

Breaking the Mold: A Content Analysis of ESPN's Written and Broadcast Coverage of the 2023 Women's College World Series



Nina-Grace Montes is graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in Journalism and Latinx Studies. Nina's research project titled "Breaking the Mold: A Content Analysis of ESPN's Written and Broadcast Coverage of the 2023 Women's College World Series" was mentored by Professor of Practice of the School of Journalism and Communication, Lori Shontz. She plans to attend Arizona State University for a Masters degree in Film and Media Studies in the Fall of 2024.



Lori Shontz specializes in the teaching of core writing and reporting skills. She is a leader nationally in the teaching of community-centered journalism and trauma-informed journalism, and she is an affiliated faculty member of the Agora Journalism Center.

Abstract

This project investigates whether the 2023 Women's College World Series media coverage exhibits gender biases in its softball coverage similar to those researchers have found in coverage of other women's sports: sexualization, stereotyping, and downplaying importance, among many others. Specifically, it compares ESPN's coverage of the Women's College World Series to its male counterpart: the College World Series baseball championship. Through a comparative content analysis of live game broadcasts and written articles during the championship series, the research found that some elements of softball broadcasts had higher production values than baseball broadcasts, with more creative elements such as graphics, music, player segments, and replays. Comparatively, baseball broadcasters used more action-packed language and had more excitement in their delivery and utilized more creative elements. The results suggest that women's sports coverage is improving, although there is still room for improvement.

1. Introduction

Scholarly research has found that traditional sports media have framed women in a way that made femininity more important than being an athlete. The content has rarely provided depth or analysis for female athletes- the way it has done for men. Daily sports and highlight shows, like ESPN's SportsCenter, have not increased the amount of women's sports coverage in three decades, but the content has improved. (Cooky, Council, Mears, Messner, 2021). ESPNW, the women's sports brand, was launched in July 2010 and now, there are women-sports-specific broadcasters and content creators that discuss games and players, something that the men have had for a long time. ESPN has also not fully addressed the power dynamics and socio-political context that shapes women's sports. In 2013, ESPN launched a series of short documentaries to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Title IX. Each documentary told a story of successful women in sports who have tackled gender and sex-related issues, but the films overwhelmingly relied on individualized and depoliticized narratives that avoided the issues of power and socio-political conditions plaguing women's sports (Antunovic and Linden, 2020).

This project analyzes coverage of the 2023 Women's College World Series by ESPN to determine whether it fits into the pattern of gender stereotypes in sports media, such as less important, less relevant, sexualized, and comical amongst others. It also compares coverage to the Men's College World Series, the male counterpart. The content analysis compared live game broadcasts and written articles from the two World Series to see if they reinforced the gender stereotypes identified by previous research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. History of Softball

Softball came to be accepted in the early 1900s as the female equivalent of baseball because the image nicely coincided with the image of women being the weaker sex as the sport featured a smaller diamond (Bealle, 1957). As softball continued to grow, the American Softball Association, the major governing body for the sport, with writers portraying female players as masculine (Fischer, 1939). In a Saturday Evening Post article called Miss Casey at the Bay written on August 22, 1942, author Robert Yoder wrote "The frailest creature on the diamond is frequently the male umpire. Miss Olympia, although built like a football halfback, looks frail compared to Miss Freda. Olympia runs the bases, slides like a man and catches like a man." To counteract that, the American Softball Association sponsored its first beauty contest in conjunction with the world championships (Littlewood, 1998).

By the late 1950s, softball reigned supreme as the female equivalent of baseball. The promotion of women's softball emphasized players' beauty and sexuality. Feminine

ballplayers fit in nicely with cultural and advertising norms of women as sex objects. The image of the frail, weaker sex was so great that sports promoters were able to use the double sex standard to their advantage (Berlage, 2000). Professional female athletes were seen as a form of novelty entertainment. The sensationalism of seeing the weaker sex play a masculine game became a big enough draw that the women didn't have to play well. Cultural conditioning meant that women accepted baseball as exclusively a male endeavor (Berlage, 2000). Girls aspired to be softball players, and the women who played professional baseball were forgotten.

Once softball was seen as a women's game, universities decided it was the female equivalent to baseball and opened programs on campuses to uphold the requirements of Title IX (Withrow, 2023). The World Series is held at the USA Softball Hall of Fame Stadium in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, every year. Eight teams will compete in a double-elimination bracket with the final two teams competing in a series of three (NCAA, 2023).

2.2. Participation/Title IX

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is an amendment to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It states, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving financial assistance." The amendment applies to all public and private educational institutions that receive federal funding and is widely known for its influence on sports (Schultz, 2018). In 1971, 300,000 American girls played high school sports and fewer than 30,000 played varsity college sports. Now, 3 million high school girls play sports and women make up 44% of NCAA athletes due to Title IX (Women's Sports Foundation, 2022).

There are three general aspects of Title IX as it applies to sports: participation, scholarships, and operations. Federally funded programs are required to give male and female sports equal scholarship budgets (Schultz, 2018). Operationally, Title IX provides equitable treatment in the provision of equipment and supplies, scheduling, practice times, tutoring, medical and training facilities, recruitment, etc. (Schultz, 2018).

2.3. Sports Media Environment Changes

Since Title IX was passed, there has been an increase in girls' high school sports participation rates of more than 1000% (NCAA, 2022), but it does not necessarily mean that social acceptance of female athletes in sports media will have improved.

Televised sports news and highlight shows are part of a mega-billion-dollar institutionalized sports-media complex (Jhally, 1984) which has a pattern of historically excluding women (Kane, 1995; Messner, 1998). The mass media has become one of the most powerful institutional forces for shaping values and attitudes in modern culture:

they portray dominant images or symbolic representations of American society and then tell audiences who and what should be valued and esteemed (Boutilier and SanGiovanni, 1983). A 2002 study on the visual and textual constructions of femininity in *Sports Illustrated* found that 10% of articles and photos coded covered female athletes. In the rare instance that female athletes were shown, the photos were posed, and the stories were often non-sport related (Fink and Kensicki, 2002).

Often women's sports stories show up on the news as "one-and-done" situations—meaning after it happens once, they won't show it again—something that suggests that ESPN does not allow viewers to build and sustain interest, knowledge, or emotional connections with women's sports (Cooky, Council, Mears, Messner, 2021). In 2015, researchers found that ESPN's flagship program *SportsCenter* dedicated only 2% of its hour-long program to women's sports. "Broadcasts build audiences for men's sports while positioning women's sports as unimportant and less interesting" (Cooky, Council, Mears, Messner, 2018).

Softball does not have a specific broadcast contract; it is part of a package deal with ESPN to show the championships of 28 NCAA sports – nearly everything except football, men's basketball and women's basketball– through 2032. ESPN does not place college softball or the Women's College World Series on its broadest network, ABC – which has access to more than 121 million US TV homes, 57% more than ESPN (Nielsen, 2021). ESPN does not do "megacasts" (multiple specialized game feeds airing on several networks simultaneously) for softball, but they do them regularly for other top properties. The channel also does not use innovative broadcast technologies for softball, something common for most major events (Hecker and Fink, 2021). Media executives continue to impose corporate restrictions and place limitations on their coverage (Coche, 2022) despite the proof of profitability of women's sports. Deloitte – the largest financial company in the world – forecasts that in 2024, women's sports will generate a revenue that surpasses \$1 billion, a 300% increase from the industry's evaluation in 2021 (Deloitte, 2024). A record-breaking 92,003 fans watched a University of Nebraska volleyball game to set the record for the largest crowd to watch a women's sports game ever (Nebraska Huskers, 2023). The 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup had two million in-person fans over the course of 64 matches. The 2024 NCAA Women's Basketball Championship game between the University of Iowa and the University of South Carolina drew 18.9 million viewers, making it the most-viewed college basketball game ever on ESPN- when networks invest in women's sports, the return is high.

2.4. Narratives/Tropes in Women's Sports Coverage

Many scholars contend that media outlets actively shape news through contextualization in a process known as framing, influencing public perception before events occur, particularly in sports coverage (Fisk, 1989; Duncan and Brummet, 1987; Messner and Solomon, 1993; Tannen, 1993; Wenner, 1989). For example, the framing of sports events

often begins weeks in advance, creating a buildup of hype. This has not typically happened with women's sports. However, the framing of women's sports is frequently attributed to a "supply and demand" rationale, (Duncan and Messner, 2002) which itself is a product of media framing. Executives, producers, and editors have claimed that there is no market for women's sports, even though they haven't done the work to create one. This often leads to male athletes being portrayed as, whereas female athletes are diminished by coverage that emphasizes their femininity over their athletic ability.

Eventually, the bigger sports media outlets switched from being overtly critical to being ostensibly "respectful" (Musto, Cooky, Messner, 2017). In 2017, researchers discovered a contemporary gender framework called "gender-bland sexism" that disguises sexism against female athletes as reactions to individual athletes' performance, making women's sports appear lackluster to men's sports. (Musto, Cooky, Messner, 2017). However, gender-bland sexism reinforces gender hierarchies and codifies the individual assessments of merit during moments when men and women are perceived as equal (Musto, Cooky, Messner, 2017).

During a SportsCenter "Top Ten Plays" segment, the ninth play went to Missy Franklin, an Olympic swimmer with multiple world records. The commentator said, "Missy Franklin... Way ahead of the pack in the 200-yard freestyle. Wins easily." Number six is from a spring training MLB game between the Cubs and the White Sox. The second baseman catches the ball and tags a player out, and a commentator gushes, "I think he's ready for the regular season! Let's get it going!" Number four is from the Heat vs. Grizzlies basketball game, showing Ray Allen scoring. The voice-over from the in-studio commentator exclaims, "From fizzle to sizzle!" (Musto, Cooky, Messner, 2017). These examples show the great effect of gender-bland sexism on men's and women's sports commentary.

2.5. Changes/Progression in Women's Sports Coverage

Women's sports have the fastest-growing audience on TV (Nielsen, 2022). At a time when viewership for live TV is shrinking, women's sports is the only exception to this (Nielsen, 2022). Women's sports are drawing in younger, more affluent viewers from every corner of the nation with 39% of Generation Z sports fans watching more women's sports than a year ago (NRG, 2022). The softball 2023 Women's College World Series championship series averaged 1.6 million viewers, and the title game brought in 1.9 million viewers, peaking at 2.3 million, a 7% increase from the previous year (ESPN, 2023).

The Women's College World Series was not broadcast on TV until ESPN received the rights from the NCAA in 2000 (Caron, 2020). Sixteen years later, ESPN started to expand its coverage to all 16 regional sites (Caron, 2020). In 2019, ESPN boasted its most-watched WCWS production with a 40% increase in viewership (Caron, 2020). The two-game championship series against UCLA and Oklahoma averaged 1.57 million viewers and 1.1

million viewers throughout the entire tournament (Nielsen, 2020). That year was a significant outlier for televised sports, where growth was at its highest (Stainer, 2020). After the explosion of viewership in 2019, the sports media conglomerate began to increase coverage on both linear and digital networks, such as ESPN+, prompting the company to offer a record-high 200+ games (Margulis, 2020). The 2022 Women's College World Series championship against Oklahoma and Texas reached peak viewership at 2.1 million, making it the most-watched college baseball or softball game that year (ESPN, 2022).

3. Research Questions

1. How many baseball and softball stories were provided by ESPN on their website? What kind of stories were they?
2. What are the common adjectives and descriptors used in the broadcast and written coverage to describe the athletes in each sport?
3. What are the differences and similarities between live in-game coverage compared to outside coverage such as written stories for each sport?]
4. Does the coverage of baseball and softball in 2023 reinforce the same gender stereotypes that existing women's sports media research has found?

4. Methodology

This research was conducted by using a qualitative content analysis of all of ESPN's written and live TV broadcast coverage from the 2023 Women's College World Series championships and the 2023 Men's College World Series. We compared articles and broadcasts from June 6, 2023 to June 10, 2023 for softball, and June 23, 2023 to June 27, 2023 for baseball, ranging from one day before and one day after the championship series.

While visiting ESPN's website to pull articles and ESPN+ to get broadcast coverage, we noted differences in how softball and baseball coverage were treated after the fact. For softball, there were no full games available to rewatch on ESPN+, and the only thing available was a three-part series about Oklahoma's champions mindset. To collect softball data, we pulled all three games from the NCAA's YouTube channel. For the baseball championship series, we rewatched all of the games on ESPN+.

All baseball articles were available to read on ESPN.com. When searching "college softball" or "softball world series" after the tournament ended, no softball results would appear. To find the articles, we had to type into Google "ESPN women's college world series."

4.1. How many baseball and softball stories were provided by ESPN on their website? What type of articles were they?

This question seeks to understand how accessible ESPN made the game for fans during the championship. To answer RQ1, we determined how many stories were provided by ESPN outside of live game coverage by doing a website and Google search and seeing how many written softball and baseball stories are available. We downloaded each article that qualified for this project and organized them into different files. Each file and article was organized by sport, then by day, and was later placed into a category for the type of coverage: game recaps, feature stories, and previews/analyst articles.

4.2. What are the common adjectives, descriptors, and tones used to describe the athletes in each sport?

To answer RQ2, we determined the common adjectives and descriptors used in each article and live coverage. We placed each word into themed categories: descriptions of body and/or face, roles off the field, relations and/or similarities to male athletes, and “matter-of-the-fact” manners (Cooky, Council, Mears, Messner, 2021). Since we were comparing the softball coverage to baseball, we also took note of exciting verbs used in men’s sports (Cooky, Council, Mears, Messner, 2021). The multiple-choice Qualtrics form allowed us to see the frequency and locations of the framing.

4.3. What are the differences and similarities between live in-game coverage compared to outside coverage such as written stories for each sport?

To answer RQ3, we created a category differentiating whether phrases came from broadcast or written coverage. We compared occurrences of respectful coverage, sexualized stories, scandals, and women described as mothers, girlfriends, or wives between the two types of sources.

4.4. Does the coverage of baseball and softball in 2023 reinforce the same gender stereotypes that existing women’s sports media research has found?

We compared our data from the Women’s College World Series to the patterns uncovered in previous scholarly research about women’s sports media coverage: common themes, descriptive words, production skills, and narratives. Then, we compared our data from the men’s College World Series to the existing scholarly work about men’s sports media coverage. Once we compared the two tournaments to past research, we were able to find trends, commonalities, and differences in softball coverage.

5. Results

While each softball game included music, graphics, interviews, and highlights from previous games, the broadcasters had a segment about an athlete's characteristics in one game. In both games, something about off-the-field activities was included. During the baseball live coverage, each game included music, graphics, interviews, and highlights from old games. The baseball broadcasts included competitive aspects of the sport, an athlete's performance, and achievements across all three games. Conversations about athletes' lives off the field only happened once during the series.

5.1. How many baseball and softball stories were provided by ESPN on their website? What type of stories were they?

During the time range of the championship series, ESPN provided eight softball articles and 10 baseball articles on its website outside of the live broadcast coverage. This chart breaks down the stories by type: feature stories, which featured player profiles and off-the-field happenings; game recaps, which focused on the results and key plays; and other news.

	Number of articles	Feature stories	Game recaps	News
Softball	8	5	2	1
Baseball	10	3	7	0

5.2. What are the common adjectives, descriptors, and tones used to describe the athletes in each sport?

Typically, a television broadcast of an athletic event adds to the experience of watching a game. The average commentator entertains fans while they watch the athletes compete. Its purpose is to keep fans engaged during the game, so they continue watching.

Baseball ESPN broadcasters used action-packed language across all three games. They also often used nicknames or told jokes when referring to male players, teams, or events. Commentators regularly employed dominant descriptors when discussing male athletes, such as using hyperbole. At one point, they called a Florida player – who was only a college-level player – the next Shohei Ohtani; Ohtani is one of the most talented baseball players in history (Game 3). Whenever a play was well executed, they would have extensive conversations about how “brilliantly designed” it was (Game 3). The baseball broadcasters engaged in player nicknames such as “Bele Bombs” or “Tommy Tanks” (Game 1).

Research has found that historically, fast-paced, action-packed language is largely absent from women’s games, which tend to be presented in a monotone, uninspired, “matter-of-fact” tone that is similar to one you would hear on a non-sports news program (Cooky, Council, Mears, Messner, 2021). In comparison to the softball broadcasters, the baseball broadcasters had more excitement and energy in their delivery. No nicknames or jokes were told during either softball game. Despite being generally less energetic, the softball broadcasters did have a pattern of giving lavish compliments after a play, a pitch, a swing, etc. They would use dominant phrases to describe players being “dialed in,” “in complete control,” or “unstoppable.” However, they remained more analytical and were typically given right after a play or a pitch was broken down.

The baseball coverage focused on what happened on the field. A baseball athlete’s off-the-field activities were only discussed in one of the three games. In Game 2, the broadcasters told anecdotes about players’ fathers, grad school plans, or life after baseball, and they occasionally mentioned their playing careers (Game 2). There were not any player segments about it.

The lives of softball athletes off the field were far more prominent in both of the game broadcasts.. Typically, the anecdotes were about recruiting visits or relationships with parents, such as how a Florida State pitcher’s dad built her a pitching facility in their backyard (Game 1) or how the Oklahoma team held bonding activities (Game 2).

Stereotypically feminine interests such as makeup, weddings, and proms were also mentioned frequently. For example, Michaela Edenfield, a catcher for Florida State, is famous on social media for her makeup tutorials. In Game 1 of the series, her eye look was inspired by breast cancer awareness, which was the theme of the game. In the second game, she did a camo look inspired by Military Appreciation Night (Rorabaugh, 2023). After sideline reporter Holly Rowe explained the looks, she mentioned Edenfield’s favorite looks and themes throughout the year that tied in with how her season was going.

It was more difficult to analyze the written coverage because there was a small sample size of articles from the ESPN website. Here is the breakdown of the key kinds of themes and language used in the stories:

	Descriptions of body/Face	Roles off the field	Relations/similarities to male athletes	Specifically focused on sport
Softball	0	0	4	8
Baseball	0	1	9	2

	Matter-of-fact	Dominant language	Lavish compliments
Softball	3	4	1
Baseball	1	9	5

5.3. What are the differences and similarities between live in-game coverage compared to outside coverage such as written stories for each sport?

Softball had more creative productions with advanced stats, heat charts, and pitch simulations. There would either be an advanced pitching or offensive stat in the top left corner underneath the box where the score, count, and pitch count were displayed. Men's College World Series saw less use of creative productions. The creative graphics and heat charts only appeared during pitching changes for both teams in baseball. The graphics and statistics for softball were typically used only during at-bats, pitching changes, and natural pauses in the game.

In previous research about online written sports articles, it has been shown that articles are far more likely to include positive descriptors on athleticism, skill, and accomplishments than negative descriptors (Kian, Mondello, Vincent, 2009). While this was true in both the softball and baseball articles that were analyzed, baseball articles used more dominant descriptors in comparison to softball articles. The baseball written coverage contained a feature-style aspect compared to softball, which was results-focused. The difference in the style of writing is clear in the two examples shown below.

The game story from the men's final game began by employing storytelling techniques meant to draw in readers and make them feel as if they were at the game, including historical perspective and treating sources as characters in a scene:

The Men's College World Series old-timers have been digging through the memory banks for nearly two weeks, all with the same question. 'Has this been the greatest College World Series I've ever seen? Hmmm,' Jack Dotson paused and thought. It was Monday, about five hours before the national title-deciding Game 3 of the 2023 Men's College World Series finals between LSU and Florida... (McGee, 2023)

The comparable game story from the women's final stuck to the result and statistics – essentially, it provided only the essentials with no attempt to tell a story:

The Oklahoma Sooners softball made history Thursday night, defeating Florida State 3-1 in the Women's College World Series finale. The win clinched the Sooners'

seventh national title, concluding a dominant 61-1 regular season and extending an NCAA Division 1 softball-record 53-game winning streak. (Post, 2023)

The language, themes, and style of writing remained consistent throughout the written coverage. The softball articles emphasized strict facts rather than excitement. The baseball writers published more in-depth, vivid, and creative pieces about the teams, players, and the games in general and used more lavish and descriptive words such as “GOAT” -sports slang for the Greatest of All Time-, “astonished,” “making history,” “thriller” and “wildest.” (McGee, 2023).

Another big difference in the written coverage was that baseball articles did not compare the players to other athletes, implying that readers had knowledge of the players being described. The softball articles compared female athletes to male athletes and/or athletes from other sports, implying the athletes could not stand on their own. For example, Oklahoma pitcher Alex Storako, who transferred from Michigan to start the season, was compared to Kevin Durant, an NBA forward who was criticized when he went to the Golden State Warriors in search of his first championship (Scarborough, 2023). Oklahoma softball was compared to the Alabama football team and its coach, Nick Saban, and the 2016 University of Connecticut women’s basketball team (Scarborough, 2023). Baseball articles had no comparisons of other successful teams across sports.

5.4. Does the coverage of baseball and softball in 2023 reinforce the same gender stereotypes that existing women’s sports media research has found?

While there is still room for large improvement in all analyzed categories, there are signs of growth toward media coverage equality in the Men’s and Women’s College World Series. The in-game production for softball was more creative and engaging, making the game easier and more fun to watch. The softball written coverage did not carry that same excitement, but it did not reinforce gender-specific stereotypes that were found in previous research.

6. Discussion

In this study, the 2023 Men’s and Women’s College World Series live and written coverage was coded for the quantity of content, types of content, creative efforts, and tone, adjectives, and descriptors used. The results showed that the softball live-game coverage used more graphics, music, and player segments than baseball while baseball’s broadcasters and writers used more energetic language.

This study was not consistent with existing research about women’s basketball and Olympic sports. In many ways, it is an improvement in coverage equality. Common

stereotypes identified in research about coverage of other women's sports, including focusing on athletes as women, mothers, and or wives, were absent. While the softball written coverage did not carry the same excitement as the men's, with less attention to character; scene; and historical perspective, it did not reinforce gender stereotypes.

In addition, the in-game production for softball was more creative and engaging than baseball's, making the game easier and more fun to watch. Since the 1980s, broadcast coverage of women's sports has consistently had lower production value than men's (Bruce, 2015). By using fewer camera angles, statistics, and graphics, and lower sound quality, sports media depict women's sports in less dramatic and spectacular ways than men's (Messner, Duncan, and Wachs, 1990). The 2023 Women's College World Series did not have these issues, and in some ways, it had a higher production value than the men's.

In other ways, our findings mirror the existing research, particularly in the depth of coverage. Previous research has noted the "one-and-done" situations common with women's sports coverage: when women's sports do appear on a website, sports newsletter, or social media, they are often obscured by a cluster of men's stories that precede it, follow it, and are longer than it.

After the softball tournament ended, it was difficult to find recorded coverage. In order to find the articles on ESPN, we had to google "women's college world series ESPN." One day after the tournament ended, the in-depth game recap and an "Oklahoma softball WCWS takeaways, early 2024 season preview" were published, but they were removed from the front page of the website and were difficult to find. Audiences of online written sports media – which is dominated by the 18–34-year-old age demographic – are more open to reading different types of content than what they typically read such as extreme sports, women's sports, youth sports, etc. (Real, 2006). So, while the audience is there and has shown interest in the coverage, it's not accessible.

There is a path forward for equality and equity based on these results. The growth of viewership for college softball coverage in recent years reflects the success of the strategies for live-game coverage, which have given softball more prominent exposure. This shift in viewership patterns suggests that when given the attention and presentation that men's sports receive, women's sports can captivate a large and dedicated audience.

7. Conclusion

ESPN is improving its coverage through camera angles, statistics, music, graphics, and player segments when compared to past years. However, the differing language and tones in the broadcast and the articles suggest a deeper issue within sports media coverage: one that affects how women's and men's sports are perceived and valued. By shining a light on these discrepancies, this study adds to the conversation about gender

in sports media, but also challenges us to consider the implication of ESPN's coverage strategies.

While strides have been made in the media coverage and viewership of softball and women's sports in general, there remains an opportunity for ESPN and other sports media organizations to build on this momentum. By ensuring consistent visibility and accessibility, we can help cement softball's place in mainstream sports conversations.

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