Gender Bias in Media Coverage of Professional Tennis (Tingao Jiang)

Abstract

Professional tennis is often recognized as one of the most gender-equal sports because male and female athletes receive equal prize money at all four Grand Slam tournaments. However, equal prize money does not mean that gender inequality has disappeared from tennis media coverage. This paper examines three major problems. First, male players often receive more media attention and more detailed discussion of their performance. Second, male and female players can be described with different types of language: men are more often connected with strength, strategy, and competitiveness, while women are more often connected with emotion, personality, or gracefulness. Third, female tennis players may be hypersexualized, meaning that media coverage focuses more on appearance and attractiveness than on athletic ability. Using academic studies, tennis history, and examples including Billie Jean King, Serena Williams, Novak Djokovic, and Anna Kournikova, this paper argues that true equality in tennis requires more than equal pay. It also requires fair media attention, performance-focused language, and less appearance-based representation. The paper recommends regular coverage reviews, clearer editorial standards, and more responsible image and interview choices.

Introduction

Professional tennis is often recognized as one of the most gender-equal sports because male and female athletes receive equal prize money in major competitions such as the Grand Slam events. This progress is important. Equal prize money shows that women's competition should have the same institutional value as men's competition. However, despite male and female players being paid equally at the most important tournaments, gender inequality still exists in tennis media coverage. Financial equality does not automatically create equal attention, equal respect, or equal representation.

Male tennis players are frequently given more attention, and media reports often focus on their athletic performance and achievements. For example, when reporting on Novak Djokovic, articles commonly emphasize his Grand Slam titles, world ranking, head-to-head records, physical endurance, serve, return accuracy, and ability to perform during long matches. Headlines may highlight record-breaking achievements or his dominance over rivals. This type of reporting presents him mainly as a serious professional athlete whose success can be explained through statistics, tactics, and performance.

In contrast, female players are more likely to be discussed in terms of their appearance, emotions, personality, or personal lives rather than only their professional skills. This does not mean that every article about a female player is biased, or that personal stories should never be included. The problem appears when women are repeatedly described through different standards from men. Cooky et al. argue that women's sports receive less coverage and that female athletes are often represented through gender stereotypes. Fu et al. and Yip also suggest

that coverage of women may focus more on appearance, relationships, and perceived weaknesses, while questions to men are more likely to focus directly on the game.

Many previous discussions about equality in professional tennis have focused mainly on prize money. However, fewer public discussions examine how media attention, language, storytelling, photographs, and gender stereotypes can continue to create inequality. Media coverage plays an important role in shaping public opinion and influencing how audiences understand athletes. The amount of coverage can decide who becomes famous, while the type of coverage can decide whether an athlete is mainly respected for performance or judged through appearance and behavior.

This paper looks at how male and female professional tennis players are covered in sports news articles, match reports, headlines, interviews, and social media. It focuses on the words used to describe players, the amount and prominence of coverage, and the topics emphasized, such as performance, emotion, personal life, or appearance. The central thesis is that equal prize money has not created complete gender equality in professional tennis because female players can still receive less media attention, more gendered and emotional language, and more hypersexualized coverage than male players. These three problems can reduce recognition of women's athletic achievements and limit the way audiences understand female tennis players as serious professionals.

Methodology

This paper uses qualitative secondary research and illustrative case analysis. It brings together academic studies, official tennis sources, and selected media examples to identify repeated patterns in the representation of professional tennis players. Secondary research is appropriate because the goal is to find existing evidence and well-known cases rather than to claim that a new large-scale media survey has been completed.

The research is organized around three categories that match the thesis. The first category is media attention, including how much coverage male and female players receive and whether their matches are given detailed analysis. The second category is media language, including words connected with strength, strategy, emotion, gracefulness, anger, or personality. The third category is hypersexualization, including coverage that gives more attention to clothing, body image, attractiveness, or celebrity status than to athletic performance.

The paper uses several tennis examples to explain these categories. Billie Jean King and the 1973 Battle of the Sexes are used to show how women's tennis has sometimes gained attention through comparison with men. Novak Djokovic is used as an example of performance-focused reporting. Serena Williams and the 2018 U.S. Open final are used to discuss emotional double standards. Anna Kournikova is used to examine hypersexualization and the difference between an athlete's real achievements and her media image. These cases do not represent every article or every player, but they help show how the three problems can appear in professional tennis coverage.

Findings and Discussion

Problem 1: Equal Pay Does Not Mean Equal Media Attention

The first problem is that equal prize money in professional tennis does not mean that male and female players receive equal media attention. Tennis is often described as gender-equal because men and women receive the same prize money at Grand Slam tournaments. However, news reports, sports highlights, websites, and commentary can still give men's matches more space and more detailed analysis. Cooky et al. found that women's sports remained seriously underrepresented in televised sports news and highlights over a long period. Although this research covers sports more broadly, it helps explain why equal competition rules do not automatically create equal visibility.

The difference can be seen in the kind of attention players receive. Reports about leading male players often explain rankings, records, tactics, rivalries, and technical strengths. When audiences repeatedly receive detailed information about men, they become more familiar with male players and may believe that men's tennis is naturally more important or more interesting. Editors can then use this audience familiarity to justify giving men even more coverage. In this way, unequal attention becomes a cycle: more coverage creates more familiarity, and more familiarity is used to support more coverage.

This issue may also be connected to the idea of the male gaze, which describes how media can be organized around a male-centered point of view (Mulvey 6–7). In sports media, a male-centered perspective can influence which athletes are treated as the normal or most important competitors. Male athletes may be presented as the main standard of professional sport, while women's competitions are treated as a special category that needs extra explanation or comparison.

A historical example is the 1973 Battle of the Sexes between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs. The event became one of the most famous tennis matches in history and helped promote gender equality. At the same time, much of its media power came from presenting women's tennis through a direct contest against a man. King's victory was a major cultural moment, but the story also shows that women's athletic ability was being publicly tested against a male standard (Women's Tennis Association, "It's Showtime, Baby!"). This does not reduce King's achievement. Instead, it shows how media narratives can center men even when the story is about women's progress.

Unequal media attention has practical effects. When women's matches receive shorter coverage or less technical discussion, audiences have fewer opportunities to learn about female players' styles, achievements, and rivalries. This can reduce public recognition and may also influence sponsorship and career opportunities.

Problem 2: Gender Differences in Media Language and Emotional Standards

The second problem is the difference in language used when describing male and female tennis players. Sports journalists and commentators may use different types of words depending on an athlete's gender. Male players are commonly described using language related to strength, power, dominance, strategy, endurance, and competitiveness. Female players may also receive

performance-based descriptions, but they are more likely to be described as emotional, graceful, nervous, calm, attractive, or inspirational.

For example, a male player's victory may be explained through an aggressive return position, powerful serving, physical preparation, or a successful tactical adjustment. A female player's victory may be explained through confidence, composure, or an emotional journey. These descriptions are not always negative, but they can shift attention away from technical skill. Fu et al. found that post-match questions asked to male tennis players were generally more focused on the game than questions asked to female players. Interview questions matter because they influence the answers that become headlines and later stories.

The media response to Serena Williams during the 2018 U.S. Open women's final provides a clear example of emotional standards. When Williams argued with the chair umpire, many reports focused heavily on her anger, behavior, and loss of control. The incident was important and could reasonably be reported. However, the larger issue is whether similar behavior from male players is described with the same level of criticism. Anger from men is sometimes framed as passion, intensity, or competitiveness, while anger from women is more likely to be treated as a failure to remain calm or graceful. Research on the media framing of the final shows that different choices of language and emphasis shaped how audiences interpreted the same event (Police and Hambrick).

These language choices matter because they shape how audiences understand athletic ability. If men are consistently described through tactics and performance while women are described through emotion and personality, men may appear to be more serious or more naturally competitive. Women may be expected not only to perform well but also to behave according to traditional ideas of femininity. This creates a double standard: female athletes must compete at the highest level while also being calm, graceful, and socially acceptable.

Therefore, the second part of the thesis is supported. Gender inequality in tennis media is not only about the amount of attention. It also appears in the words, interview questions, and explanations used to describe performance. More balanced reporting should judge similar behavior by similar standards and give female players the same level of technical analysis as male players.

Problem 3: Hypersexualization of Female Tennis Players

The third problem is the hypersexualization of female tennis players in media coverage. Hypersexualization happens when media attention focuses heavily on an athlete's body, attractiveness, clothing, or sexual image instead of her athletic performance. Appearance can be part of celebrity and sports marketing for both men and women, but this type of attention is more likely to become a central part of the public identity of female athletes.

Anna Kournikova is a well-known example. She became extremely famous in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but media coverage often focused more on her appearance, modeling, and celebrity image than on her tennis. This can create the misleading impression that she was famous only because of her looks. In fact, Kournikova reached a career-high singles ranking of No. 8 and became world No. 1 in doubles (Women's Tennis Association, "Anna Kournikova").

Her professional record shows that she was a high-level athlete, even though her media image often gave more attention to beauty and marketability.

Academic research supports this interpretation. Harris and Clayton examined English tabloid coverage and found that Kournikova's femininity and physical appearance were strongly emphasized. The study shows how a female athlete can receive a large amount of media attention but still not receive equal athletic recognition. Visibility by itself is therefore not always equality. An athlete can be highly visible while her sporting ability is reduced or pushed into the background.

Hypersexualization can also influence younger athletes and audiences. When coverage repeatedly suggests that female players must be attractive to become marketable, young athletes may feel pressure to meet appearance standards in addition to athletic standards. Sponsors and media organizations may choose athletes according to a narrow image of femininity rather than only performance. This can disadvantage players who do not fit traditional beauty expectations, even when they are more successful on court.

The third part of the thesis is therefore supported. Female players can be represented as celebrities, fashion figures, or objects of attraction before they are represented as professional competitors. True media equality requires attention to women's bodies and appearance to be limited by the same relevance standards used for male athletes. Athletic achievement should remain the main focus of sports coverage.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Give Men's and Women's Tennis More Consistent Media Attention

Sports media organizations should regularly compare how much attention they give to men's and women's tennis. They can review the number of articles, homepage placement, broadcast time, video highlights, photographs, and the amount of technical analysis.

The goal is not to force every match to receive identical coverage. Rankings, match quality, national interest, and major records will always affect news value. However, the same criteria should be applied to male and female players. A major upset, record, or high-quality match in women's tennis should be treated as an important sports story rather than a secondary story. Regular coverage reviews would help editors identify patterns that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Recommendation 2: Use Performance-Focused Language and Equal Emotional Standards

Journalists should place the result, tactics, turning points, rankings, and athletic skills at the center of match reporting. Interviewers should prepare technical questions for both male and female players. Editors should also compare the language used for similar behavior. If anger is described as "passion" for a male player, reporters should consider whether a female player is being judged more negatively for the same behavior. Training can use examples of headlines and interview questions to show how subtle bias appears. The International Olympic Committee's portrayal guidelines provide useful principles for gender-equal and fair sports representation (International Olympic Committee).

Recommendation 3: Reduce Hypersexualization and Use More Responsible Images

Media organizations should avoid using appearance, clothing, relationships, or attractiveness as the main focus unless these topics are genuinely relevant to the story. Photo editors should select images that show female players competing, training, celebrating achievements, or discussing their sport, rather than repeatedly choosing sexualized or unrelated images. The same editorial standard should be applied to male athletes. Athletes should also have opportunities to communicate through their own social media, interviews, and player-produced content so that their professional identity is not controlled by one media image. These steps would not remove personality or fashion from sports coverage, but they would prevent these topics from replacing athletic performance.

Conclusion

Professional tennis has made important progress toward gender equality, especially through equal prize money at the four Grand Slam tournaments. However, equal pay is not the same as complete equality. This paper has argued that gender bias remains in tennis media coverage through three connected problems: female players can receive less media attention, they can be described with more gendered and emotional language, and they can be hypersexualized through coverage that focuses on appearance rather than athletic performance.

Therefore, true gender equality in professional tennis should be measured not only by prize money but also by how athletes are represented. When female players receive serious attention, detailed analysis, and respect for their athletic identity, media coverage can support the equality that tennis organizations have already begun to create.

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