

Beyond Annie Oakley: An Analysis of TV's Portrayal of Markswomen

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Abstract. Media portrayals influence how women are perceived in society. Historically, women have often been chastised or punished for exhibiting skills and attributes which have been traditionally perceived as appropriate for men and therefore, inappropriate for women. Currently, some reality television series seem open to portraying women in roles which have historically been considered inappropriate for them. The purpose of this study was threefold: to discern whether the History Channel's television series *Top Shot* provides a sexist representation of either gender, to determine whether casting is gender-biased when compared with ratios of marksmanship in the Military, Hunting, Law Enforcement, Exhibition, and Competition sectors, and to assess whether markswomen are marginalized based on their gender. This study finds that the series provides a slightly sexist representation of markswomen, that casting appears gender-biased, and that fan opinions reflect a difference in the treatment of female and male contestants.

Introduction

Communication is all around us. Media, and television especially, play a large role in our lives. Sexism, defined as behavior leading to difference of treatment based upon biological sex (Berg, 2009) has the potential to be disseminated through this medium. Sexism can also lead to the marginalization, or taking of importance or power (Ferguson, 1990), from a gender group. In this paper, I consider History Channel's *Top Shot* through a gender studies lens (Richardson, 2007), by looking at how the series portrays female and male contestants, whether these portrayals are gender biased, and if ratios match the participation rates of women and men in marksmanship in the public and private sectors.

Research Questions

RQ1: Does *Top Shot* provide a sexist representation of contestants based on gender? RQ2: Is casting gender-biased compared to real-world ratios? RQ3: Are markswomen marginalized?

Methods

Three inductive processes were used to analyze content from the 12 episodes in seasons 1 and 2 that contained both female and male contestants in order to address the research questions.

RQ1: A coding process was developed to quantify every instance of gendered language use in reference to individual female or male competitors, as well as single sex and mixed sex groups. Findings were inductively analyzed to determine whether language use reflected a sexist representation of contestants (Boyatzis, 1998).

RQ2: Ratios of female and male competitors on the show were compared with ratios of females and males in the categories of shooters from which show participants are recruited: Military, Hunters, Law Enforcement, Exhibition, and Competition to assess whether the show accurately reflected women's participation in these sectors (Wrench, et. al., 2008).

RQ3: A qualitative inductive analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) of fan comments on the *Top Shot* Facebook page in response to the post: "Some of the most talked about contestants in *Top Shot* history are the ladies...Tell us below which one of *Top Shot*'s female contestants was most impressive?" was conducted as the emergent discussion allowed for analysis of fan perceptions of the treatment of female competitors on the show.

Results

The quantitative comparison of gendered language usage resulted in these totals:

Table 1: Gendered language usage by referent

| Female Contestant | | Male Contestant | |
|-------------------|---|-----------------|----|
| Marksman | 4 | Guy | 36 |
| Girl | 3 | Man | 34 |
| Woman | 1 | Marksman | 6 |
| Chick | 1 | Bro(ther) | 5 |
| | | Sir | 4 |
| | | Boy | 2 |

While there were a larger number of gendered references to male contestants, per capita there were 3 references per contestant. This parity allowed for analysis of equivalent data among contestants. The two most frequently used gender-specific words in reference to a male competitor were “Guy,” and “Man”. The two most frequently used gender-specific words used in reference to a female competitor were “Marksman,” and “Girl”, the first a male referent word, the second a juvenile form of the word “woman.”

Next, the ratio of female to male show competitors was compared to the ratios in the Military and Hunting sectors. The Law Enforcement, Exhibition, and Competition sectors were not compared due to a lack of available comparison data. While there is an unequal ratio between Top Shot (1 to 9.67) and both Hunting (1 to 9.5) and the Military (1 to 5.94) sectors, the difference between Top Shot and the Military sector is most disparate.

Lastly, a qualitative content analysis of Facebook fan comments revealed sixty one comments from fifty seven fans who discussed the treatment of female contestants on the show. Commenters painted a clear picture of the show. Two main themes emerged in analysis of this data. First, the male competitors (as a majority) frequently put female competitors in positions which were more difficult in order to eliminate them, possibly because they did not trust the female competitors’ physical abilities. One fan stated “I feel like the guys in the last one were trying to get the women out early because they didn't think that they could handle the physical part of the challenges”. Another stated that “The physical nature of the competition undermines female contestants' marksmanship abilities significantly”.

Secondly, an overwhelming number of comments discussed an interest in having a female-only Top Shot as a solution to inequity. One fan summed up this

sentiment: “I would like to see a ladies only show because from what I have seen so far, it seems like regardless of how they do or their skill level the guys seem to go out of their way to put the ladies into the do or die competitions as soon as possible.” This discussion was divided, however. Many commenters felt that having a female-only Top Shot was not a suitable solution, as this fan expressed: “I am truly dismayed by all of the suggestions to have a women’s-only Top Shot...[that] would serve to ‘prove’ that women can’t shoot as well as men and that they ‘need’ their own division, which is a total load of crap!”

Conclusions

In answering the research questions, the following conclusions became evident:

The first two seasons of the television series Top Shot provide a slightly sexist representation of markswomen. This is done by showing gendered language usage in a way that frames female contestants in primarily masculine or juvenile ways, denying their mature female nature. Secondly, casting for the show appears gender-biased when compared to available data on women’s participation in relevant sectors. Finally, fan comments indicated that markswomen are treated differently by their male counterparts due to gender.

Limitations

More research is needed in the areas of Law Enforcement, Exhibition, and Competition to draw accurate conclusions about the show’s seemingly gender-biased casting.

Overall, the findings of this research show that Top Shot’s portrayals are slightly sexist. They also indicate that there is much room for further research.

References

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