The Women’s Tennis Association and Media Framing of the 2018 U.S. Open Final

Case

Author: Chelsea Police & Marion E. Hambrick
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Abstract

Sports organizations attempt to generate positive news coverage for their events and athletes. Journalists and other media providers engage in media framing when they select certain news stories to produce and promote, highlighting their relative salience. This occurred with the news coverage of the 2018 U.S. Open final match between Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka, two star athletes governed by the Women’s Tennis Association. Media providers offered an array of stories, many of which focused on the altercation between Williams and the match officials rather than Osaka winning her first Grand Slam. The case study provides an overview of the Women’s Tennis Association and this news coverage, offers a discussion of media framing, and asks readers to assess the effects of media choices when discussing athletes and events and the business implications for sports organizations making these media decisions.

Case

Learning Objectives

By the end of this case, students should be able to:

- evaluate how media providers frame their headlines and articles to influence readers;
- assess social media portrayals for Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka as they relate to their respective social media coverage;
- outline the business implications the Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) and other sport organizations face with media decisions involving their events and athletes.

Introduction

The Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) is the international governing body for women’s professional tennis. The organization includes 2,500 athletes from 100 countries around the world. WTA athletes compete for a combined USD 164 million in prize money offered by 55 professional tennis events and four Grand Slams—the Australian Open, the French Open, Wimbledon, and the United States Tennis Championships (the U.S. Open)—across the globe. In 2018, approximately 600 million viewers watched these events and athletes (WTA Tour, 2019a). Top athletes in 2019 included Naomi Osaka (country: Japan, rank: #1, age: 21 years old), Simona Halep (Romania, #4, 27), Serena Williams (United States, #8, 37), and Caroline Wozniacki (Switzerland, 19, 29) (WTA Tour, 2019c).

WTA star athletes receive significant media coverage for their exploits on and off the court. The tennis governing body emphasizes this coverage and branding: “The WTA’s brand identity communicates and raises awareness of the WTA as the global leader in women’s professional sport” (WTA Tour, 2019b), continuing, “This identity strengthens its presence in key media and commercial properties (digital, broadcast, licensing) and imbues a sense of pride in the WTA brand.” WTA organizational leaders emphasize the importance of media and branding, as they strive to attain media coverage to promote their brand, events, and athletes. But is all media attention good attention?

Women’s sports and female athletes compete to obtain the same level of coverage as their male counterparts. Some have noted that these athletes and their competitions only receive coverage for controversial or less than positive events. In 2019, for example, news stories addressing top female athletes included Megan Rapi-
noe of U.S. Women's Soccer and her social media feud with President Donald Trump during the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup (North, 2019). USA Gymnastics remained in the news with the scandal involving the sexual abuse of more than 100 female gymnasts (Musumeci, 2019). The Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) suspended star athletes Brittney Griner and Diana Taurasi of the Phoenix Mercury for fighting during a July 2019 game. This media coverage focuses on more sensational aspects of female competition and “underscores the trend that [female] players must have extraordinary, if not extreme, on-court performances to draw the national media’s gaze” (Spruill, 2019).

How do sports organizations featuring women garner media attention for positive events as well as negative ones? This case addresses negative news coverage for one sports organization in particular, the WTA, and asks readers to assess this coverage, including the media framing and business implications.

U.S. Open Final Controversy

On September 8, 2018, WTA competitors Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka competed against one another in the U.S. Open final—Williams, the veteran tennis player with 23 Grand Slam titles, and Osaka, the 20-year-old relative newcomer, who had idolized Williams growing up. Osaka did not let her admiration for Williams interfere with her play. She won the first set by a commanding score of 6–2 (Waldstein, 2018). The second set, however, took an unexpected turn. Williams received a verbal code violation after her coach Patrick Mouratoglou made a hand gesture to her. The chair umpire perceived this motion as on-court coaching, which is impermissible in the professional competitive tennis. Williams protested this interpretation of the gesture, but the umpire upheld the violation. Later in the second set, Williams broke her racquet in frustration, another code violation, resulting in the loss of a point (Waldstein, 2018). As the match continued, tensions ran high and the altercation between Williams and the officials escalated. Williams addressed the chair umpire throughout the second set, and this ultimately led to a final code violation and loss of a game for Williams. Osaka eventually won the second set 6–4, claiming her first Grand Slam title and defeating her childhood hero (ESPN, 2018).

Many perceived Osaka’s win over Williams as a major upset, but one clouded by the second set penalties. A pro-Williams crowd booed incessantly during the trophy presentation. Osaka, in tears, apologized to the spectators, and Williams implored the crowd to stop booing and instead congratulate her competitor (ESPN, 2018). The controversy and reaction by the fans in attendance overshadowed what should have been a joyous occasion for Osaka and ignited a media storm on social media and other media providers across the Internet.

Media Framing

Online media providers such as CNN and the New York Times and social media platforms such as Twitter and Snapchat serve as sources for individuals to receive stories and information and assess their relative newsworthiness. News providers can use framing to directly influence this media consumption, dictating what consumers see and how they process the information (Scheufele, 1999). Framing indicates the relative importance of the messages presented in conjunction with what is said. When media providers choose what to show, display, or discuss, they indicate the importance or salience of this information based on their selections. This selection process, or framing, influences about what consumers think (Scheufele, 1999).

The use of framing is prevalent in sport. Media framing exists in the way journalists select headlines. For example, “Wife of Bears lineman Mitch Unrein wins bronze medal in Olympics” (an actual headline) highlights how males and females are described differently in the media (Bell, 2016). Media researchers have studied framing in sports (Jones, 2006). Their findings documented differences in the media portrayals of male and female athletes regarding how, and how frequently, they are depicted. Female athletes are often judged on
their appearance rather than their athletic abilities. Furthermore, male athletes are featured more often than their female counterparts (Jones, 2006). Beyond gender, race also can influence media coverage. In some instance, Black and White athletes are portrayed differently in the media. Researchers explored the framing of Black and White quarterbacks prior to the National Football League (NFL) draft. Black quarterbacks were often described based on their physical abilities and limited mental capabilities, whereas, conversely, White quarterbacks were described as lacking the physical abilities but possessing the mental capacity for the game (Mercurio & Filak, 2010). These examples highlight stereotypes often perpetuated in the media through various frames.

Returning to the 2018 U.S. Open final, sports journalists focused more on Williams’ actions during the match and less on Osaka’s victory. This framing brought attention to the controversy occurring during the final, rather than its outcome. News headlines highlighted the same event, but focused on different aspects. Headlines included “Naomi Osaka upsets Serena Williams in controversial U.S. Open final” (Ubha, 2018), “Serena Williams unleashes furious rant to umpire as she loses U.S. Open 2018 final to Naomi Osaka” (Briggs, 2018), “Naomi Osaka captures U.S. Open; Serena Williams fined, penalized game for calling chair umpire ‘a thief’” (ESPN, 2018), “Serena Williams’ U.S. Open outburst leaves women’s Tour divided” (Rossingh, 2018), “Naomi Osaka defeats Serena Williams in dramatic final” (Marshall, 2018), and “Did Serena Williams go too far at the U.S. Open?” (Ponterfrect, 2018). These headlines reflect the media frames used to portray the event. Understanding the role that framing plays in how media is created and then subsequently used and validated by media consumers is important when considering the potential merit and biases of media communications. This is also important for sports organizations such as the WTA to better understand the potential business implications of this framing and how their organizational leaders and others can address these challenges.

Serena Williams

Arguably one of the greatest athletes of all time, Williams’ journey to the tennis pinnacle started from humble beginnings. Determined to give his children a better life, Richard Williams introduced his daughters to the game of tennis (Granderson, 2017). Competing in a typically White-dominated sport, Williams and her sister Venus took the tennis world by storm, facing ridicule and racism along the way. This negativity, however, did not limit their abilities, but instead propelled Serena to become one of the best tennis players ever. Yet after making her professional debut almost 24 years ago, Williams still experienced intense scrutiny from the media and fans alike (CNN, 2018).

This scrutiny emerged once more following the 2018 U.S. Open final, when Williams received both social media support and backlash for her actions. Some praised her for bringing attention to double standards in tennis related to the portrayals of female and male players, while others berated her for setting what they perceived as a poor example. In the former category, tennis great Billie Jean King tweeted, “When a woman is emotional, she’s ‘hysterical’ and she’s penalized for it. When a man does the same, he’s ‘outspoken’ & there are no repercussions.” She ended with “Thank you, @serenawilliams, for calling out this double standard. More voices are needed to do the same.” Fellow tennis player James Blake said, “I will admit I have said worse and not gotten penalized.” He concluded, “Sad to mar a well played final that way.” Activist Preston Mitchum criticized the media and its portrayal of Williams, tweeting, “I’m so sick of the media’s language re: #SerenaWilliams.” He continued, “She wasn’t having a ‘meltdown’ or a ‘breakdown.’ She’s sick of people treating her differently from White women players and from White men. That is calling out racism and sexism, not a breakdown or meltdown. Stop.”

Those who disagreed with Williams’ actions described her as having an outburst as well as being a sore loser and hysterical. Bobby Umar, a professional speaker, tweeted, “I love tennis & #SerenaWilliams but she, the USTA & fans blew it.” He finished with “It’s shameful what US Open did to Naomi Osaka.” Using the “meltdown” term, Fatima Madsen tweeted, “Oh, how the proud have fallen. It was not[th]ing but an epic meltdown of someone who could not deal with the fact that the time has come to stop playing as age has caught up.”
She concluded with “And in prime sports, age matters. #SerenaWilliams #Unhinged.” These tweets offered evidence of positive and negative conversations regarding the athlete.

While receiving criticism was not new for the tennis star, some noted the portrayal of Williams differed vastly from other tennis players. She faced racism and discrimination online, frequently generating comparisons to an ape or gorilla. Social media users and media providers additionally questioned Williams’ gender and whether she used performance-enhancing drugs (Litchfield, Kavanagh, Osborne, & Jones, 2018). Newspaper cartoonist Mark Knight of Melbourne’s Herald Sun highlighted these portrayals in his controversial depiction of the 2018 U.S. Open final. His cartoon showed a larger Williams throwing a tantrum while a petite Osaka stood in the corner (Herald Sun, 2018).

**Naomi Osaka**

Osaka also represented a collection of intersecting identities. Born to a Haitian father and a Japanese mother, Osaka and her family relocated from Japan to the United States when Osaka was a toddler. Leonard Francois, Osaka’s father, followed the blueprint created by Williams’ father and aimed to produce the next international tennis star. Despite living in the United States, Osaka represented her native country of Japan, a choice her father had made after she garnered little interest from the United States Tennis Association (USTA). Choosing to represent Japan produced positive outcomes for Osaka. Japanese companies courted her, leading to multiple sponsorships. Media providers highlighted her Japanese heritage by stating she was the first Japanese tennis player, male or female, to win a Grand Slam title, but also failed to recognize her Haitian background (Larmer, 2018). Osaka shared similarities with Williams in that both were Black female athletes, but Osaka’s background added an additional piece as a Japanese person, potentially influencing media portrayals of her.

As noted above, Osaka did not have the opportunity to experience the typical on-court celebration after winning her first Grand Slam title. Many fans in attendance did not applaud the outcome, leading to her tears and an off-court apology. Social media users quickly noted this treatment. Social media presenter Andy West stated, “So #SerenaWilliams is penalized after her coach cheated to give her a sporting advantage. Then she verbally attacks the umpire and smashes her racquet. Then she claims she’s the victim because of her gender.” He concluded, “This kind of cynicism is what weakens feminism.” Similarly, Twitter user Maureen Reiser stated, “I don’t know why anyone is cool with #SerenaWilliams behavior. She was wrong, abusive, and embarrassing. While I’ve been a fan, she was a sore loser and she ruined a beautiful moment for #NaomiOsaka!” (RTÉ, 2018).

Others congratulated Osaka for her performance. Tennis player Kevin Anderson said, “Very happy for you on your @usopen title @Naomi_Osaka. I hope you feel proud for competing against someone you (and the rest of us) admire so much to win your first slam. You’re the real deal!” Twitter user @dominichiemfan asked, “I have a question to audience of Arthur Ashe Stadium. How could you do this to Naomi? I mean, how could you boo her?” The tweet continued with, “Yes, Serena is a really big champion. But Naomi didn’t deserve this. What happens. She is the 2018 US OPEN CHAMPION! Please just respect. #NaomiOsaka #USOpen18.” Osaka’s breakthrough moment was seemingly overlooked in the aftermath of the altercation and penalties, and social media users offered commentary in response.

**Media Coverage and Implications**

A common refrain in business environments is “all publicity is good publicity.” Some believe this holds true whether the news is positive or negative. Researchers put this assertion to the test by assessing outcomes related to positive and negative publicity (Berger, Sorenson, & Rasmussen, 2010). Applying their findings to a sport context, advantages of negative publicity could include more people learning about an organization and
its athletes. Additionally, more individuals could read about and consume related content. An accompanying increase in the profiles of the organization and athletes could occur along with the financial benefits of selling more of their related products. Conversely, disadvantages of this news could include backlash, boycotts, and other negative reactions to the organization and athletes. Penalties for the athletes could include fines and suspensions as well as loss of playing time, endorsement contracts, and related purchases. This ultimately could lower the profiles of the athletes and their organizations. For smaller, less popular sports, this could further marginalize them, their events, and athletes. The potential negative financial ramifications could prove substantial for these groups if they already face challenges with revenue generation. Thus, organizations and athletes should be prepared for the potential positive and negative effects of media coverage, which could elevate or detract, respectively.

Given the stature of Williams as a professional athlete and her influence in the tennis world, she receives substantially more media coverage than other lesser-known players. The WTA recognizes the influence and visibility Williams possesses. As such, it becomes important for the leaders of the governing body to understand how these attributes could dictate media framing. Williams draws significant attention as she chases a record-tying 24th Grand Slam. The 2018 U.S. Open final was the second-highest rated U.S. Open match, with a 2.5 rating on ESPN (Andreeva, 2018). Knowing the reach Williams has with fans and critics alike, journalists and other media members find ways to cover her activities on and off the court. These discussions have financial implications for the media, Williams, and the WTA. In the case of the 2018 U.S. Open final, many journalists chose to discuss the controversy to generate views. While Osaka represented an up-and-coming tennis star, who also went on to win the Australian Open, her status as a tennis player has not yet surpassed Williams. This media framing tactic showcases how and why journalists select story lines for publications. Media members fixated on the bigger star, knowing Williams is easily recognizable to their intended audiences and will help to generate more views for the coverage. Her controversial actions may appear more “newsworthy,” but should they be the journalistic focus? At what point should journalists concentrate solely on the triumphs of athletes and not focus on their downfalls?

Potential business implications arise in the way stories are framed, particularly with the use of headlines specifically outlining the controversy. Media providers understand controversy often equals successful stories in terms of consumption numbers, but using them to generate attention can do a disservice to the athletes and their sports organizations. Osaka did not receive the recognition she deserved as the winner, and Williams had to come to terms with her role in overshadowing her competitor. In an article following the match, Williams (2019) stated, “Not only was a game taken from me, but a defining, triumphant moment was taken from another player, something she should remember as one the happiest memories in her long and successful career.” It is also important to note that Williams addressed the booing Osaka encountered during the trophy ceremony, encouraging fans instead to support and congratulate Osaka. This showcase of sportsmanship did not receive as much media attention as her actions leading up to it.

While events of the U.S. Open final ended on the court, they had lasting ramifications. The WTA recognizes the positive impact Williams has within the tennis world, thus putting pressure on the organization to support the star. WTA leaders backed Williams’ claims of sexism by the chair umpire. Williams asserted the official would have handled the situation differently had Williams been male, thus underscoring the potential presence of double standards (Agence France-Presse, 2018). Williams believed her actions were warranted, to protect herself and her integrity, but how the media and media consumers perceived her deeds did not always support this sentiment. Yet, while the WTA could have supported Williams from behind closed doors, the willingness and openness displayed by the organizational leaders indicates the value Williams has for them. This support is significant, especially given the otherwise negative media storm Williams experienced.

The WTA has only limited control over the stories journalists write. Positive stories about high-profile athletes such as Williams may be preferred from the business perspective of the sports organization, but journalists use media framing—and in some cases negative stories—to benefit their bottom line (i.e., in this case, reporting on the Williams controversy, not the Osaka win). Yet this type of media framing could negatively affect
the WTA's bottom line, as an organization that prides itself on its positive media coverage and brand identity (WTA Tour, 2019b).

Conclusion

Sports consumers have the ability to discuss professional athletes through various platforms. Journalists and other media personnel can play a role in these discussions with their selection of stories and headlines, increasing the relative salience of certain news stories. In turn, these decisions can have profound consequences for the athletes and their sports organizations. In the case of Williams and Osaka following the 2018 U.S. Open final, media providers focused attention on the response Williams had to losing rather than on Osaka winning her first Grand Slam title. These framing decisions could have a notable effect on what sport consumers read and discuss. These decisions also have implications for the WTA as it tries to generate positive news coverage to promote its athletes and events.

Discussion Questions

1. The idea of framing suggests media providers can influence media consumers based on what stories they choose to focus on and the headlines they select for these stories. How could the news headlines addressing the U.S. Open final have potentially influenced the social media responses included in the case?

2. Media portrayals can vary based on a variety of factors. A political cartoon was published in Melbourne’s Herald Sun following the 2018 U.S. Open final. Examine the cartoon and compare the depictions of Williams and Osaka. How does this cartoon contribute to the media portrayals of the two competitors? (https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/herald-sun-backs-mark-knights-cartoon-on-serena-williams/news-story/30c877e3937e51064609d89ac521d9f)

3. How could leaders of sports organizations such as the WTA respond to negative media coverage as it relates to their athletes and events? What are the potential business implications associated with these decisions?

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