Examining the Intersection Between Gender and Disability: A Discourse Analysis of Canadian Print Media During the Toronto 2015 Parapan American Games

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The way in which the intersection between gender and disability is represented in sport media has been identified by numerous scholars as an important and underrepresented scholarly endeavour (McPherson et al. 2016). Media narratives about representing the junctures of gender, race, and bodies predominate accounts for large events like the Olympic Games as a means to attract viewers. Yet, research addressing gender and disability is relatively scarce, but how media represents gender and disability is critical to (dis)empowering narratives (McPherson et al., 2016) and crucial to guiding future sport management practices (Shapiro & Pitts, 2014). As such, the purpose of this project is to examine how disability and gender intersect in media representation of a sport mega-event, in this case the Toronto 2015 Parapan American Games, and begin to fill this identified gap in the literature.

Literature Review

Scholarly research on media, disability, and sport, particularly surrounding large sporting events, is growing. Within this body of work, scholars have argued that media representation of para-athletes often reinforce existing power relations and societal norms in regards to disability and the lived experiences of persons with disabilities (Butler & Bissell, 2015; McPherson, O'Donnell, McGillivray, & Misener, 2016; Misener, 2013). The majority of existing research describes discourse surrounding para-athletes as using “othering” language, primarily through the supercrip narrative. The supercrip narrative depicts elite para-athletes as “superhuman” or “heroic”, doing little, if anything, to debunk social constructions of disability (Kama, 2004; Misener, 2013; Schell & Rodriguez, 2001).

In contrast, much research has been done analyzing gendered media representation of able-bodied athletes. A large amount of research emerged after the installation of Title IX in the United States in the form of case studies and content analyses of media pieces during large sporting events such as the Olympic Games. Findings from this research assert that male athletes are more often portrayed in the media in general, and when they are represented, female athletes are more likely to be sexualised and depicted according to social norms of femininity (Pratt, Grappendorf, Grundvig, & LeBlanc, 2008; Fink & Kensicki, 2002). The aforementioned literature leaves a gap regarding the juncture between gender and disability. This is troubling when considering the predominant role that media has in shaping public perceptions of the lives of parasport athletes and more broadly, persons with disabilities.

Methodology

By employing discourse analysis to examine various forms of print media that was disseminated from one year prior to, and during, the games, we will present how disability and gender transect the media narratives. Data collected includes various forms of print media articles and images, gathered from two Canadian sources: The Toronto Star and The Globe and Mail. Analysis is on-going, and will continue until an adequate sample has been analyzed.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

Preliminary results suggest that disability was over-represented in the media, particularly in the marketing pieces and the lead-up to the Games. Overall gender representation in media regarding the Parapan American Games has shown to be more equitable than in past parasport events. While female parasport athletes appeared in more passive poses and less action-shots, the gender narrative that often exists in sport media was not as evident throughout the 2015 Parapan American Games. Additionally, discussions about transgender emerged as key to considering the links between sport, disability, and identity. Our paper addresses the role of the media in reproducing social norms of gender and disability, and of what is considered to be “normal”. We also explore how the media-represented definition of “normal” has implications in the lives of elite athletes, and on current social constructions of gender.
and disability.

Through this project we demonstrate the role of media outlets in contesting or supporting existing social frameworks and norms of gender and disability, and the implications these representations have for elite athletes. We will contribute to the knowledge gap in sport management research regarding the intersection of gender and disability. In doing so, we will add to the understanding of how sport federations, media organizations, and other sporting bodies can work to disrupt existing power structures and invoke larger societal change through their own media and marketing campaigns.