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On Thin Ice: Gendered Images of Men and Women Figure Skaters in 2006 Winter Olympics

This case study examines gender representation and portrayals of figure skaters on two popular web sites *Time.com* and *SI.com (Sports Illustrated)* through their online photo essays of the 2006 Winter Olympics. Figure skating is a fascinating site to interrogate portrayals because of the various complexities and contradictions that the sport projects. According to Kestnbaum (2003) “[Figure skating] encompass [es] opposites such as control versus freedom, effortlessness versus power, art versus sport (i.e., representation versus fact), and masculine versus feminine, skating occupies an “anomalous category” particularly fraught with cultural meanings related to the intersections or clashes of these categories” (p. 5).

Portrayals of gender are analyzed using theories from gender studies and semiotics. Semiotics is an important critical visual methodology that helps to understand underlying meaning conveyed through visuals. Semiology has elaborate analytical terminologies that help to create careful and precise accounts of meanings in a particular image (Rose, 2001). Thus, in this study, semiotics provides deeper insight into the meanings conveyed through sports photographs of men and women figure skaters.

The study’s findings show greater coverage in both publications of women figure skaters in the 2006 Winter Olympics as compared to men. Women figure skaters are extensively covered both in terms of number of times they appear in the photo essay and the privileged positions they occupy within the photo essays. This might be because figure skating is perceived as a feminine sport because of its artistic and athletic components and deviates from the combative and confrontational sports like football. However, a closer look at the images reveals a hyper-sexualization and hyper-feminization of female figure skaters in both publications by the use of passive-submissive body positions, displays of emotions, and camera angles in the photographs. Men figure skaters on the other hand have received much less coverage than women figure skaters have and their portrayals are more complex and ambiguous in both online publications. Men’s portrayals are mostly feminine, yet sometimes demonstrate power and speed typically seen in portrayals of male athlete in other sports like football and baseball.

The images of men and women figure skaters seem to communicate the hegemonic masculine ideologies that trivialize women as serious athletes using feminized, sexualized, and infantilized images and inferiorize some men for taking part in the “feminine” sport. The use of these kinds of images is likely to create and reinforce gender differences in sport and in the larger society. The use heterosexual male criteria in selection and circulation of images by prominent media institutions are likely to have serious consequences for both men and women who enjoy figure skating. Many men might not pursue figure skating for the fear of being labeled as “less masculine.”

Reference:

Kestnbaum, E. (2003). *Culture on ice: Figure skating and cultural meaning*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Rose, G. (2001). *Visual methodologies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publication, Inc. CA.