

The Impact of Physical Attractiveness on Fan Viewership in Professional Tennis

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Introduction

The Wimbledon Championships are considered the pinnacle of grass tennis and represent one of the four major grand slam tournaments. In the 2000 Wimbledon Championships, Venus Williams and Pete Sampras claimed the prestigious singles titles, yet neither athlete garnered as much media attention as Anna Kournikova—a player who was knocked out in the second round of the tournament and had never previously won a singles tournament on the WTA Tour. Despite her lack of titles, Kournikova became one of the most recognizable names in tennis, largely due to her perceived attractiveness rather than her on-court success (Vincent et al., 2007). This beauty bias goes beyond media exposure and trickles into consumer viewership preferences. When measuring facial symmetry scores of professional tennis players, consumers demonstrate a beauty bias in that they prefer to watch matches with attractive female tennis players more often – this preference was found to hold no significance in men’s professional tennis (Dietl, et al., 2020). This phenomenon raises important questions about what truly drives audience engagement in professional tennis. Are fans more drawn to athletic excellence, or do physical appearance and marketability play an equally—if not more—significant role?

Professional tennis is one of the most commercially successful women’s sports, with extensive media coverage, lucrative sponsorships, and a global fan base. While skill and performance remain critical, research suggests that attractiveness can influence media exposure, endorsement deals, and audience engagement (Kiefer & Scharfenkamp, 2018). However, nearly all existing studies examining the link between attractiveness and tennis viewership have been conducted in European contexts. Given the sport’s global reach, it is essential to explore how these dynamics play out in other regions.

This study seeks to address this gap by investigating how player attractiveness influences viewership habits among American tennis fans, specifically focusing on spectators of the U.S. Open. By broadening the scope of existing research, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how player attractiveness affects U.S. fan engagement with professional women's tennis. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of literature on consumer behavior in sports, yielding new insights into the factors that shape audience preferences. The findings may serve as a foundation for future studies examining media representation, marketing strategies, and ethical considerations in women's sports, ultimately contributing to discussions on gender equity and the commercialization of female athletes.

Literature Review

Introduction

Attractiveness has long been recognized as a factor that influences attention and consumer preferences across various industries, including entertainment, politics, and media (Rhode, 2010). Psychological and economic research suggests that individuals perceived as more attractive often receive greater social and professional advantages, including higher earnings and increased media exposure (Nault et al., 2020). This effect is particularly evident in public-facing professions, where marketability is closely tied to visibility.

In professional sports, attractiveness can serve as an additional factor influencing an athlete's marketability, sponsorship potential, and media coverage. While athletic performance remains the primary driver of success and media popularity, studies indicate that physically attractive athletes, particularly in women's sports, often receive more media attention and commercial opportunities than their less conventionally attractive counterparts (Kiefer & Scharfenkamp, 2018). This trend is particularly pronounced in professional women's tennis, one

of the most widely broadcasted and commercially viable women's sports, where athletes who align with conventional beauty standards often secure more endorsement deals and media exposure than equally or more successful peers (Bakkenbüll & Kiefer, 2015).

This literature review will first examine the broader relationship between attractiveness and public attention, drawing on research from psychology, media studies, and economics. It will then explore how these principles apply to sports viewership, with a particular focus on professional women's tennis. The forthcoming research aims to address a geographical gap in existing studies, which have primarily focused on European audiences. Using a mixed methods approach, this study combines eye-tracking data and qualitative interviews conducted with spectators at the U.S. Open to understand the factors influencing American fans' viewership preferences in professional women's tennis, with a particular emphasis on the role of facial attractiveness.

The Benefits of Beauty

There is a wide array of research that reinforces the link between physically attractive individuals and a competitive advantage in the labor market. Attractiveness has been found to play a significant role in shaping public perception and social hierarchies. The Superstar Phenomenon, first introduced by Rosen (1981), provides a helpful framework for explaining the tie between beauty and occupational success. The phenomenon encapsulates a kind of market dynamic in which a small number of individuals in certain professions could earn disproportionately high incomes compared to their peers, despite marginal differences in talent or performance. A few years later, Adler (1985) offered an alternative perspective on the superstar phenomenon. In his article, *Stardom and Talent*, he argues that large income disparities can exist even without differences in talent or performance. According to Adler, consumers rely

on shared knowledge to engage with a product, which they acquire through discussions with others. As a result, people gravitate toward what is already popular, reinforcing stardom through media exposure and social networks rather than differences in talent. If Adler's argument holds true, then that would suggest that a non-performance related attribute, such as physical attractiveness, could impact wages earned.

In addition to higher earnings, which is relevant to the broader discussion, attractiveness also plays a significant role in capturing attention, which is more directly related to my research. Research suggests that, when it comes to capturing and maintaining a person's attention, physically attractive individuals possess a competitive edge. Li et al., (2018) examined how facial attractiveness influences sustained attention by conducting an eye-tracking experiment. In this study, participants were presented with images of faces that varied in attractiveness and were instructed to focus on the central part of the image. Participants' gaze patterns were measured by the researchers, specifically tracking the duration of their fixations on the faces to determine how long they spent looking at more attractive versus less attractive faces. The results indicated that individuals tend to focus longer on attractive faces compared to less attractive ones. This effect is attributed to the brain's natural tendency to prioritize visually appealing stimuli, making attractive individuals more likely to be noticed and remembered. In social and professional settings, this advantage can translate into increased visibility, greater influence, and enhanced opportunities, as people are more inclined to engage with and pay attention to those they find aesthetically pleasing.

Lights, Camera, Attraction

In professional sports, while skill and performance remain primary determinants of success, research indicates that physical attractiveness can influence athlete popularity and media

coverage. Mutz and Meier (2016) examined the relationship between athletic performance, attractiveness, and popularity among male and female soccer players through a survey-based study conducted in Germany. Participants were asked to evaluate the attractiveness and performance levels of soccer players using images and video clips, and they were also surveyed on their perceptions of the players' popularity. The researchers further analyzed media coverage and sponsorship deals related to the athletes to explore how attractiveness impacts their visibility. The study found that, while skill remains a key factor in an athlete's success, physical attractiveness significantly enhances their media presence and fan interest, often leading to greater sponsorship opportunities and financial rewards. These findings suggest that an athlete's appearance can boost their marketability, emphasizing the important role attractiveness plays in determining sports popularity.

Recognizing that attractive athletes tend to draw greater fan interest, media outlets often face ethical considerations regarding their coverage choices. This dynamic can lead to disproportionate attention on physically appealing athletes, potentially overshadowing others based on merit alone. In women's sports, this bias often results in the sexualization of female athletes, where media portrayals emphasize physical appearance over athletic competence, thereby reinforcing traditional gender norms and diminishing recognition of athletic abilities. In her analysis, *Play Like a Girl: An Analysis of Media Representation of Female Athletes*, Mannion (2016) examined how media representation of female athletes often emphasizes physical appearance over athletic competence, leading to the sexualization and delegitimization of female athletes. Mannion conducted a content analysis of various media sources, including newspapers, magazines, and television broadcasts, focusing on the portrayal of female athletes in comparison to their male counterparts. The study involved coding the content for themes related

to appearance, skill, and media framing. This analysis found that biased media coverage not only skews public perception but also raises ethical concerns about fairness and equity in sports journalism.

This issue goes beyond that of traditional media. Research indicates that sports celebrities' brand image dimensions, including their attractive appearance, substantially impact fan loyalty and social media engagement. A study by Magano et al., (2024) investigated how athletes' projected image influences fan engagement and loyalty, specifically on social media platforms. Using a survey-based study, researchers asked participants to evaluate the perceived image of various sports celebrities, focusing on aspects such as physical attractiveness, personality, and overall appeal. The study explored how these perceptions correlated with fan behaviors, including following athletes on social media, purchasing merchandise, and attending events. Additionally, data concerning fans' emotional connections to athletes was collected to assess how these connections impacted loyalty. Conducted in Portugal, the findings demonstrated that athletes who project an appealing image tend to attract more followers and foster stronger emotional connections with fans. This heightened engagement often translates into increased loyalty, with fans more likely to attend events, purchase merchandise, and actively support their favorite athletes across various platforms.

Attractiveness in Professional Women's Tennis

Women's tennis stands out as one of the most widely broadcasted female sports, making it a prime case study for examining the intersection of attractiveness, media coverage, and fan loyalty. A notable study by Dietl et al., (2020) analyzed the relationship between facial attractiveness and television viewership in professional tennis. Their findings indicated a "beauty bias," where matches featuring more attractive female players garnered higher viewership

ratings. Interestingly, this bias was not significant in male tennis matches, suggesting a gender-specific phenomenon. The authors posited that attractive female athletes might receive more media exposure, leading to increased visibility and, consequently, higher viewership.

Further exploring this dynamic, Kiefer and Scharfenkamp (2018) investigated the impact of physical attractiveness on the online popularity of female tennis players. Their research revealed that more attractive players experienced increased popularity across various online platforms, including Facebook, the Sports Illustrated website, and Google. However, they also noted that athletic performance had a more substantial effect on online popularity than physical attractiveness, suggesting that while beauty contributes to visibility, performance remains a more critical factor in determining popularity.

Building on this discussion, Vincent et al. (2007) offer an alternative perspective by suggesting that physical attractiveness may, at times, outweigh athletic performance in determining media coverage. Their analysis of British newspaper narratives during the 2000 Wimbledon Championships found that Anna Kournikova, despite losing her first round match singles, received more media attention than the tournament's champions, Pete Sampras and Venus Williams. This finding would suggest that an athlete's marketability and media visibility may be disproportionately influenced by their physical appearance, particularly in women's tennis. Traditional media outlets may prioritize beauty over on-court achievements. In turn, this effect could shape public perception and influencing viewership patterns by amplifying the visibility of attractive athletes regardless of their competitive success.

Where To Next?

Although numerous studies have investigated the influence of attractiveness on success, media coverage, and fan viewership in professional tennis, nearly all have been conducted in European contexts and have primarily used facial attractiveness as the key metric. While these findings provide valuable insights into how beauty influences media coverage, fan engagement, and online popularity, they leave gaps in understanding how these dynamics play out across different cultural contexts. Moving forward, research should expand to broader geographical regions, particularly in North America and Asia, where tennis has a significant fan base and ideas of attractiveness might differ. Additionally, future studies could explore other attributes of attractiveness beyond facial features, such as body composition, fashion sense, or personal charisma, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of what makes an athlete appealing to audiences. By studying a wider range of factors, researchers can get a better understanding of how attractiveness impacts tennis viewership and player marketability.

Methods

This explanatory research study explores how the facial attractiveness of professional tennis players influences fan viewership behaviors. In a sport where athletes' publicity and marketability are often tied to both performance and appearance, this research investigates a relevant, yet understudied, dimension of sport consumption. The primary gap in existing literature is geographical, with the majority of studies having been conducted in European contexts. Using a mixed methods design, this study aims to uncover both behavioral (via eye-tracking) and perceptual (via interviews) data to provide a fuller picture of how appearance may shape fan engagement in the United States. Findings could inform marketing strategies, media coverage decisions, and fan experience initiatives in professional tennis.

Approach

Participants were randomly assigned to watch different professional tennis matches involving either highly attractive or less conventionally attractive players, while wearing eye-tracking technology to measure natural gaze behavior and visual attention (Kredel, 2023). These matches included both men's and women's professional tennis to explore potential gender differences in attention and perception. This approach allowed for causal inference regarding attractiveness and attention. Follow-up qualitative interviews were conducted to help understand motivations and perceptions behind observed behaviors.

In anticipating the risk of social desirability bias (Krumpal, 2013) -- such as discomfort or embarrassment in admitting attraction-based viewing habits -- the researchers relied on eye-tracking data, in addition to interviews, to help triangulate responses and expose patterns that participants may have been unwilling or unable to admit (Jones, 2015, pg. 135).

Population

The study recruited approximately 100 participants at the US Open Tennis tournament using a convenience sampling method. All participants were at least 18 years old and self-identified as tennis fans (either casual or dedicated). This approach was chosen because it allowed researchers to efficiently gather data from an accessible and relevant population in a natural setting. While convenience sampling can limit the generalizability of findings, it is a widely accepted technique when time, resources, and accessibility are constrained (Golzar et al., 2022). In the context of this study, tennis fans present. At the event, are ideally positioned to offer insights into viewership behaviors related to professional players.

Participants varied in age, gender, and ethnicity to reflect a broad fan base. Inclusion criteria included willingness to participate in both eye tracking and interviews; exclusion criteria included visual impairments or prior familiarity with the specific match footage.

Procedure

As forementioned, data was collected using a two-phase process involving eye-tracking and follow-up interviews. First, participants were individually invited to a controlled setting where they were fitted with Tobii Pro Glasses 3, a state-of-the-art mobile eye-tracking system. The Tobii Pro Glasses 3 were selected due to their high accuracy in dynamic environments, such as when participants are seated but freely shifting gaze across a screen depicting a tennis match. As Onkhar et al. (2024) explain, “the Tobii Pro Glasses 3 exhibited significantly better accuracy than the Tobii Pro Glasses 2 during the walking condition,” signifying their strong performance in non-static viewing scenarios. The device’s upgraded design makes it especially reliable for tracking subtle gaze movements, which is essential when analyzing how visual attention may differ based on a player’s physical attractiveness.

Each participant viewed video footage of professional tennis players during point play, with the footage randomized so that each participant viewed either a set of players rated as more conventionally attractive, or a set rated as less conventionally attractive. The classification of players into “more” or “less” attractive categories was determined prior to the study through a pre-rating process. A separate sample of undergraduate students (N=50) rated a pool of both male and female professional tennis players on physical attractiveness using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all attractive, 7 = extremely attractive). The highest and lowest rated players from this pool were then selected for use in the eye tracking segment to ensure a clear contrast in perceived attractiveness.

An eye movement data collection system was developed to capture quantitative data, including participants' gaze behavior, fixation duration, and saccades. This method allowed researchers to objectively measure visual attention. As Kredel et al. (2023) emphasize, the use of advanced eye-tracking methodology “allow for more significant amounts of gaze data to increase the explanatory power of the inferred results.”

Following the eye tracking session, participants were invited to participate in follow-up semi-structured interviews to further explore motivations, perceptions and viewing habits. The goal of these interviews was to provide context to the visual attention data and explore any psychological or emotional factors that may influence viewership. This interview format allowed for consistent questions across participants while enabling open-ended responses. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

Eye-tracking data collected via the Tobii Pro Glasses 3 was analyzed using Tobii Pro Lab software. This platform enabled researchers to define Areas of Interest (AOIs) and extract metrics such as fixation counts and durations. The software also facilitated the generation of heat maps and gaze plots, which visualize participants' gaze patterns and intensity of attention across different regions of the visual stimuli (Tobii, 2024). Statistical analyses, including independent samples t-tests, were conducted to compare gaze behaviors between participants viewing more versus less physically attractive tennis players, following a similar approach used by Li et al. (2016) to assess gaze duration based on facial attractiveness.

Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the study's purpose and their rights before data collection began. Written informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured that their data would remain confidential and will only be reported as a group. Eye-tracking videos and interview recordings were anonymized and stored securely. Participants had the option to withdraw at any time. The use of incentives – entry into the raffle to win U.S. Open tickets – were disclosed in advance.

Anticipated Results

It is expected that participants who watch more physically attractive tennis players will demonstrate longer fixation durations and higher gaze density on those players, suggesting greater visual engagement. This aligns with the beauty bias framework, which suggests that individuals tend to attribute more positive qualities—such as competence, likability, or talent—to those who are physically attractive. In the context of sport consumption, this bias may subconsciously influence viewer attention, enjoyment, and media attention. Additionally, qualitative interviews may reveal that casual fans are more influenced by appearance than serious fans, who may prioritize athletic skill. Together, these findings could highlight the nuanced ways physical attractiveness—through the lens of beauty bias—shapes consumer behavior in professional tennis viewership.

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