

Gender disparities in tennis media

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SUMMARY

In tennis, the US Open is the largest tournament, where the world's top players compete for the 3-million-dollar prize. The 2023 US Open marked the 50th year since it became the first major tournament to offer equal prize money. Given the US Open's global viewership, treating women's tennis equally to men's tennis is crucial, as focusing on men's tennis could perpetuate the misconception that tennis is not a sport for women. This study investigates if the US Open tournament has eliminated historical gender disparities within its own programming. In order to do this, we investigated two areas: the topics commentators focused on when speaking about men's matches compared to women's, and the number of matches from the men's or women's tournaments that were shown live on ESPN1 and ESPN2 (TV channels offering comprehensive sports entertainment and analysis). Specifically, we tested two hypotheses: 1) A specified television network would broadcast more men's matches than women's matches, and 2) commentators would discuss more tennis related topics during men's matches, as opposed to discussing personal topics more during women's matches. Our results supported our first hypothesis but did not support our second hypothesis. Noticing and addressing discrepancies between the way each gender is treated is crucial in combatting bias in everyday conversations and ensuring equal opportunities for all athletes.

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is a human right that gives all people equal access to opportunities, rights, and resources, regardless of gender identity. Throughout history, gender disparities have existed in many facets of society, including education, healthcare, and politics, which have limited women's role and impact (1). A similar pattern has been seen in sports. When women began to get involved in more competitive athletic activities, society viewed them as unnaturally masculine or said that their behavior was countering traditional gender roles (2). These stereotypes were damaging because they discouraged women from sports and furthered the idea that women were not equal to men (3).

Tennis was previously a sport for white, elite males (4). Billie Jean King, an American professional tennis player, co-founded the Women's Tennis Association and played a key role in organizing women's only tournaments (4). After

winning the 1972 US Open and receiving significantly less prize money than the men's winner, she threatened to boycott the following year, leading to the US Open becoming the first major tournament to offer equal prize money to men and women (5).

Throughout campaigns for gender equality, the media has been a powerful tool for spreading awareness and advocating for female athlete's rights and opportunities (6). For professional athletes, the media plays a large part in deciding how much time they spend in front of reporters. Female tennis players not being treated the same as male players by the media could, therefore, feel like their sport matters less (7). Overall, female athletes have higher burnout rates than men, and a large reason for this is feelings of devaluation (8).

A previous study on gender representation in tennis studied the way British newspapers covered men's and women's matches at Wimbledon — a major tennis tournament (9). This study tracked the uses of the words "boy" and "girl" in articles, which are indicators of the players not being taken seriously. Their results showed that the term "boy" was used to refer to the male players when they were children, while the term "girl" was consistently used as reference to female athletes, regardless of age, diminishing them to girls (9). Our study attempted to build on this research by analyzing commentary during live tennis matches. Real-time, spontaneous commentary could result in more gender bias than newspaper articles because people's implicit biases determine their choice of words, so it is valuable to see where stereotypes are more prevalent (10). Additionally, the fast nature of real-time commentary reinforces gender disparities as they come up, while print media provides more opportunity for balanced reporting because there is less of an emotional response (11). This means that live commentary is more at risk of circulating gender bias. No matter the type of media that stereotypes are perpetuated through, they have a significant influence on public perceptions of athletes. One study found that the photographs included in sports articles did not depict women within a sports context, while men were playing their respective sports (12). A survey later asked participants to describe the athletes based on these photos; overwhelmingly, respondents used words that objectified or sexualized women and commented on the men's strength and athleticism (12). These examples of the danger of live commentary on perpetuating stereotypes demonstrate the importance of our study in finding and recognizing any existing gender stereotypes at the 2023 US Open.

Our study was focused specifically on the US Open tournament, one of the four Grand Slams/major tournaments in tennis: US Open, Roland Garros, Wimbledon, and Australian Open (13). We chose the 2023 US Open because it has been the most progressive tournament in terms of gender equality,

specifically because of its early decision to award men and women equal prize money (5). The year 2023 marked the 50th anniversary since the US Open announced that it would give equal prize money to both men and women; throughout the tournament, this was mentioned and celebrated multiple times (14). We wanted to see if any gender disparities were present in the commentary at this tournament, especially because of the large focus on gender equality.

We analyzed all US Open matches broadcast live on ESPN1 and ESPN2 to identify if the media contributes to gender disparities by focusing on 1) the matches chosen for coverage and 2) variations in commentators' language between male and female players. We hypothesized that the ratio of women's matches shown on TV to the total number of women's matches played would be lower than the corresponding ratio for men. Additionally, we hypothesized that commentary during women's matches would focus on life outside of tennis, while men's matches would receive more tennis-related commentary. Our results supported our first hypothesis, as a significantly higher percentage of men's matches were broadcast, but did not support our second hypothesis with conclusive evidence. Hopefully, future studies will be able to expand on our methods to collect data from more tournaments in order to gain a more complete understanding. Nonetheless, our findings suggest a need to continue promoting equal representation of women in tennis media in order to ensure that female athletes feel valued and supported. This is true not only in tennis but in all sports. Stereotypes that say that men's sports are more competitive or exciting to watch are dangerous, discouraging young female athletes from sports. By highlighting these disparities and biases, our study attempts to create a more inclusive sports environment that values all athletes equally.

RESULTS

Female athletes experience a higher burnout rate compared to males, often due to feelings of devaluation stemming from unequal treatment in the media (8). This discrepancy highlights the importance of addressing stereotypes in sports to ensure equal opportunities for athletes. We assessed whether there was a difference between the way the media portrays women tennis players versus male tennis players at the 2023 US Open by testing two factors: 1) the number of matches shown

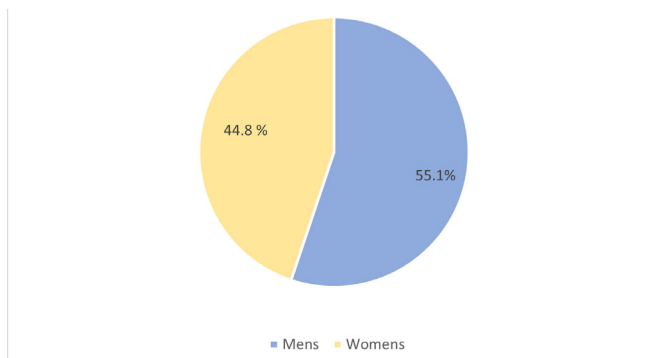


Figure 1: Matches of each gender broadcast live. Each match shown live on ESPN1 and ESPN2 was counted and categorized as being part of the men's tournament or women's tournament. 55.1% of all matches broadcast live during the 2023 US Open were men's matches. This difference is significant, as no gender disparities would mean 50% of matches shown are men's and 50% are women's.

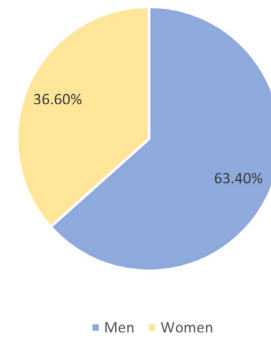


Figure 2: Sets played by each gender. For each match that was broadcast live, the number of sets played was counted and categorized as being part of the men's or women's tournament. Because men's matches are longer than women's, this was the best way to find which gender received more streaming time on the television network. 63.4% of the total sets broadcast were from the men's tournament, indicating further gender disparities than when looking at just the number of matches shown. This disparity in men's and women's sets broadcast was statistically significant ($p < 0.0001$).

from both the men's and women's tournaments and 2) the topics that commentators chose to focus on when covering the tennis matches. Each match shown on ESPN 1 or ESPN 2 was categorized as being from either the men's tournament or the women's tournament. Additionally, for each individual match, the subjects the commentator decided to speak about were placed into six individual categories: career, sportsmanship, health, appearance, emotions, and family.

Over the duration of the tournament, 190 men's matches (singles and doubles) and 190 women's matches (singles and doubles) were played. Out of these 380 total matches, 112 matches were shown on ESPN: 61 from the men's tournament and 51 from the women's tournament. Out of the total matches broadcast, 54.5% were men's matches, and 45.5% were women's matches; 9% more men's matches were shown (**Figure 1**). To determine the significance of these results, we used a chi-square test to determine if there was any correlation between our two variables (gender and number of matches broadcast). Our findings were not statistically significant ($p = 0.3173$), indicating that there is not a strong association between the two variables.

In addition to that, because of the difference in length between men's and women's matches (women play best out of three sets while men play best out of five), we compared the number of sets played by both the men and women. This is important to note because while men's matches are already shown more frequently, they would also occupy a greater portion of the TV network's time. Throughout the tournament, 1056 total sets were played (singles and doubles): 612 sets were played by men, while 444 sets were played by women. 355 sets were broadcast live on ESPN: 225 were played by men, while 130 were played by women. Of the total sets broadcast, 63.4% of the total sets shown on ESPN 1 or 2 were played by men, while 36.6% of sets were played by women (**Figure 2**). These findings were significant ($p < 0.0001$), indicating a strong association between gender and number of sets broadcast. Additionally, the chi-square value of 25.4223 indicates that there is a larger discrepancy between the observed and expected frequencies than would be expected by chance. Therefore, there is likely a significant association between the gender of players and the sets

| Comment | Category |
|--|---------------|
| "Salisbury was a college player as well, at the University of Memphis." | Career |
| "Nice embrace from these two at the net." | Sportsmanship |
| "You never know if you'll come back from a surgery like the one Zverev had." | Health |
| "He's never been the most positive guy, but his attitude is great tonight." | Emotions |
| "There's Coco's mom in the stands there." | Family |
| "Shelton's a big guy, 6'4, 205 pounds." | Appearance |

Table 1: Representative comments from each category tested. Each comment was categorized by both authors and a third party unaware of the hypothesis, with the third party's choice being used when there was disagreement.

broadcast on TV, thus supporting our hypothesis.

Our second hypothesis was that commentators would focus on tennis-related topics more during men's matches compared to non-tennis-related topics during women's matches. Commentators spend most of the match time talking about the player's technique, the strategies they see being used, or analyzing the match. We wanted to see if there was a difference in the topics they discussed when they were not analyzing the technicalities of the match. We picked six topics to focus on: career, sportsmanship, health, emotions, family, and appearance. The first three (career, sportsmanship, health) are related to the sport, and we predicted that men's matches would have a higher number of comments on those topics. The last three (emotions, family, appearance) are more related to the player's personal characteristics, so we hypothesized that women's matches would have a higher number of comments on these topics.

The exemplar comments falling into the six categories are presented in **Table 1**. Most comments (87%) clearly fit into one of our six categories, but when there was disagreement over one, a third party decided on its categorization. One example of a comment that did not fit into a category was, "I'm just impressed that he's out there, even though he was out for so long." This could have fit into the emotions category and the health category, but the third party placed it into the emotions category.

It is not possible to compare the total number of comments from each category because there was a difference in the number of male and female sets/matches played on the TV networks. Therefore, we looked at the average number of comments in each category per set, which was calculated by dividing the total comments in one category by the total number of sets played for men and women separately (**Figure 3**). To determine if the differences in comments per set for each topic were statistically significant, we conducted a chi-square test using a 2x6 contingency table. We concluded that there was no association between gender and the number of comments per set in each category we tested ($p = 0.999$).

To further test our second hypothesis, we combined the categories that were not tennis-related: emotion, family, and appearance. We then found the proportion of non-tennis-related comments/total comments for each day that the tournament was played (**Figure 4**). For example, on day 1 of the tournament, 55 total comments were recorded for women's matches, and 27 of those were non-tennis related. Therefore, 49% of women's comments on day 1 were non-tennis related. Doing this comparison per day allowed us to account for any differences in commentary topics that could have occurred as a result of different commentators. The data was graphed on a violin plot, and the general width at

each point of the graph was fairly equal for men and women. This indicates that the commentators covering matches on a given day discussed non-tennis-related topics equally for both genders. We performed a Kruskal-Wallis test on the combined data and found that there was no significant difference in the proportion of non-career comments per total comments between men's and women's matches ($p = 0.679$).

DISCUSSION

In this study, we compared the number of men's matches broadcast live on ESPN 1 or 2 with the number of women's matches. We found that 54.5% of the matches shown were from the men's tournament, while 45.5% were from the women's tournament. While this difference may not seem significant, it is important to consider the varying match lengths (men play up to five sets, and women play up to three). This shows that in addition to broadcasting more men's matches overall, ESPN devoted significantly more airtime to men's matches compared to women's matches. Therefore, we also compared the total number of sets played by men and women. The average duration of one set is similar across matches, so the ratio of sets played by men to sets played by women should approximately equal the ratio of airtime given to men's and women's matches on TV. Out of the total 355 sets broadcast from both the men's and women's tournaments, 225 were played by men, and 130 were played by women. This shows that 63.4% of ESPN's total streaming time was occupied by men's matches, while 36.6% was spent

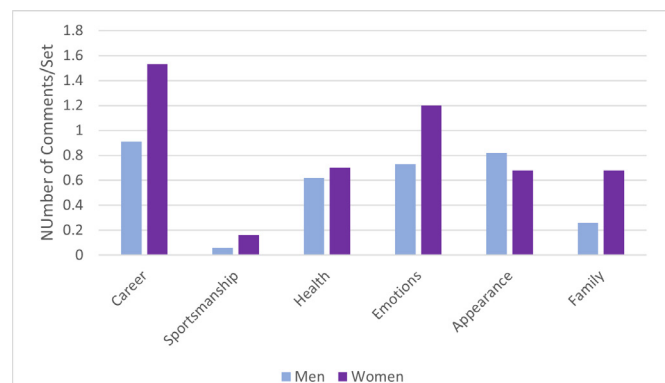


Figure 3: Frequency of Subject of Commentary per Set. Dividing the number of comments in one category by total sets played, for men and women separately, gave us the average number of comments per set. Commentators mentioned each subject, except appearance, more times per set during women's matches. A chi-square test was run on this data, which showed that the difference in the number of comments/set between men and women was not statistically significant ($p = 0.999$).

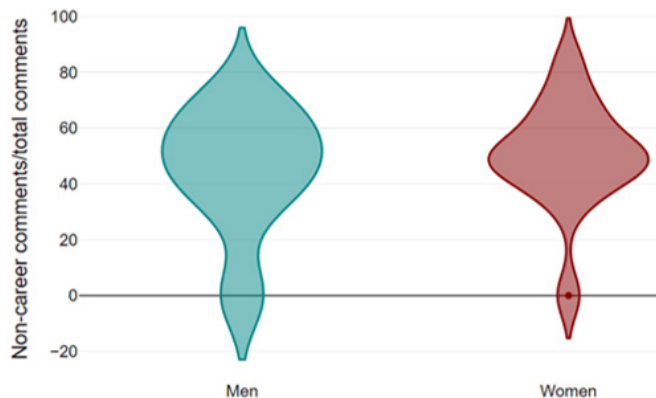


Figure 4: Proportion of non-career-related comments for each day of the tournament. To further test whether commentary differed between men's and women's matches, we combined the non-tennis-related categories and found the proportion of non-tennis-related comments for each day of the tournament. A Kruskal-Wallis test was performed, and the difference between the men's and women's data was found to be insignificant ($p = 0.679$).

showing women's matches.

We combined singles and doubles matches together in order to get as much data as we could from both the men's and women's tournaments. However, throughout the whole tournament, six doubles matches were broadcast (four women's and two men's), so the double's data had minimal impact on the overall match count.

In 2022, all women's sports received an average of 15% of media coverage (15). A 2023 study conducted by The Collective found that women's sports received 15% of total sports media coverage, indicating no improvement in one year (16). Our findings show that in the 2023 US Open, women's tennis received 36.6% of media coverage, suggesting that tennis media generally does a better job at equitable coverage compared to other sports or that the US Open is more progressive in terms of gender equality than other tournaments. Either way, there is still room to improve in order to reach complete equality. A big reason for more men's matches being shown could be because producers believe that they will generate more viewers than women's matches (17). It is important to note that according to ESPN's viewership data, though, this is not true (18). At the 2023 US Open, the women's championship match between Gauff and Sabalenka generated 3.4 million viewers. The men's championship match between Djokovic and Medvedev generated 2.3 million viewers, meaning that the women's finals had 67.8% more viewers. If popularity is not the reason that male matches receive more airtime than female matches, persistent gender stereotypes could be a factor. Tennis, and sports in general, excluded women for a long time (19). This legacy of sports broadcasting being more focused on men's sports could be contributing to unequal representation between men's and women's sports today.

The second hypothesis that this study tested is that commentators would focus on different subjects when covering men's tennis matches compared to women's matches. During most of the match, commentators spoke about strategies and the players' technique, but we focused on the subjects spoken about during the rest of the match. The topics that we anticipated would be most prevalent in

their conversations were career, sportsmanship, health, emotions, appearance, and family. We thought career, sportsmanship, and health would be discussed more in men's matches, as they are sports-related, and emotions, appearance, and family would be more discussed in women's matches as they are more related to the player's personal characteristics. However, the difference between topics of commentary for men's and women's matches was statistically insignificant. Additionally, when we combined the comments per set for topics that were non-career related, we found no significant correlation between men's and women's matches. Based on these results, it appears that commentators did not focus on different subjects when covering men's matches compared to women's matches. This suggests that in the context of tennis commentary, the focus remains fairly consistent regardless of the player's gender.

This study has a few limitations due to the level of human interpretation and bias required to complete it. In order to test our second hypothesis, that the subject the commentator chose to focus on was different between men's and women's tennis matches, we had to decide whether each comment fit into one of our six set categories or not. This required us to use our judgment and context clues from the commentators in order to find the category in which the topic of commentary would best fit. While this was not an error-free method of collecting the data, we attempted to reduce any biases by having both authors review each comment and agree on which category it would best fit into. Additionally, we provided a third party, who did not know our hypothesis, with all of the comments we originally categorized, and we asked them to place each comment into one of the six categories or indicate that they did not fit into any categories. 87% of all comments were placed in the same category by both authors, and of these comments, the third-party agreed with 96% of the categorizations. When discrepancies arose between categorizations, we used the category that the third-party chose. In the future, this limitation could be resolved by creating an algorithm that would be able to identify and categorize each new topic of discussion into a category based on the set criteria.

Another challenge we ran into was comparing data from the men's tournament to data from the women's tournament. Each men's match can last up to five sets, while a women's match is at most three sets. Because men's matches last longer, and there were more men's matches shown throughout the tournament, the amount of commentary on each subject we focused on was understandably greater for men than women. To fairly compare the values from the men's and women's datasets, we divided the number of mentions of a subject in the commentary by the total number of sets played in the tournament. In total, the number of sets from the men's tournament shown on ESPN 1 or 2 was 225, while the number of sets from the women's tournament shown was 130.

Future studies should consider factors like the location of the tournament or the demographic information of the commentators. During the 2023 US Open, the tournament was celebrating 50 years of equal pay for both men and women. This means that gender equality was a big focus of the tournament, as there were various ceremonies celebrating it, and it was mentioned numerous times by all the commentators. With such a focus on gender equality, it is possible that commentators were more mindful about the

language they used, so it would be valuable to replicate this study, but with a separate tournament, either in the US or in another country. Nearly 38% of the world speaks a gendered language, meaning nouns are classified as masculine or feminine, reflecting distinctions between genders (20). In these countries, women have significantly fewer opportunities, and there are more regressive gender norms (1). It would be interesting to see if tournaments in these countries or commentators speaking these languages translate to greater disparities in the language commentators use to describe male or female athletes.

In summary, our study found that throughout the 2023 US Open, ESPN1 and ESPN2 broadcast more men's matches than women's matches but did not find a significant difference in the topics that commentators chose to discuss. This shows that there is still work to be done to ensure that women receive equal representation in the media, thereby creating an environment that sets female athletes up for success. Any stereotypes or biases that contribute to these existing disparities need to be recognized, and people should work to correct them. Policymakers should ensure that female athletes receive equal pay and have access to the same facilities and coaches as their male counterparts, demonstrating that women's sports are important and deserving of the same attention. Additionally, media outlets should make an effort to highlight the success stories of female athletes in order to combat stereotypes and inspire young athletes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Source of Commentary

We assessed whether there was a difference in the portrayal of male and female tennis players in media coverage during the 2023 US Open, using matches televised on ESPN1 and ESPN2. These channels were chosen for their comprehensive coverage and free accessibility (paid streaming services, such as ESPN +, allow subscribers to choose which matches to watch, which would not allow us to observe the matches that the program chose to show). The matches that were taken into consideration for the study included men's singles, men's doubles, women's singles, and women's doubles. This data allowed us to find the number of matches from each gender broadcast on TV and analyze the topics that commentators chose to focus on.

Number of matches

For each day of the tournament, a count was kept of how many matches from both the men's tournament and the women's tournament were shown. At the end of the tournament, we combined the number of women's singles and doubles matches and separately combined the number of men's singles and doubles matches. By combining singles and doubles data, we aimed to provide a more representative sample of the total matches played by both men and women. These totals were then compared using a chi-square test to assess any significant differences in the number of matches broadcast on ESPN for each gender.

Because of the difference in match length between both genders, we counted the total number of sets shown live from both the men's and women's tournament, combining both the singles and doubles data. A chi-square test was conducted to see if there was a significant association between gender of players and sets broadcast on TV.

Subject of commentary

Each commentator's remarks were categorized into six distinct categories: career, sportsmanship, health, emotions, appearance, and family. These categories were chosen because we noticed that these are common themes that commentators focus on when they are not directly analyzing the game. Additionally, they cover subjects from both on and off the court, helping us understand whether there are differences in the narratives given to male and female athletes. Only comments about the players currently participating in the televised matches were considered for categorization. For this study, a comment represented an instance of a subject (one of the six categories we tested) being discussed. This means that each reference a commentator made to one of our categories was counted as a separate comment, regardless of whether it had already been discussed.

Criteria were established before the tournament began to determine which comments qualified for classification into one of the categories. Comments referring to the player's tennis background were put into the "career" category. Comments about code violations or directly referencing the sportsmanship of the players were put into the "sportsmanship" category. Comments about injury, illness, and physical/mental struggles were put into the "health" category. Comments on the player's feelings or the emotions they appeared to be expressing were placed in the "emotions" category. Comments on the physical image of the players, including clothing or their body in general, were placed into the "appearance" category. Comments made about the player's family life or family members were placed into the "family" category.

To minimize bias that could have occurred when placing comments into categories, each comment was categorized by three people: both authors and a third party who did not know our hypothesis. The third party was tasked with sorting each comment into one of the six categories or identifying them as not fitting any category, based on the predetermined criteria. In cases where there was disagreement between the three evaluators on which category a comment belonged in, we kept the category the third party had chosen.

For each match shown on ESPN1 or ESPN2, we tallied the occurrences of commentary within each category. At the end of the tournament, we totaled the counts separately for men's and women's matches. Due to the shorter duration of women's matches compared to men's matches, we normalized the commentary frequency by dividing the total comments in each category by the total number of sets played by men and women, respectively. This gave us the number of times each topic of commentary showed up on average per set in both the men's and women's draws.

We conducted a chi-square test to determine if there was any statistically significant difference in the frequency of topics discussed in men's and women's matches. We used a 2x6 contingency table with "match gender" and "topic discussed" as variables. The test was conducted with five degrees of freedom and a significance level of 0.05. Additionally, we created two categories by combining the tennis related comments (career, sportsmanship, health) and non-tennis related comments (emotions, appearance, family). We then found the proportion of non-tennis related comments/total comments for each day of the tournament. We performed a Kruskal-Wallis test on this data, and our results

were insignificant. There was not a significant difference between the proportion of non-tennis-related comments/total comments for men and women.

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