

Original Research

Preferences Toward Gender of Coach and Perceptions of Roles of Basketball Coaches

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ABSTRACT

International Journal of Exercise Science 8(4): 303-317. Framed within role congruity theory this study examined (a) if female collegiate basketball players have a preference toward male or female head basketball coaches, (b) if the gender and enjoyment level of past head coaches influence preferences toward a male or female head coach and/or influence the perceived roles of women's basketball head coaches, and (c) if there is a relationship between the perceived roles of women's basketball head coaches and female collegiate basketball players' preferences toward male or female head coaches. Fifty-nine women's basketball players from 10 Division I universities completed a survey that included a consent form, demographic questions, the list of managerial sub roles, and questions regarding preferences, gender, and enjoyment level of past and current coaches. Participants significantly preferred male head coaches compared to female head coaches. A cluster analysis was conducted to group participants into a male coach profile and a female coach profile using the variables of gender of past and current coaches and the gender of coach enjoyed most. Results showed that the male coach profile group preferred male coaches significantly more than the female coach profile group. Because preferences for male coaches still exist, especially with female basketball players who did not have a female high school coach, it is vital that the numbers of female coaches increase, especially at younger age levels.

KEY WORDS: sport, college athletes, role congruity theory

INTRODUCTION

Since the enactment of Title IX in 1972, there has been a large increase in the number of women's athletic teams in intercollegiate sport (1), which has resulted in a subsequent increase in the number of female athletes. In addition to the proliferation of the number of teams and female athletes, there has been a logical increase in the number of coaching opportunities. Despite this increase, there has been a decrease in the percentage of female coaches (1). In 1972, more than 90%

of collegiate women's teams were coached by a female; whereas in 2014, 43.4% of women's teams were coached by a female (1). At the high school level, a report by LaVoi (18), who analyzed data from 2010, revealed that only 27% of all high school head coaches were female. Furthermore, while 92.5% of boys' teams were coached by men, only 39.6% of girls' teams were coached by women.

Researchers have attempted to explain the decrease in the percentage of collegiate female coaches and the low number of

female high school coaches by examining attitudes and preferences of male and female athletes toward female coaches with contradictory results. Several studies have concluded that a greater percentage of female athletes prefer male coaches than female coaches (20, 21, 25, 26). These studies examined high school volleyball players (20), high school basketball players (25), and elite (21) and youth (26) athletes from a variety of sports. In contrast, other researchers found more equal percentages in preferences for male or female coaches with collegiate athletes from a variety of sports (11) and high school basketball players (27). Other studies have concluded that female elite soccer players (10) and competitive swimmers (24) preferred female coaches.

Habif, Van Raalte, and Cornelius (14) studied basketball players and volleyball players separately when examining attitudes toward and preferences for male and female coaches. Unlike the basketball players, the volleyball players did not show a significant difference in their attitudes and preferences toward a male or female coach. It is important to note that the participants in the studies above differed in age, sport, and competitive level, and this variation in sampling could account for contradictory results. However, within the group of studies that concluded there is a greater percentage of female athletes that prefer male coaches, variation in sampling also existed, which could influence results. Moreover, two studies both examined high school basketball players and found different results (25, 27). In addition to the need to resolve these contradictory results, there is not a substantial amount of research that attempts to find explanations for why these

preferences exist. Furthermore, these studies are outdated and there is a lack of current references on this topic.

The decreasing percentage of female coaches may be an important variable that influences coaching preferences. From the literature, the gender of past and current coaches may influence athletes' preferences toward male or female coaches (10, 20, 21, 22, 25). In the studies showing a preference toward male coaches, the majority of the participants' past coaches were male (20,21). When athletes preferred female coaches, there were a high percentage of female coaches in the participants' past (10). Similarly, in the studies suggesting relatively equal preference for male and female coaches, the majority of the participants had experience playing for both male and female coaches (11, 27).

A limitation of many of these previous studies is that athletes responded to hypothetical coaches (14, 22, 24, 25). In one study, participants answered questions about a male and female hypothetical coach with identical backgrounds to control for other factors such as success rate, years of experience, and academic degrees (22). These researchers studied athletes' attitudes toward strength coaches and found that female athletes have positive attitudes toward both male and female coaches. In another study, participants were given questions about a male and female hypothetical coach in different scenarios of success backgrounds based on team record (25). In the case of a male and female head coach with the same background in success/team record, the researchers found that a male coach was still preferred. Although the researchers

contributed to the literature on the gender of coach athletes tend to prefer while controlling other factors by using hypothetical methodology, the researchers did not ask questions regarding the participants' past experience with male and female coaches. For example, Magnusen and Rhea (22) noted that it is possible that the participants in their study have had effective male and female coaches in their past, potentially influencing their current/positive attitudes toward both male and female coaches. Without using the gender of participants' past coaches as a covariate in the studies, it assumes all participants in the sample have had the same background, which is likely not the case. Future research should examine past experience with male and female coaches in addition to using hypothetical situations.

Another consideration linked to preference of female coaches is the gender-typing of sports. Sports differ in whether they are gender-typed as masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral. Habif et al. (14) suggested that preferences for male coaches may specifically exist in traditionally masculine sports. In early research, high school boys and girls perceived basketball to be a masculine sport, compared to more gender-neutral or feminine sports such as tennis, swimming, and gymnastics (4). More recent research has identified basketball to be typed as gender-neutral by a Swedish sample (17) and typed as masculine by college aged students in the United States (15). Because of the similarity in sample of the Harrison and Lynch study (15), for the purpose of the current study, basketball is gender-typed as a masculine sport. With basketball being gender-typed as masculine, it is possible that individuals believe that a

woman is incapable of coaching basketball due to the perceived lack of masculine traits necessary to fit the leadership needed (9). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders (9), which focuses on gender roles and leadership roles, is one possible explanation for female athletes' preferences toward a male or female coach in the sport of basketball and the decline in the percentage of female coaches in all sports since the enactment of Title IX.

The role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders extends Eagly's (7) social role theory of sex differences and similarities by focusing on the congruity of the gender role (i.e., female) and the social role (i.e., leader). Gender roles are people's viewpoints about the characteristics of men and women as well as qualities and tendencies that are desirable for each sex (9). Social roles are common expectations or norms of people who are in specific social positions, such as a leadership position. The role congruity theory, then, draws attention to both gender and social roles and the congruity or incongruity between the two roles.

According to Eagly and Karau (9), one of the reasons that prejudice exists toward female leaders is because of the perceived incongruity between the female gender role and the leader role. Prejudice against female leaders can arise when expectations about the desired characteristics of the female gender role do not match the expectations people often have about leaders. A key aspect of Eagly's (7) social role theory clarifies societal beliefs about the preferred qualities of men and women. Eagly describes these attributes as communal and agentic. Communal characteristics are those

that show care for the well-being of others (e.g., affectionate, understanding, sensitive, and temperate) and these traits are credited to women. Agentic characteristics are those that resemble an aggressive, controlling, and confident inclination. Examples include ambitious, dominant, and prone to act as a leader, and these characteristics are credited to men (7,9). Although different types of leader roles exist, leader roles needing agentic qualities present the biggest challenge to females (8). Masculine oriented leader roles are incongruent with stereotypic characteristics and expectations of women, which can cause people to only consider men as proper occupants of leader roles that require agentic qualities, such as coaching. Because people perceive women as lacking the masculine characteristics associated with these leadership positions, women are not perceived as having the required abilities to be flourishing leaders and thus often face obstacles.

The role congruity theory has been applied to the sport domain through research in athletic administration (6, 12, 13, 28). Results in the study by Burton et al. (6) revealed that both masculine and feminine traits are important to the role of the athletic director, but men are still overrepresented in the field. Therefore, it is possible that women face disadvantages in domains such as sport that are stereotypically generalized as masculine (8). Yet, there is a gap in the literature when applying role congruity theory to the coaching profession. Because there is a relatively low percentage of women working in athletics, including coaching, and because of the decrease in the percentage of female collegiate coaches since the enactment of Title IX (1), it is necessary to extend Burton et al.'s (6) work to the

world of coaching. The results of this type of study could help explain the decrease in the percentage of female coaches, the overall underrepresentation of female coaches today, and barriers that female coaches are facing. Furthermore, because past studies are outdated, frequently used hypothetical situations, and often did not further investigate explanations for why specific preferences exist (22, 24, 25), a study examining participants' current and past experiences could greatly contribute to the literature. The results may strengthen the argument for the importance of increasing the percentage of female coaches.

Framed within role congruity theory, the purpose of this study was to examine women's basketball players' preferences toward male or female head basketball coaches and perceptions of specific roles of head basketball coaches. This study was guided by three research questions: (a) Do female collegiate basketball players have a preference toward the gender of their head coach?, (b) Does the gender and enjoyment level of past head coaches influence head coaching preferences and the gender typing of the roles of women's basketball head coaches?, and (c) Is there a relationship between gender typing of the roles of women's basketball head coaches and the participants' preference toward the gender of their head coaches?

METHODS

Participants

Sample criteria included NCAA Division I women's basketball student-athletes from two conferences in the Midwest. Of the schools contacted, approval for participant recruitment was granted by athletic

directors from 10 of the Division I Universities. Of the 150 women's basketball student-athletes contacted, 66 completed the survey; however, due to missing data or incomplete data, seven participants were excluded from data analysis. The final sample size used for data analysis was 59 participants. Participants ranged from freshmen to graduate students and their ages reflected, accordingly ($M_{age} = 20.07$, $SD = 1.9$). Furthermore, 68% of the sample identified as European American/White and 22% identified as African American/Black American. Ninety-seven percent of participants were on scholarship and 45% of participants were in the starting lineup of their teams.

Instrumentation for this study was an online survey that included demographic questions, the list of managerial sub roles based on role congruity theory, and questions regarding preferences, enjoyment level, and gender of past and current coaches. The demographic questions assessed age, year in school, race/ethnicity, starter or non starter, athletic scholarship, and number of years of basketball at the collegiate level.

After completing demographic questions, participants completed the list of managerial sub roles based on role congruity theory. Participants rated the list of 19 managerial sub roles from the study by Burton et al. (6) to assess the importance of these sub roles to head coaches. In order to assess and update gender stereotyping of positions, the list of managerial sub roles from Atwater and colleagues (2004) was adapted for the sport management environment in the study by Burton et al. (6). College-aged sport management

students were asked to rate the degree they believed a characteristic identified from Atwater et al. was masculine, feminine, or gender neutral. Because there were differences in the results between the Atwater et al. study and the Burton et al. study, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. Results of the exploratory factor analysis showed four factors: masculine 1, masculine 2, feminine, and neutral behavior (6). The list of managerial sub roles adapted by Burton et al. (6) was applied to coaches in the current study. The assumption was made that although athletic directors and coaches are different positions, there is sufficient overlap between the responsibilities of the two positions. Whereas athletic directors have the responsibilities for overseeing multiple teams, coaches have similar responsibilities for overseeing a particular team. For example, athletic directors need to provide support and communicate well with the coaches they manage, and coaches need to provide support and communicate well with the players they manage. Furthermore, similar to the notion that an athletic director may have to discipline the coaches they manage for negative behavior, coaches also may have to discipline the players they manage for negative behavior. Therefore, it was decided to apply the measure to coaches.

The list of managerial sub roles consists of 19 sub roles with four different subscales: (a) masculine subscale 1 with five items (e.g., allocating resources, managing conflict), (b) masculine subscale 2 with three items (e.g., punishing, disciplining), (c) feminine subscale with five items (e.g., supporting, communicating and informing, planning and organizing), and (d) the gender-neutral

subscale with six items (e.g., providing corrective feedback, clarifying roles and objectives). Burton and colleagues reported Cronbach's alpha levels ranging from .73-.78 for the subscales, which showed adequate reliability. In the current study, only the masculine 1 (Cronbach's alpha = .77) and feminine (Cronbach's alpha = .70) subscales were reliable. Both the masculine 2 (Cronbach's alpha = .65) and gender neutral subscales (Cronbach's alpha = .61) revealed low reliability; therefore, these two subscales were deleted from further analyses.

Participants rated how important a sub role was for head coaches on a five-point Likert type scale (5 = *most important* to 1 = *least important*). Mean scores were computed for each subscale. The survey concluded with questions about the gender of participants' past and current head coaches, the enjoyment level of their past head coaches, and preference for their head coach being male or female. Enjoyment level was determined by asking one question where participants stated whether the coach they enjoyed the most in their past was male or female. Preference toward a male or female coach was determined by asking two questions. The first question simply asked whether the participants preferred a male head coach, a female head coach, or no preference. The second question had the participants numerically state their preference toward a male or female head coach by allocating 100 points between the two coaches. This will be referred to as the point allocation method throughout the paper. Based on how strongly the participants preferred one coach over the other, they assigned the male coach and the female coach a number, with the total

equaling 100. For example, a participant could allocate the number 60 for preference toward a male coach and 40 for preference toward a female coach. Results from the first question were used only as categorical data for reporting frequency distributions, while results from the second question were used for the primary analyses.

Procedure

After Institutional Review Board approval, athletic directors from 10 Division I universities were contacted about the study. Upon approval, women's basketball head coaches were contacted to gain permission to use his/her players as participants and retrieve email addresses. Permissible women's basketball players were sent up to three emails, every 10 days, containing information about the study and a link to the online survey. If they viewed the survey, no additional emails were sent. After clicking the link to the survey, participants were presented with the informed consent form. If consent was obtained, they were taken to the survey for completion. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses and techniques using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 22) were used to answer the research questions.

RESULTS

Frequency distributions of the categorical data regarding preferences toward male or female coaches and past history of male or female coaches are available in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency distributions of categorical data.

	Female		Male		No Preference	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Head Coach Preference	10	17.2	33	56.9	15	25.9
Current Head Coach's Gender	38	64.4	21	35.6		
Head Coach Enjoyed Most	17	28.8	42	71.2		
Past High School Female Head Coach	23	39.0	36	61.0		
Past High School Male Head Coach	53	89.8	6	10.2		

The data showed that 57% of participants preferred a male coach while 17% of participants preferred a female coach, and 26% of participants did not have a preference. Sixty-four percent of participants' current head coaches were female. In addition, while 90% of participants had a male high school head coach in the past, only 39% of participants had a female high school head coach.

When assessing the participants' preferences toward the gender of their coach using the point allocation method, preferences for a male head coach displayed a higher mean score ($M = 63.46, SD = 19.95$) than did preferences for a female head coach ($M = 36.54, SD = 19.95$). Because the same participants completed both variables, a paired samples *t*-test was conducted and revealed a significant preference toward male coaches, $t(58) = 5.19, p < .01$. Athletes perceived that both masculine sub roles ($M = 4.10, SD = .54$) and feminine sub roles ($M = 4.23, SD = .51$) were important for head basketball coaches to possess.

The current study examined whether the enjoyment level and gender of past head coaches was related to preferences toward the gender of the head coach and the

perceived roles of women's basketball head coaches. First, a cluster analysis was used to determine whether basketball players could be differentiated into distinct groups that represented varying patterns in the target variables. By separating the sample into homogeneous groups, the cluster analysis maximizes between-group variance and minimizes within-group variance (2, 5). Using variables assessing gender of past and current coaches and the gender of coach enjoyed most, the SPSS Quick Cluster program was utilized.

The cluster analysis revealed two distinct profiles of basketball players: (a) a male coach profile with athletes who enjoyed a male coach most with no female high school coach and current male coach ($n = 38$), and (b) a female coach profile with athletes who enjoyed a female coach most with a female high school coach and current female coach ($n = 21$). Three independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to test for significant differences between the means of male coach profile and female coach profile regarding preference toward gender of coach and perceived roles of women's basketball coaches. The *t*-test for preference toward gender of coach was significant and approaching a medium effect size, $t(57) = 3.60, p < .001, d = .44$. The male coach profile ($M = 69.80, SD = 19.43$) had a significantly greater preference for male coaches than the female coach profile ($M = 52.00, SD = 17.66$). Two *t*-tests examined differences between the two coach profiles regarding the perceived masculine and perceived feminine managerial sub roles of women's basketball coaches. The analysis of the masculine 1 subscale ($t(57) = -.59, p = .55$), and feminine subscale ($t(57) = .02, p = .98$) were non-significant.

The third research question used an independent *t*-test to examine if preferences toward the gender of the head coach were related to the perceived roles of head coaches. The coaching preference based on the median of the point allocation method, which was 60, was used to create two even groups used as the independent variable, and the perceived sub roles of head coaches were the dependent variables. All of the results were insignificant.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine whether female collegiate basketball players have a preference toward male or female coaches, and if so, whether the gender and enjoyment level of past and current coaches influence those preferences as well as influence the gender typing of the roles of women's basketball coaches. Results from the current study showed collegiate female basketball players had a preference toward male head coaches, supporting previous research that found a greater preference toward male coaches (20, 21, 25).

Results regarding the gender and enjoyment level of past head coaches showed a significant difference in preference toward the gender of head coaches based on the participants' past. This finding supports the study by Fasting and Pfister (10), which found that athletes who have only had male coaches in the past might be biased in favor of male coaches. These researchers noted that the participants admitted their negative attitudes toward female coaches changed when they actually experienced a female coach. The current findings draw attention to the fact that athletes' lack of experience

with female coaches might be a possible explanation for why there is a higher preference toward male coaches. It is important to note, however, that even when athletes experienced a female coach but enjoyed a male coach the most, they had a notable preference for male coaches.

Furthermore, the group of athletes who enjoyed a female coach the most, regardless of whether or not they had a high school female head coach, indicated a slight preference toward female head coaches according to analyses using the point allocation method. Thirteen out of 17 participants in that group had never had a high school female head coach, which means that unless they experienced a collegiate coaching change, the coach they have enjoyed the most is their current female head coach. These results support research by Medwechuk and Crossman (24) who found that the gender of the athletes' coach at the current time significantly influenced the athletes' preferences toward a specific coach. However, there is contradictory evidence in the findings: given that 64% of participants' current head coach in the present study was female, it was surprising that only 17% of participants preferred a female coach. This does not support research that has shown that preference toward a coach is significantly influenced by the gender of the current coach (20, 21, 24). Therefore, while participants' past and current backgrounds may be a possible explanation for why preferences toward a male or female coach exist, this finding sheds light on the fact that several other factors relating to the current head coach that are unrelated to gender can influence preference. Possible examples might include whether or not the participant likes

her current head coach, whether or not the participant is a starter, satisfaction with playing time, personality factors, injury status, and whether or not the participant was forced to redshirt. Jowett and Nezlek (17) examined how competitive level, relationship length, and gender composition influenced athletes' satisfaction with their coach and concluded that satisfaction was stronger in higher competitive levels and with longer relationships. This is just one example of how different factors may influence satisfaction and, therefore, potentially influence preferences. It is important that researchers continue to analyze various factors that may play a role in athletes' preferences toward the gender of their coach.

The non-significant results regarding the relationship between the gender and enjoyment level of past head coaches and the gender typing of the roles of women's basketball head coaches showed that while participants' past history influences preferences toward a male or female head coach, it does not influence what sub roles are considered important for their coach to have. One of the possible reasons for this finding is that the participants perceived all the characteristics of each subrole to be important and rated high. The insignificant results regarding the relationship between gender typing of the roles of women's basketball head coaches and the participants' preference toward the gender of their coaches was also likely due to the lack of variability among the importance of the sub roles. Therefore, because all sub roles were perceived as important, preferences for gender of head coach did not appear to be based on expectations of sub roles but rather

on what the participants have been exposed to regarding male or female coaches.

The role congruity theory was used as a framework in the current study to determine whether perceptions of the importance of specific roles of head basketball coaches were stereotyped as masculine, feminine, or gender-neutral. According to Eagly and Karau (9), a form of prejudice that exists is the notion that men are more favorable occupants of leadership roles. Role congruity theory would suggest that masculine sub roles would be considered most important to the head coach because it is a leadership role.

Unfortunately, although Burton et al. (6) reported sufficient reliability of the measure when sub roles were applied to athletic directors, two subscales (masculine 2 and gender-neutral) of the subrole measure were not reliable when the sub roles were applied to head coaches. Because of the overlap in the responsibilities of athletic directors and coaches, the measure was not pilot tested prior to the study. It is possible that the different responsibilities that exist between the two positions need to be considered in future research. Future research should test the validity and reliability of the measure used by Burton et al. (6) when applied to coaches, as the position may have sufficient differences in responsibilities compared to athletic directors, and strengthen the measure as needed.

Because of low reliabilities, only the masculine 1 and feminine subscales were used in the analyses. Results of the current study showed no variability in the importance of the sub roles, and the participants' past experience and enjoyment

levels of male and female coaches did not influence the ratings. Masculine and feminine sub roles were both important and rated high. This finding does not support general role congruity theory tenets, which presume that masculine sub roles would be considered most important to positions of leadership (i.e. head coach), especially in a masculine environment (i.e., sport of basketball).

It is important to note there are conditions that moderate role incongruity prejudice. Inconsistency in how the leader role is defined will impact the amount of incongruity between the female gender role and leader role (9). Greater incongruity exists when the leader role is defined in more masculine terms. Therefore, men have an advantage in more masculine defined leader roles, but females may experience that advantage in more feminine defined roles. In the current study, the leadership role of the head coach position is defined as requiring all types of roles. Because athletes perceived that both the masculine and feminine sub roles defined the head coach position, little incongruity likely exists between the female gender role and the leader role. Due to this finding, it is interesting that athletes still tend to prefer male head coaches over female head coaches. This finding parallels the results of the study by Burton et al. (6), which revealed the participants' desire for athletic directors to have both masculine and feminine qualities. Despite this finding, men are still overrepresented in the athletic director position. Even though an overrepresentation of men is currently not the case in collegiate women's basketball coaching, the percentage of women in

collegiate head coaching positions has been decreasing over the years (1).

Burton et al. (6) were able to use role congruity theory to support their results using past findings, which suggest that women who adopt masculine characteristics elicit more negative evaluations than men who elicit feminine characteristics. Because it is perceived that both the masculine leader role and feminine gender role cannot be fulfilled at the same time (the female cannot conform to the female gender role and the leader role without compromising one or the other), the result is a more negative evaluation of the female leader (9). Therefore, despite the importance of both masculine and feminine characteristics, women can still be at a disadvantage.

Furthermore, women may be evaluated as less capable leaders in leadership positions associated with sport regardless of characteristics identified as important to the leadership position because the domain of sport is considered masculine (8). It is possible that the need for women to express masculine characteristics as a coach may lead to female basketball players preferring a male coach. The current study, unlike the study by Burton et al. (6), however, did not measure evaluations of the coaches. Thus, future research should consider examining evaluations of coaches when applying role congruity theory to the coaching context.

Another condition that moderates role incongruity prejudice is the degree to which injunctive norms are accepted. The more a leader role requires agentic attributes and the more a woman displays those agentic requirements, the more likely that person will be evaluated less because of the conflict

between the injunctive norms of the female gender role and the agentic demands of the position (9). McPherson et al. (23) found women at a disadvantage in masculine environments, but especially in environments where men make up a strong majority. Despite the fact that men dominate the overall coaching realm, it should be noted that collegiate women's basketball is one of the sports that is not dominated by male head coaches, according to the 2008-2009 NCAA Race and Gender Demographics Report. Given this difference in the gender of coaches in women's basketball compared to sport as a whole, role congruity theory may operate in different ways when applied to collegiate women's basketball. At the high school level, however, male coaches still hold a majority of the positions. LaVoi (18) reported that only 28.1% of high school basketball teams were coached by a female in 2010.

A finding in the current study was the participants' significant preference toward male coaches. Given that role congruity theory would suggest a male preference would exist if the masculine sub roles were rated higher than the feminine sub roles, it is interesting that preferences toward male coaches still existed. It is also interesting that this preference existed even though collegiate women's basketball is not dominated by male head coaches, given the notion that women are particularly at a disadvantage in male-dominated environments. A notable finding in the current study was the significant influence that the participants' background had on their preferences toward a male or female head coach. Participants' backgrounds included if they enjoyed a male or female

head coach the most, if they had a female high school head coach in the past, and if they currently had a male or female head coach. Participants with a male dominant background preferred a male head coach more than participants with a female dominant background. Furthermore, if qualities of a female are just as or more important than qualities of a male to the head coaching position, but a male coach is still preferred, it is possible that athletes who are used to being coached by males prefer homeostasis. This idea is supported by Fasting and Pfister (10), who reported that some players discussed "they were originally negative toward playing for a female coach, but that this attitude changed with the experience" (p. 103). If that is the case, the preference for a male coach would not be due to prejudice against females but rather due to the comfort of always having been coached by a male.

The results of the current study provide important information about preferences and the need for a greater percentage of female coaches in the profession. If more athletes experience female coaches, especially at younger age levels, it is likely that the gap between preferences toward male and female coaches will decrease. More women in the coaching scene would eliminate the issue of preferences being affected by male dominant backgrounds and/or homeostasis. In addition, if more female coaches existed at the youth level, it may have a positive effect on increasing sport participation of young girls, and keeping more females involved in sport may potentially have a downstream effect on increasing the number of female coaches.

Furthermore, it is important for collegiate coaches to understand the influence that participants' past experiences with male or female coaches has on preferences toward a male or female coach when they are recruiting athletes. In the current study, 90% of participants had a high school male head coach while only 40% of participants had a high school female head coach. Because it was concluded that athletes' backgrounds influence preferences, female college coaches may initially be at a disadvantage in recruiting due to the lack of female coaches in high schools. It is important for female coaches to be cognizant of this phenomenon so they can make their recruits aware of the natural tendency for athletes to prefer what they are most comfortable with, even when that might not be what is best for them.

As previously mentioned, prejudice involved in role congruity theory is influenced by how a leadership role is defined (8). The results of the current study show that the assumed definition of the women's basketball head coach leadership position was not true for female collegiate basketball players. This could be a sign that traditional stereotypes are changing, which would be a positive occurrence for future female coaches according to role congruity theory. Furthermore, the definition of the head coach leadership position also may or may not change when asking a different sample of participants, or asking athletic directors, senior women's administrators, or coaches. It may be beneficial to examine how athletic directors and senior women's administrators define the women's basketball head coach leadership position, because they are responsible for the hiring of coaches. Without female coaches, the current study reveals that preferences will

be influenced and more male preferences will exist.

Finally, a continuous issue is the shortage of women entering the profession as well as the number of women leaving the profession (19). One reason females may be leaving is that their athletes prefer a male head coach. It is clear from the results of the current study that past experiences with male or female coaches influence preferences. Equal preferences toward male or female coaches cannot be achieved if women are not interested in and/or staying in the coaching profession to begin with. More female youth coaches are needed in order to influence the tendency for children to prefer what they are comfortable with. LaVoi and Dutove (19) have reported several barriers and supports that influence females in sport coaching. These researchers noted that an underrepresentation of female coaches is found at the youth level, but the research regarding barriers for female coaches examined elite and intercollegiate coaches. Research should continue to examine issues influencing the lack of female youth coaches and provide suggestions to help facilitate the development of more female coaches.

Limitations of this study included convenience sampling and representativeness of the athletes in the sample compared to the greater population. Because only two conferences in the Midwest were used as a sampling frame, it is questionable whether the results would generalize to collegiate women basketball players in the South or on the East or West coast. Furthermore, online sampling can often yield low response rates, and a small sample size served as a major limitation in this study. In addition, in order

to contact the student-athletes, consent from the university's athletic director as well as the women's basketball team's head coach had to be obtained. Several athletic directors and/or head coaches declined participation in the study, serving as an additional limitation to the sample size. The number of current male versus female head coaches of the participants in the study is another limitation because it is not representative of the current number of male and female head coaches overall. The athletes' abilities to recall gender and experiences of past coaches served as a constraint as well. The researchers also did not ask questions regarding participants' past experience with female coaches in club basketball, which may have changed certain participants' history with female coaches. Furthermore, the current study did not measure current or past success of coaches, and research has reported that success can influence preferences (25). In addition, only one (team) sport was assessed, all teams were Division I, and schools were primarily in the Midwest. Therefore, one is unable to generalize the results to a larger sport population. The reliability of the masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral subscales was also a limitation. Two of the subscales had to be dropped from further analysis due to low reliability, and that may have influenced the results. It is possible that the roles of athletic directors and head coaches are not as comparable as the researchers assumed. Finally, participants in this sample defined the leadership role of the head coach position as requiring all types of roles, and this does not support general role congruity theory tenets, which presume that masculine sub roles would be considered most important to positions of leadership, especially in a masculine environment.

Therefore, role congruity theory may not be a good theory to use in order to explain coaching preferences. In the case of applying role congruity theory to the coaching context, it is important for future research to include other measurements such as the evaluation of male and female coaches, the coach-athlete relationship, and coaching effectiveness.

The finding that 64% of participants' current head coach in the current study was female, while only 17% of participants preferred a female coach was contradictory to research that has shown that preference toward a coach is significantly influenced by the gender of the current coach (20, 21, 24). It would be helpful for future research to investigate other factors besides gender that are related to the current head coach and that can influence preference. While several factors may influence preference toward male or female coaches, it is clear that more female coaches are needed in all levels of sport. Future research should continue to examine underlying causes of preferences toward male coaches to help change the coaching culture toward being more open to female coaches.

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