

The Gendered Language of Sports Teams Names and Logos

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Abstract

For professional sports organizations, team names and logos represent a group's central identity, reflecting geographic location and important attributes pertaining to strength and skill. For minority groups and women, however, team names and logos have also served as a site of oppression in the sports domain. This study examines this problem as it is apparent in team names and logos chosen to represent each of the 44 teams belonging to the National Football League and Lingerie Football League. Drawing on previous research on the topic of team names, logos, and sports team identity, the study provides argues that despite gender-exclusive nature of the leagues, gendered-language is still used to define, demean, and derogate women's teams.

Introduction

As a cultural institution, it can be argued that Sport represents a microcosm of American society at large. The evident social organization around the identity and esteem needs of men and its preservation as a male-dominant environment reflects the value placed on patriarchal ideology and an inherent motivation to preserve social, cultural, ideological, and economic power among men. Bryson (1987) argues that this system is maintained through an exclusion of women through direct control, ignoring, definition, and trivialization. Daddario (1998) further suggests that these practices are legitimated through representational bias in sports and by sports media, an emphasis on the physiological difference between men and women, questions of sex and sexuality, and a primary focus on male spectatorship. This article recognizes each of these processes, and focuses specifically on how team names and logos are implicated in the marginalization and trivialization of women's teams and female athletes.

Literature Review

Team names and logos are a keystone of identity for sports leagues, teams, and players. Through the use of common sign and symbol systems – including names, colors, and emblems – leagues, teams, and players are afforded greater recognition and recall of significant

characteristics by members of both the in-group and out-groups. In-group members (owners, administration, coaches, and athletes) assemble around this identity to communicate solidarity, distinguish teammates, and detect opponents. Out-group members (local residents, sports fans, and spectators) use this identity as a point of social organization. Through donning a team's colors, emblems, and other insignia, outsiders are able to communicate their identification with a team, demonstrate support for a particular team or sport, and participate in other facets of sports culture.

As a central element of group identity, team name represents more than a label (Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 1989). Although the practical purpose of a team name may be to provide no more lexical content than a street sign, culture, context, and common use of language embeds a range of possible meanings and interpretations (Smith, 1997). Therefore, the functional purpose of a team name is to communicate only the most important group attributes or self concept. Commonly, this is achieved using a formula consisting of a geographic identifier and one modifier usually alluding to geography (Baltimore Charm), animal types (Jacksonville Jaguars), weather and natural disasters (Green Bay Chill), natives (Washington Redskins), historic icons (Tampa Bay Buccaneers), or other devices conveying strength, power, and aggression (Slovenko, 1994). This is supported and reinforced by the lexical and visual content of logos.

While team names and logos for most groups define group identity positively and encourage social support, prior research reveals that this is not necessarily true for minority groups. According to Eitzen and Baca Zinn (1989) in their study *The De-athleticization of Women: The Naming and Gender Marking of Collegiate Sports Teams*, names referencing these groups or assigned to teams for these groups create bias and reinforce stereotypes by emphasizing ethnic and gender identity over more salient characteristics that are relevant to the nature of sport. Consequently, ethnic and gender minorities are trivialized as athletes and their accomplishments minimized. For women's teams in particular, strategies that have aided in this process of marginalization include the use of physical markers (*belle*), terms such as *girl or gal*, feminine suffixes (*ette, esse*), labels such as *lady or woman*, male names with female modifiers, or double gender markers, among others (Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 1989). By using gender differentiation to separate women and men, the authors argues that "language reflects and helps maintain the secondary status of women by defining them and their place" (p. 364). In doing so, team names, situated within historical and social context, also reveal some of the underlying politics at play.

While the use of gendered terms is not innately offensive or oppressive, understanding language in this way demonstrates that naming is not an arbitrary process. Instead, team names are indicative of the existing rules present in society (Spender, 1980). With regards to the American culture of naming, then, Eitzen and Baca Zinn (1989 p. 364) note that it is important to recognize how:

"Patriarchy has shaped words, names, and labels for women and men, their personality traits, expressions of emotion, behaviors, and occupations. Names are badges of femininity and masculinity, hence inferiority and superiority.

Therefore, name labels, despite intent, are latently responsible for contributing to gender bias and reinforcing gender stratification prevalent in society and in sport.

The present study builds on these findings by examining the implications of naming practices for women's sports team and leagues at the professional level. While prior research has focused on team names (Slovenko, 1994) and their relationship to gender (Smith, 1997; Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 1989), none have attempted to apply conclusions to the professional domain. However, it is apparent that gender differentiation in language is as critical an issue in this environment as it is at the level of high school and collegiate sports. This is particularly evident in sports in which males and females participate equally. Nationally, athletic associations such as the National Basketball Association, Major League Baseball, and the Professional Golf Association, all refer to an exclusively male athletic environment. Conversely, national women's leagues are modified to include feminine references such as "women" and "ladies". Examples include the Women's National Basketball Association, and Ladies Professional Golf Association. This study argues that although there is no statute that legitimates a separation of male and female teams for the same sport, or prohibits either gender from participating under the auspices of the same league, through gender differentiation, male and female sports leagues are situated to reinforce the naturalized system gender order present in sport.

A Brief Description of the Leagues

Football is commonly regarded as the most male and one of few remaining sports for reserved for men (Christensen et al, 2001). Modeled after European rugby football, the sport pits men against men in a violent clash of aggressive competition. This drive to demonstrate power and control is considered "properly virile and thus good training for American boys (Christensen et al, 2001, p 422). In line with cultural values, however, football has been deemed inappropriate for women. As a result, football maintains identification with maleness and masculinity. Still, since 1941, women have sought to establish a presence in the sport, through involvement with high school football teams, participation on men's teams, and the establishment of leagues of their own. Nevertheless, American knowledge of football is limited to the National Football League, established in 1920.

The National Football League (NFL) is currently recognized as the highest level of professional American football (compared to amateur and arena style football). The league consists of an American Football Conference (AFC) and National Football Conference, made up of thirty-two teams in total. Teams are divided evenly (sixteen each) into each conference, which is further separated into four divisions (North, South, East, West), with four teams belonging to each. The regular season for the sport runs from September to January, with teams competing within conferences for six playoff spots, in the hopes of competing in the national championship, known as the Super Bowl.

The Lingerie Football League (LFL) represents one of several American Football leagues for women (other leagues include Women's Professional Football League (1965), National Women's Football League (1970), Women's Professional Football League (1999), Independent Women's Football League (2001), and Women's Football Alliance (2008)). Created in 2009, the LFL is accredited as being the fastest growing sports franchise for women in the nation (Chandler, 2011). It is modeled after a pay-per-view special called the *Lingerie Bowl*, originally intended as an alternative to the NFL's Super Bowl halftime show. Currently, the league consists of an Eastern and Western Conference, with six teams belonging to each. Similarly to the NFL,

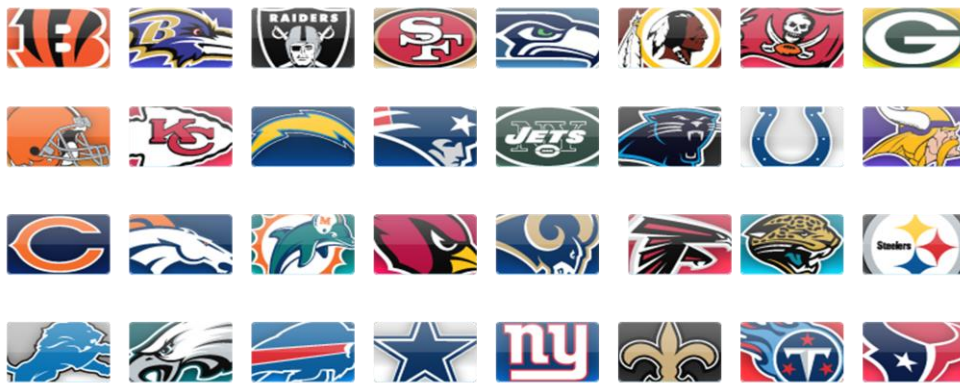
lingerie football is a full-contact style of gridiron football played in professional stadiums and arenas across the United States. Teams compete against teams within the same conference in the hopes of competing in the championship known as the Lingerie Bowl. Individual athletes from each team may also be chosen for participation in the annual All Fantasy Game.

Data and Methodology

The data sources for identifying team names and logos were the national websites of the National Football League and Lingerie Football League. Each website provided a current roster of active teams, logos for each team, and hyperlinks to each team’s independent website for further information. A total of 44 teams were identified (NFL: 32, LFL: 12). Formerly associated teams and teams scheduled for future expansion were omitted. NFL teams included the *Arizona Cardinals*, *Atlanta Falcons*, *Baltimore Ravens*, *Buffalo Bills*, *Carolina Panthers*, *Chicago Bears*, *Cincinnati Bengals*, *Cleveland Browns*, *Dallas Cowboys*, *Denver Broncos*, *Detroit Lions*, *Green Bay Packers*, *Houston Texans*, *Indianapolis Colts*, *Jacksonville Jaguars*, *Kansas City Chiefs*, *Miami Dolphins*, *Minnesota Vikings*, *New England Patriots*, *New Orleans Saints*, *New York Giants*, *New York Jets*, *Oakland Raiders*, *Philadelphia Eagles*, *Pittsburgh Steelers*, *San Diego Chargers*, *San Francisco 49ers*, *Seattle Seahawks*, *St. Louis Rams*, *Tampa Bay Buccaneers*, *Tennessee Titans*, and *Washington Redskins*. Teams for the LFL included *Baltimore Charm*, *Chicago Bliss*, *Cleveland Crush*, *Green Bay Chill*, *Las Vegas Sin*, *Los Angeles Temptation*, *Minnesota Valkyrie*, *Orlando Fantasy*, *Philadelphia Passion*, *Seattle Mist*, *Tampa Breeze*, and *Toronto Triumph*. League names were also assessed.

To determine whether or not a name label represented gender neutrality or gender linking, each team name was separated from its regional identifier (e.g. Philadelphia Passion, only Passion) to be first defined denotatively using either Merriam-Webster (or Wikipedia where noted), and then defined connotatively according to context (sponsoring league), culture, and common use of the term. In addition to being evaluated individually, team names were also assessed between leagues. League Names were also assessed for gender-linking through inclusion of physical markers, or other gender identifying terms.

Figure 1
National Football League Logos



To determine how logos factor into reinforcing denotative and/or connotative meaning of team names and enhancing team identity, each of the 46 logos (leagues and teams) were evaluated according to whether the logo used a literal (adhering to denotative definition) or interpretive (adhering to connotative definition) image, and whether gender-linking was used in text or images. In addition to being evaluated individually, team logos were also assessed between leagues.

Figure 2
Lingerie Football League Logos



Analysis

LEAGUE NAMES. In the present study, the NFL represents the socially undisputed national sports leagues for men’s participation in football. Therefore, no gender-linking is apparent and none is required. For the LFL, which positions itself as an American league for women, however, a unique feminine qualifier is used. Unlike other sports leagues for women, which generally include terminology such as *women* or *ladies*, the LFL uses the term *lingerie* to communicate the feminine aspect of the league. While this is not apparently necessary, it does follow normative standards for naming women’s leagues. Used here, the term *lingerie* can imply a range of meanings and associations. Given the importance of culture, context, and common use however, these meanings can be limited to a very specific reference.

The origin of *lingerie* is French, and refers to undergarments (irrespective of gender). However, in the American sense of the word, *lingerie* is defined as intimate apparel for women. Thus female gender is evoked. Using this meaning, not only are audiences able to infer details about the league, they are further inclined to speculate about the physicality and caliber of these female players. This has negative implications for the type of conclusions and biases drawn. Compared to other women’s sports leagues, which use general terms associated with females, the use of the term *lingerie* suggests a very specific type of woman. Cultural associations between women and lingerie evoke images of modelesque or hypersexualized women. This is supported by the fact that lingerie is distinguished from typical cotton underwear by its revealing designs. It is further eroticized through the use of sheer, delicate, and close-fitting material (e.g., lace,

chiffon, silk, spandex, etc.), risqué design (thong underwear, negligees, baby dolls), girlhood accoutrements (e.g. bows, ruffles, ribbons), and common associations to romantic, personal, and pornographic settings. These qualities not only enhance associations with the feminine, but also transfer to players, emphasizing the body and suggesting a certain standard of accepted beauty. Generally, in the mainstream, lingerie is associated with women who are cosmetically flawless and generically feminine (thin, long hair, make-up).

Combined with the concept of a football league, the use of *lingerie* evokes dissonance. Lingerie evokes salaciousness, sensuality, and sex. Football evokes force, toughness, and nerve. Therefore, where these terms intersect, the traditional characteristics of football are destabilized. Consequently, lingerie football is presented as a “powder-puff”, less skillful variation of the sport. As a result, women’s athletic abilities are compromised by an emphasis on physicality and sexuality.

TEAM NAMES. As discussed, team names are a central element of group identity. Names are usually inspired by geography, animal types, human figures (warriors, natives, patriots), or other symbols of power and skill. This standard of naming is supported and reinforced by the thirty-two teams that make-up of the NFL. Of the teams, fifteen cite animal types (birds: 5, undomesticated cats: 4, other wild mammals: 6). Species of birds include *Cardinals*, *Falcons*, *Ravens*, *Eagles*, and *Eeahawks*. With the exception of *Cardinals* and *Ravens*, the remaining species of birds represent birds of prey. Predatory birds hunt and feed on other animals. As a result of these hunter-like sensibilities, birds of prey are considered swift, cunning, and aggressive. These qualities are also apparent in the undomesticated cats and other wild mammals cited in NFL team names. Animals such as *Panthers*, *Bears*, *Bengals* (a species of tiger), *Broncos*, *Lions*, *Colts*, *Jaguars*, *Dolphins*, and *Rams*, are commonly recognized for their large size, strength, and domination in the natural environment. These traits are also symbolic of the teams to which these names are assigned.

Other team names for the NFL cite human figures such as patriots (1), natives (2), aggressors (4), and historic icons (5). Of these, names such as *Packers*, *Steelers*, *49ers*, and *Browns* pay homage to significant icons of geographic history. For locals, these names convey prestige, honor, pride, and esteem. Others, such as *Buccaneers*, *Patriots*, *Vikings*, *Giants*, *Raiders*, and *Titans*, celebrate the spirit of conflict and aggression evident in football. Symbols such as *jets* and *chargers* also represent the power and force athletes are expected to embody on and off the playing field.

Conversely, team names for the LFL do not evoke strong emotions or reference literal objects and characters. Instead, the Lingerie Football League relies on thematic naming, that focuses on positive emotional states. As opposed to evoking strength, aggression, or skill, these team names evoke happiness, joy, and curiosity. While many of the names (*Passion*, *Sin*, and *Charm*) reference geography (i.e. Philadelphia is known as the city of brotherly love, hence *Passion*), the characteristics referenced do not communicate as rich a history as team names for the NFL. Also, names that reference weather (*Mist*, *Chill*, and *Breeze*) are not as strong as those commonly used for men’s sports including *Storm* and *Hurricane*. Football is not a sport that most would consider charming, fantastic, or sinful. Therefore, these names demonstrate an obvious disconnect between the league and football enthusiasts, except where gender is recognized. Where gender is recognized and the concept of the league is understood, spectators

come to understand the LFL as a spectacle of sport, designed with the male gaze in mind. These names are not intended to suggest true athletic ability or power, but as Eizen and Baca Zinn (1989) states to “define women and their place.” Consequently, lingerie league players are not valued as athletes and their athletic abilities undermined.

Stronger names, such as *Valkyrie*, *Crush*, and *Triumph*, which could carry some weight in the male sports domain, lose their power in connection to the league. The term *Crush*, as it is applied to the LFL could easily refer to an overwhelming feeling of adoration for a person of interest. While, it could also mean to defeat or overcome. Furthermore, in the context of the league, the term *Valkyrie*, despite its strong and forceful message is defined by Merriam-Webster as “any of the maidens of Odin who choose the heroes to be slain in battle and conduct them to Valhalla.” This can be understood as a gender-marked counterpart to the NFL’s *Vikings*. As such, it faces the same consequences recognized for women’s teams at other levels.

LOGOS. As discussed, logos enhance meanings and associations with team names. Through the use of images, teams are able to limit lexical content to very specific definitions and associations. In comparing logos, some of the same general themes of male privilege become apparent. Again, the NFL, compared to the LFL, includes no gender-markers. Instead, the NFL logo takes on a patriotic theme. Shaped like a shield, in addition to the league’s initials, it also features the national colors (red, white, and blue), a football, and eight stars (representative of its divisions). Other logos for the NFL also feature no gender marking and depict literal interpretations of the team names. Logos for teams including animals in the team name include a depiction of that animal in the logo. Logos for teams featuring human figures also tend to include depiction of those figures. Other teams use some combination of team colors, initials, and/or geographic symbols to enforce team names.

The logo for the LFL depicts the league’s monograph at center (The letter “F” appears larger than the other two letters, which can either suggest an emphasis on football), surrounded on either side by one silhouette. Although the gender of the silhouettes is unclear, the posing of each silhouette (one knee up, one hand on hip) and thin, curvaceous frame suggests that they are both female. The outline of the silhouette at the head also suggests that both players have longer hair, also indicative of females. The smooth lines along the body further suggest that both silhouettes are either nude or wearing close fitting attire. Through these depictions, the LFL logo reinforces the league’s obsession with the female body and increases associations with ideal beauty. Similarly, three of the team logos for the LFL also feature female silhouettes (*Temptation*, *Sin*, *Breeze*). Although race is not considered in this study, it is noteworthy that of the four human figures depicted in logos (both LFL and NFL), all of them appear white unless referencing natives.

Conclusion

Team names and logos in football serve as intersecting sites of oppression for women in sport. While a number of previous studies have examined this problem as it occurs at the high school and college level, none have examined how this phenomenon comes into play at the professional level. However, this study shows that differentiation through naming and logos is just as critical a problem in the professional sports domain. As discussed, team names, colors,

and logos represent the core of a group's identity. When gender-linking is used to emphasize certain characteristics over others, women's participation in sport is significantly minimized. Given the socially constructed language of sport, it is important to understand the implications of such labeling and logo use on the identify formation and esteem needs of women. Although terms such as lady, girl, and woman are not independently offensive, given the significance of context, connotation, and common use to the interpretation of meaning, conventions for deciding team names should be reconsidered.

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