Gender verification / Gender stereotyping -- Or, The politics of equality in an online track and field community

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Introduction

South African runner Caster Semenya touched off a firestorm of controversy in 2009 by winning the women’s 80m at the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) World Championships in Berlin. Finishing in a time of 1:55.45, Semenya easily crossed the finish line ahead of her nearest competitor but almost immediately faced accusations that her masculine body had afforded her an unfair advantage over her female competitors. As a result, she was required to undergo tests designed to analyze whether she is fully female.

While much has been written about the sociological implications of gender verification little research has looked specifically at the ways in which members of an online Track & Field community based in Canada debated and attempted to reconcile the Semenya story and its implications for gender verification and women’s participation in the sport.

Methodology

In 2007, Brian Wilson called for greater attention to be paid to the role of the internet and online communications in relation to sport-based political activism and resistive practices. This transformative potential of the internet has held particular resonance for feminist and anti-feminist struggles that go beyond sport. LeCourt (1999), for example, identified two theoretical processes by which online communication might upset or challenge patriarchy: promotion of feminist voices and the construction of feminist epistemologies. However, on both counts LeCourt concludes that online communications offers at least as much potential for reinforcing gendered power relations and stereotypes as it has for disrupting them.

With this in mind, this study followed Van Dongen and Van Zoonen’s (2009) assertion that gender both shapes and is shaped by the internet and that investigations of such ambivalences are best approached through specific case studies. An online email group organized in Canada (which we’ve called “TrackNet”) served as our case.

Comments posted to TN during the 2009 IAAF World Championships regarding Caster Semenya and gender verification served as the data. All TN members who participated in this online discussion gave informed consent for the use of their comments for this project. This research was approved by the Research Ethics Board at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Context

• Leading up to the 2009 IAAF World Championships, Castor Semenya dramatically improved her times in the 80m, dropping more than 16 seconds in one year. Such stark improvements in athletic performance often catch the attention of doping officials and raise suspicion of illegal substances or techniques.

• Sex is usually understood to be inherently binary (male or female) and mutually exclusive. However, attempts to verify female athletes’ sex have revealed that physiological, genetic, and hormonal data from female athletes do not always align with biomedical definitions of “male” or “female,” leaving the question of some athletes’ sex unresolved.

• Gender verification” tests on Caster Semenya were activecontemplating her physical appearance and sharing articles, websites, and comparisons with transitioned (male-to-female) athletes.

Results

Analysis of the online discussion of the Semenya case revealed three dominant themes that underpinned the importance and legitimacy of gender verification for members of the TN listers and, in turn, served as the ethical and ideological bases for their claims as to how the sport of track and field should proceed. These themes are: Recognition and understanding of the ‘normal’ female body, the importance of defending fair competition, and the protection of female athletes. Each is discussed in this section, with excerpts from TN members email used to illustrate the themes.

THEME 1 – THE NORMAL FEMALE BODY

Even before the IAAF announced that they would be conducting “gender verification” tests on Caster Semenya, the TN listers was active with posts commenting on her physical appearance and sharing articles, websites, and comparisons with transitioned (male-to-female) athletes.

“I see her and I feel that something is deeply wrong...Nothing about this person (save presumably her genitalia) is ‘feminine’; not her body shape, not her facial structure, not her voice, not even the way she moves her eyes...!” Semenya’s being allowed to race against women is patently unfair”

TN Member 1

THEME 2 – DEFENDING FAIR COMPETITION

While gender was understood by many to be an important part of an individual’s identity, it did not figure in most accounts of what constituted fairness. “Fair competition” was put forward as the highest value of sport, and signs of “impropriety” in women were the biggest threat to sporting fairness – at least as threatening as illegal doping.

“The fact that she wasn’t trying to get away with something...is irrelevant...someone who has been innocently taking a cold medication full of banned stimulants isn’t allowed to compete simply because their intentions were pure. That is exasperating logic.”

“Her’s was endogamous doping. Both should be illegal”

TN Member 2

THEME 3 – PROTECTING FEMALE ATHLETES

Connected to the issue of “fairness” is that of “victimization.” TN members understood Semenya’s competitive advantage as a problem because it would victimize so-called ‘normal’ female athletes who could not win against her.

“There’s a need to protect the opportunity for women to compete and succeed in sport, or we face the dissolution of women’s sport. And if this means that <5% of people who have interesting characteristics are excluded from competing as women at the highest international level, then that’s the collateral damage that I at least accept.”

TN Member 3

Conclusions

Canadian track fans in an online community relied upon stereotyped notions of ‘normal’ femininity, sex-linked athleticism, and the level playing field to formulate a response to the Semenya gender verification controversy of 2009. Semenya’s ‘masculine’ appearance was disturbing TN members and signaled to them a corollary of the rules governing male and female bodies. Members argued, in principle at least, that any female athlete like her, from competing in elite track and field. TN members drew primarily upon their own experiences and upon circulating biomedical discourses about sex and athletic performance to come to these conclusions.

These results suggest that gendered stereotypes continue to provide the basis for sporting communities to address issues relating to sex and athleticism. Athletes like Caster Semenya could provide the impetus for re-evaluating the arbitrary dividing line between “maleness” and “femaleness.” Instead, perhaps we should highlight that these binary divisions of sex are consistent with patriarchal social order and that transgender and intersex identities should be valued for the flexibility of these stereotypes to persist, and subsume, challenges to its logic. Not only were TN members able to interpret Semenya as “less than female” based on her appearance, they were able to justify her exclusion from women’s sport.

This study also suggests that new regimes of truth, and subject positions regarding gender and sport, are difficult to construct online – particularly ones that challenge phallocentric power. In this case, the online community replicated the relations of power in the broader sporting community. LeCourt (1999), drawing on形势, argues that feminist resistance must juggle the theoretical machinery. In this study, we can see evidence that this was happening at all. We suggest that what actually happened was that the Semenya case was used to reconstruct the authentic feminine voice and thus primarily served to subject the cultural and biological complexities of the case to the mechanisms of phallocentric power.

Limitations

1. This study did not attempt to capture all online track and field fan communities, or sport communities explicitly engaged in political activism on gender. Rather, we focused on a single internet forum. While the experiences explored here are not illustrative of the gendered demographics of competitive track and field. In other words, while the experiences of all women identified as feminists and that feminists are not only women, the significant number of women who participate in competitive track and field and as athletes, coaches and administrators were women from this study. Future research should strive to make sense of their understandings of the difficult questions posed by gender verification and the presumption of a strict and definable gender binary. Of course, the extent to which men continue to dominate online communication related to sport may pose a challenge to such studies.

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References


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TN Member 1

TN Member 2

TN Member 3