverage of the ’04 Games and set out to identify ways the games could be covered in a more neutral fashion. In addition to commenting on the 2008 Games, Karch Kiraly also called the women’s games in 2004, but as mentioned above, the on-air commentary during the 2004 Games did not have significantly higher references to physical appearance. The key difference between the ’04 and ’08 games was in the visual coverage. Either way, it is important to analyze such coverage as a means of better understanding viewer perceptions of the event and the athletes involved.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Even though all broadcast coverage of women’s beach volleyball was coded and analyzed, this study’s findings and the overall generalizability of the findings are not without limitations. A quantitative analysis of broadcast coverage of any sport or any athlete will only yield data related to the manifest content. As suggested above, it is very possible that it is in the latent content that more revealing patterns with regard to the sexual nature of the sport might be revealed. The results presented here only include games where the US women’s team played. It is possible the commentary with regard to valence and topic would be different in games when the US was not playing. Future studies should consider all games where women played, to test this question. Future studies should also consider the commentary of the US men’s team to determine how or if visual and verbal coverage would be different. Additionally, in future studies, the coding categories could be even more specific so that more nuanced differences in the commentary could be identified.

The analysis of manifest content in this study suggests that NBC’s coverage of the US women’s beach volleyball team during the 2008 Olympic Games was largely that of game calling and game play, and when the commentary shifted to a discussion of a specific player, it was often a discussion about her training, the team’s history, or an injury. We would argue this study contributes to the field of sports communication in several ways,
as it is important to have an understanding of the way athletes, especially female athletes, are covered in the media. Given the heightened media attention of the Olympic Games and given the number of viewers who tune in night after night to watch the televised coverage of the games, it is important to understand the type of broadcast coverage female athletes are receiving and to assess if the coverage represents female athletes as athletes rather than objects to be viewed. These findings could serve as a catalyst for other studies of female athletes and their sports; furthermore, this study contributes to the growing body of literature in sports communication.

Kim Bissell (PhD, Syracuse University) is a professor in the College of Communication and Information Sciences at the University of Alabama and the Southern Progress Endowed Professor in Magazine Journalism. She serves as the college’s associate dean for research and is the director of the Institute for Communication & Information Research. Her research interests lie in the intersection of media, health, sports, and children. Her research publications have been related to the role of media in the development of bias against overweight and mental illness in children and the representation of disability in sport. She teaches graduate courses in research methods, mass communication theory, media effects, health communication, sport communication, children and cognition, body image, and undergraduate courses in magazine design and international journalism. She has studied the social effects of mass media as it relates to body image for more than a decade and has designed and developed media and health literacy programs for children and adolescents in the area of health and body image.

Lauren Reichart Smith (PhD, University of Alabama) is an assistant professor in the School of Communication and Journalism at Auburn University. Her research interests include portrayals of gender, race, and nationality in sport across mass media. Additionally, her published research has looked at effects of fan enjoyment and uses of social media in sport. She teaches graduate courses in research methods and sports communication, as well as undergraduate and graduate courses in public relations.

References


Kane, M. J., & Greendorfer, S. L. (1994). The media’s role in accommodating and


