

Study says cheerleading could help challenge gender stereotypes

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New research from the University of East Anglia (UEA) suggests that cheerleading has the potential to challenge traditional ideas about gender and to be an inclusive activity for both boys and girls.

The study examined the educational and transformative potential of mixed-sex sports and what the obstacles might be in practice. It focused on cheerleading, often considered a 'feminised' activity, and in particular UK university-level competitive cheerleading, which exists in both mixed and single sex formats.

Dr Esther Priyadharshani and Dr Amy Pressland, of UEA's School of Education and Lifelong Learning, argue that mixed-sex team membership can have a progressive influence on ideas about gender and the performances of both male and female participants, for example by encouraging teamwork and respect.

However, they warn that the existence of mixed-sex teams on their own is not a solution to correcting gender stereotypes and inequalities in sport, and if the transformative potential of cheerleading is to be realised, organisational, promotional and structural changes to the sport itself are also needed.

The study is published in the journal *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics*. The authors suggest that the relative rarity of mixed-sex sporting events means they are under researched and there are few that require participants to work so closely together.

"It seems imperative to consider how the sport can be shaped in socially progressive ways," said Dr Pressland. "Cheerleading is very much viewed as an activity for girls, a safe activity where they can remain girls and women. We were really interested in what happens when boys and girls take part in it together, for boys in terms of their masculinity and how the gender relationships work within the team.

"We think this would be a fantastic, inclusive, activity for young people to work together at and a place where gender norms could be challenged and played with, particularly as sport becomes very segregated when [young people](#) get to a certain age, for example when their bodies are developing.

"Girls tend to drop out of sport between the ages of 14 and 16, but if you normalise girls and boys taking part together then as they become aware of their bodies changing, it's not going to be as big a deal. It is also about building teamwork and having respect among players, being social rather than having this aura of sexuality between the genders."

Dr Pressland added: "With many sports the focus often ends up being on who is the fastest or strongest. Cheerleading is a very physical, and potentially dangerous, activity where skill is just as important as strength. We found that because of the specific safety issues, people rallied round and were very protective of each other, which you don't find in other sports."

The study follows a growth in the popularity of cheerleading in the UK in recent years, with national competitions and schools offering the activity in PE lessons. The researchers looked at four cheerleading teams: one national level, non-university, mixed-sex competitive team and three university teams—two mixed-sex stunt groups and an all-female dance one. They observed the teams and interviewed members about their experiences.

The authors found that the male participants were very protective of the females and their team mates. There was no inappropriateness or sexualisation of bodies in the team and even when they felt uncomfortable doing things they might not consider masculine, such as wearing 'sparkles' for competitions or performing certain dance moves, they did it for the team.

"For the boys the team was of most importance, more than the masculinity," said Dr Pressland. "If it was important to the team they would do it. From the girls we got contrasting views. Those in the dance team did not think the boys added anything, from their perspective they were as strong as the boys. Other girls were very pro men being in the sport and for making it more inclusive and welcoming for both genders."

Dr Pressland and Dr Priyadharshani said there remained room for coaches, trainers, teachers and professional associations to address how the activity is promoted in schools and universities.

"Because cheerleading in the UK has developed so quickly, we think the regulations behind it need to catch up with what is happening on the ground," said Dr Pressland. "Cheerleading rules need to be more explicit about expectations from both genders and roles in the team, which would make it more transparent and inclusive. For example, there needs to be more clarity about who does the 'decorative' aspects of a routine, such as 'cheer faces', winking at judges and the 'sassiness' that our participants talked about."

More information: Esther Priyadharshini et al. Doing femininities and masculinities in a 'feminized' sporting arena: the case of mixed-sex cheerleading, *Sport in Society* (2015). [DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2015.1096253](https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2015.1096253)

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