Exploring the Gendering of Children’s Official Sport Fan Apparel Through Critical Discourse Analysis

Katie Sveinson, Temple University
Szu-En Lin, Temple University
Dakota Boring, Temple University

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Studies have found that sport fans purchase official merchandise to demonstrate loyalty and identification with teams (Derbaix & Decrop, 2011; Kwon & Armstrong, 2006; Pope 2011). Other studies have explored the gendered aspect of sport apparel, including the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and norms through clothing (Kerwin & Hoeber, 2013; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016; Sveinson et al., 2019). Yet, work has not focused on sport apparel offerings for children. Research has shown that parents believe sport fandom can have positive impacts on children such as creating bonding opportunities (Barber, 2020; Tinson et al., 2017). These findings also demonstrated a strong purchase interest for children’s fan clothing (Barber, 2020). Therefore, expanding upon the critical approach to this topic, the purpose of this study was to explore the gendering of children’s sport fan apparel for professional sport teams. The research questions are: 1) What gendered discourses are found in children’s sport fan apparel for professional sport leagues? 2) How do these gender discourses differ, if at all, by team and league?

Using Schippers’ (2007) theoretical framework, which expands upon Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity, we emphasize the relationality of masculinities and femininities. This approach focuses on how symbolic meanings of multiple masculinities and femininities can both reinforce and challenge gender hegemonies. Further, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used as an analytical strategy to explore the power embedded in these gendered relations by viewing clothing as organizational artifacts.

Two teams with the top selling jerseys from 2019 were chosen from seven professional sport leagues in North America (NFL, NBA, WNBA, NHL, MLB, MLS, and NWSL). We collected the first 20 'top featured' items in the kids’ section from each team’s official online store, along with any items that had gendered labelling in the title (i.e., ‘girls’). A content analysis was used for visual (e.g., color, cut, embellishments) and written (e.g., text description on website) data collection. CDA was implemented through Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional analysis which explores how texts at the micro level relates to social practices at the societal level.

Preliminary findings suggest discourses of hegemonic femininity were evident in the majority of men’s professional league clothing by offering overtly feminine items for girls (e.g., pink, bedazzled, and glittery embellishments). This micro-level aesthetic reinforces the idea of girls and women as intruders in boys’ and men’s spaces, which requires specific markings as to not threaten the established order. Discourses of alternatives femininities were present with women’s professional league clothing, via the lack of gender labelling and through offering gender-neutral items. In this way, there was less reinforcement of an established gender hegemony through clothing. Discourses of hegemonic masculinity were present where gendered labelling occurred only for ‘girls’ items. This specific language use alludes to the importance of separating ‘boys’ from ‘girls’, where boys cannot wear items that are specifically for ‘girls’ in order to maintain legitimate dominance (Schippers, 2007). The findings demonstrate that sport fan apparel represents organizational artifacts embedded with power relations which convey messages to children about hierarchies and relationships of masculinity and femininity.