

Harris & Clayton (2002) argue that tennis player Anna Kournikova represents the most powerful symbol of genderisation in sport. Such a supposition is interesting as Kournikova, while successful, never really achieved dominance in her game, instead being better recognised in recent years for her modelling and celebrity profile. The image of Kournikova is, no doubt, a sexualised one.

Genderisation, expressed through the gendered language of the media (for example, The Sun, The Times and Sky Sports) refers to the societal practice of defining a sport as either 'masculine' or 'feminine' and then applying that language and related assumptions to observations and coverage of each athlete. This coverage often involves coverage of female athletes in a way that emphasises their gender (for example, portraying them as a wife and mother, as a sexualised being, or as a celebrity). Conversely and interestingly, it is unusual for male athletes to be portrayed in a manner that takes the primary focus off their performance on the pitch. Such a practice carries the potential for damage, as expressing the judgement that a sport is only appropriate for one gender can pressure and push a promising young athlete out of that sport if they do not feel that they conform to a gendered ideal.

For example, many male netball athletes have met with resistance to their attempts to play the game at a high level in the UK; and, similarly, women still face barriers in competing in the sports of boxing and motor racing.

The Case of Lindsey Vonn and Julia Mancuso

Such a phenomenon is certainly not new in Olympic circles, and can be represented well by the recent double controversy that arose in the case of the two highly talented athletes Lindsey Vonn and Julia Mancuso.

Firstly, commentary arose about the sexualisation of both athletes in the run up to the Games. It has been well-documented in academic and popular press that female receive far less press coverage than their male counterparts, and when they do receive coverage, they tend to be portrayed in sexualised or non-athletic poses. Males are usually portrayed in athletic poses, which is considered far more respectful and relevant to the sporting issue at hand (although anyone familiar with recent PowerAde billboards featuring naked male rugby players might beg to differ!). The sexualisation of both blonde athletes is viewed by many as a compromise of their athletic integrity.

Secondly, schisms within the US camp emerged swiftly in the press, indicating fighting between the two athletes. A rift was exposed when Mancuso was interviewed by Sports Illustrated. She claimed that the women's U.S. Olympic ski team was being hurt by the "popularity contest" that existed between herself and Vonn, saying that: "People are having a hard time reaching their potential because it's such a struggle for attention...You come to meetings after races and it's like it's a bad day if Lindsey didn't do well". Tensions were further heightened when Mancuso was flagged off of the course during her giant slalom run because Vonn, who had previously crashed, was still on the course.

Sexuality and Genderisation in Sport

Sport can be viewed as a social and cultural process, where social constructions of masculinity and femininity play a key role. Specifically, sport could still be argued to be traditionally associated with 'masculinity'. In many societies, it is still considered inappropriate for women to practice sport, and the clothing worn by women in some countries can preclude involvement in sport as a result.

Similarly, men who do not engage in sports or who do not like football might, in some sections of society, be labelled 'unmasculine' or have their sexuality questioned. One might thus observe that sport is used by society as a means of promoting conformance and pressuring and excluding those that do not conform.

The very concept of masculinity and femininity are, however, socially constructed and fluid in nature and it is illogical to apply a gender upon a sport. Physiologically speaking, there is no sport that one gender can do well, that the other cannot. Sport, as a reflection of society, offers us a powerful way of renegotiating these conceptualisations of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.

Belonging to a particular nation, culture, ethnic group, having a particular socio-economic status, and living in a particular geographic area also exert a notable effect on the opportunity to participate in sport, and on the extent to which sport might have become genderised within that particular sub-group. Thus, some women might experience far more resistance to practicing sport in general, or a specific sport, than their counterparts who

display a different cultural, ethnic and socio-economic background.

START THE DISCUSSION

- Summarise the Vonn and Mancuso situation and consider how this represents the genderisation and sexualisation of the athletes.
- Can you think of a similar example involving male athletes?
- What is the Anna Kournikova Effect?
- Why do you think sports continue to be genderised?
- Choose a sport and research gender parity issues. For example, do male and female athletes receive similar pay, press coverage and governing body funding?
- Why do you think society pressures people to conform to a particular ideal? Have you ever felt this type of pressure?
- A regular argument for the dominance of male sport over their female counterparts is that the female athletes are not as skilled, and thus not as competitive or exciting to watch. Critically evaluate this argument.
- What are the negative ramifications of a) genderisation of sport and b) sexualisation of athletes?
- Collect the sports sections of three weekend publications – this weekend – and compare press coverage of male and female athletes. Can you see any cases of genderisation or sexualisation? – and why do you think that different publications might engage in this practice in different ways?

FIND OUT MORE**OECD Report on Gender and Sport**

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/47/42/44896326.pdf>.

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CREDITS

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