Examining Online Intercollegiate Head Coaches' Biographies:
Reproducing or Challenging Heteronormativity and Heterosexism?

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BACKGROUND

Past research in intercollegiate sports connects heteronormativity (i.e., societal and/or institutional assumption that heterosexuality is the norm) and heterosexism (i.e., prejudicial and discriminatory practices and beliefs toward any non-heterosexual identities and relationships) to the creation of privilege for the dominant group (Eng, 2008; Griffin, 1998; Krane, 1997; Krane & Barber, 2005). Sport media scholars contend that coverage and framing of athletes and coaches present females in heteronormative ways in print (Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Kane & Buysse, 2005), broadcast (Billings, Halone & Denham, 2002) and new media (Jones, 2006; Maxwell, 2008). To date, research examining heteronormativity and heterosexism on university-sponsored athletics websites is scarce. Online biographies are a universal component of intercollegiate athletic websites and provide the public with an accessible "up close and personal" source of information about coaches and teams. Online biographies of NCAA Intercollegiate Head Coaches of the Big Ten Conference ($N = 226$) were examined for patterns of textual representations of dominant ideologies documented in sport media research—specifically heteronormativity and heterosexism.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the pilot study was to explore a new media source to determine what, if any, heteronormative trends exist in online biographies of D-I head coaches. Three research questions guided the study:

1) Do examples of heteronormativity exist in online coaching biographies?

2) What is the relationship between heteronormative information and the sex of the head coach?

3) Does new media, specifically intercollegiate athletic websites, challenge or reproduce dominant ideologies regarding sex (i.e., males, females) and sexual orientation?

METHODS

Sample
The sample included coaches' online biographies of Big Ten Head Coaches of NCAA Varsity sports. Each head coach was treated as one unit ($N = 226$) and duplicate biographies of individuals coaching multiple sports (e.g., Track & Field and Cross Country) were only coded once. The coding of 226 online coaching biographies yielded a sample of 158 males (69.9%) and 68 females (30.1%).

Data Collection
A 10-item coding schema was developed by the primary investigator to track for heteronormative references in this sample. Each biography was coded based on the following items: sex of coach, sex of sport participants and biographical narratives (e.g., text related to a significant other, children, grandchildren and pets).
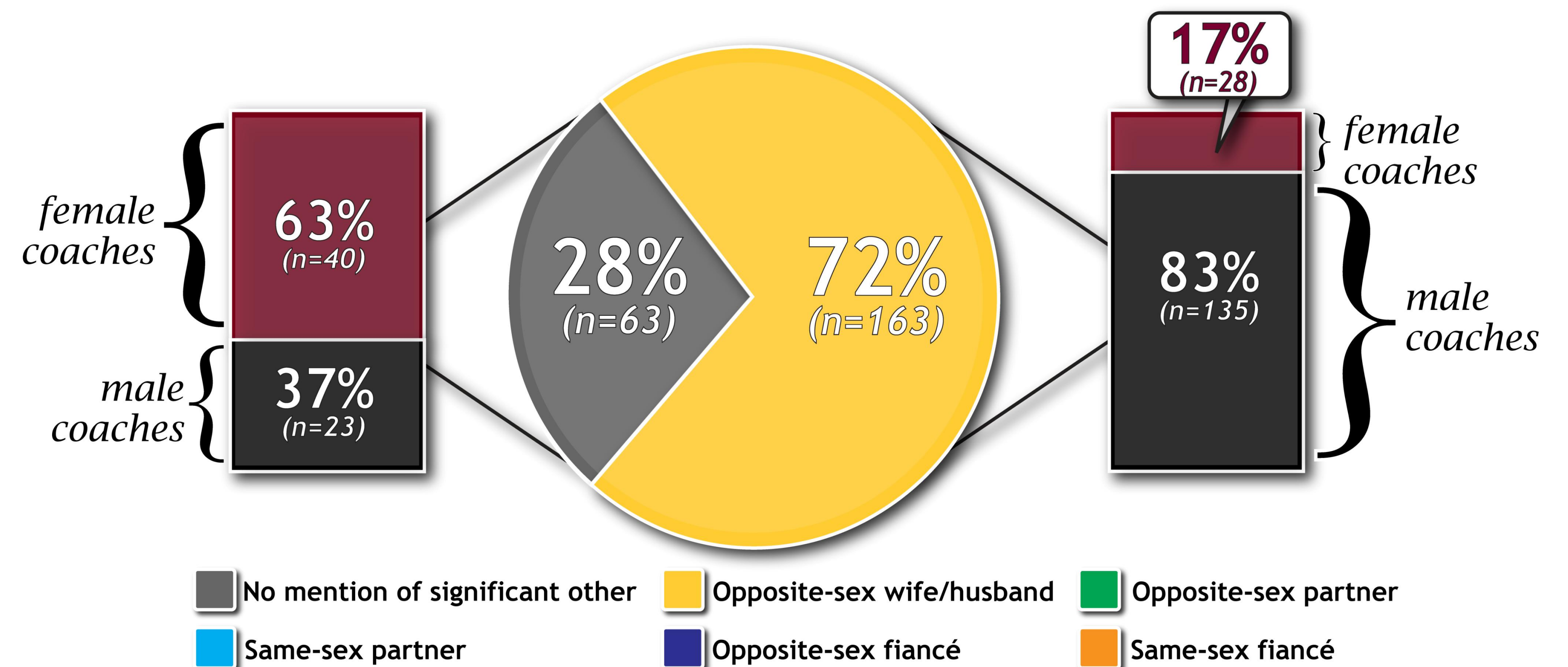
Trustworthiness
The primary investigator randomly coded 10% of the sample. A secondary investigator and an undergraduate student also coded the same 10%. Following peer debriefing (Creswell, 2006), intercoder reliability was 100%. The remaining data was coded by the primary researcher.

Data Analysis
Descriptive statistics and chi-square analyses were employed to address the research questions under investigation.

RESULTS

Sex of Coach
Of the 158 male coaches, 62.0% ($n = 98$) were head coaches of male athletes, while 28.5% ($n = 45$) coached female athletes and 9.5% ($n = 15$) coached sports with both males and females. In contrast, 98.5% ($n = 67$) of the female coaches served as head coaches of female athletes and just one female head coach (<1.5%) presided over a sport with co-ed participants. No female coaches led a sport with solely male athletes.

Biographical Narratives
Of the sample, 72% ($n = 163$) were noted as having an opposite-sex partner while 28% ($n = 63$) had no mention of a significant other. No additional type of significant other outside these two categories had any representation. A statistically significant relationship emerged between sex of head coach and mention of significant other, with male coaches having more mention of a significant other than female coaches ($x^2=1, 43.737, p<0.01$).

Frequency and Type of Significant Other Mentioned in Online Coaching Biographies

female coaches: 63% (n=40)
male coaches: 37% (n=23)

28% (n=63) — 72% (n=163)

17% (n=28) female coaches
83% (n=135) male coaches

Legend:
- No mention of significant other
- Opposite-sex wife/husband
- Opposite-sex partner
- Same-sex partner
- Opposite-sex fiancé
- Same-sex fiancé

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

Two trends emerged from the data—1) underrepresentation of female coaches, and 2) a complete absence of non-heterosexual orientations.

1) The pattern of underrepresentation of female coaches in the Big Ten was apparent. While examining females in positions of power was not an objective of this study, data indicated 30.2% ($n = 68$ of 226) of all Big Ten coaches were female. While female coaches were underrepresented, results are slightly higher than the D-I national average (~23%) (Acosta & Carpenter, 2008).

2) The *complete absence* of diverse sexual orientations was reflected in biographical narratives. Both male and female coaches' biographies contained personal information (i.e., charity work, hobbies and hometown). However, when the text focused on significant others and families, only those with opposite-sex partners were discussed. Male coaches were statistically more likely to have their significant other mentioned than female coaches. Both trends reproduce current power structures of heterosexual male privilege within D-I intercollegiate athletics.

Even the most conservative demographic estimate suggests that 10% of the population is homosexual. Therefore, it is improbable that not *one* of 226 coaches within the Big Ten has a same-sex partner. This absence begs the question—*why is there no recognition of diverse sexual orientations?*

We can only speculate as to why this phenomenon exists. Scholars have suggested that gay and lesbian coaches may "self-police" their sexual orientation due to fear of losing their jobs, recruiting implications, and homophobic backlash (Galst, 1998; Griffin, 1998; Iannotta & Kane, 2002; Krane, 1996, 1997; Krane & Barber, 2005; Wellman & Blinde, 1997). It is also possible that "policing" originates at the administrative level, as scholars assert—sport is colored by institutionalized homophobia (Griffin, 1992, 1998; Lenskyj, 1991, 1995; Sykes, 1998). Future research should investigate the gate-keeping structure of intercollegiate athletic websites to tackle the question of why same-sex partnerships are not recognized in this type of new media.

New media has the potential to not only reach a larger audience than traditional media (i.e., print media guides), but also may have an unlimited capacity to replicate or challenge dominant ideologies. The sole concentration of heteronormative narratives in online coaching biographies supports the idea that new media does not contest, but rather reproduces and promotes the status quo of heterosexism within intercollegiate athletics at its highest level.

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