Media Coverage and Gender During the Olympics: An Integrated Literature Review

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Sport in historical and contemporary contexts may privilege men over women. Scholars like Sabo and Jansen (1992) articulate the view that sport maybe considered a sexist institution because it naturalizes male domination and provides men with power and privilege over women. Media coverage of women’s sport has been significantly lower in terms of both quality and quantity (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013). While media coverage of women’s sports in the Olympic Games is comparatively higher than that of women’s sports in general, the extent of coverage of women at the Games requires further study because the quality and scope of this body of knowledge is unclear (Delorme, 2014). According to Berstein (2002), media tends to reflect what is important and influential in society. Since the Olympics are the largest sport event in existence, examining how gender is portrayed in media during the Olympics is vital.

Despite the prevalence of research on media coverage of women at the Olympic Games, no specific studies have completed a rigorous review of the research on this topic. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to conduct a review of the literature that focuses on the coverage of women in the media during the Olympic Games. More specifically, this study aims to answer and investigate the following: 1) what is known about media coverage of female athletes in the Olympic context, 2) what are the existing gaps in the literature, and 3) what are potential future areas of research.

Literature reviews have been used to synthesize findings from discrete primary studies and to enhance generalizability of data referencing the phenomena under consideration (Jackson, 1980). There are four major review methods that scholars have used to conduct literature reviews: meta-analysis, systematic review, qualitative review, and integrative review. Each of the review methods have their own unique purpose, analysis procedures, and sampling frames (Whittemore, 2005). Meta-analysis and systematic review mainly focus on literatures with quantitative analysis while qualitative reviews focus on qualitative analysis (Glass, 1976; Mulrow, 1994; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The integrated method encompasses a wide range of purposes such as defining concepts, reviewing theories, examining evidence, and investigating methodological issues within a certain topic (Broome, 2000). Given that this study aims to provide a comprehensive review by combining a range of qualitative and quantitative methods as well as to suggest future study initiatives, an integrative review method was employed (Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

A clearly defined literature search process is critical for enhancing the rigor of all review studies because unjustified and biased searching generates insufficient data leading to inaccurate results (Cooper, 1998). Following Whittemore and Knafl's (2005) integrative review framework, Schulenkorf et al. (2016) utilized a modified version to explore the sport for development scholarship. The review steps included problem identification, literature search, data evaluation, data analysis, and presentation. Modifications to Whittemore and Knafl's (2005) original procedures included the inclusion of an article screening to exclude articles not related to the topic of the review in the data evaluation step. This adjustment allowed for the integrative review process to be adapted to a sport research friendly context.

Following a lengthy discussion by the researchers, the search terms were narrowed down to Olympics, media, and gender to cover the topic of inquiry. Next, a total of 20 research databases were selected from sport management (10), women’s and gender (5), and journalism and mass media (3) fields to cover the three discrete areas of this study. In addition, Scopus and Web of Science databases were included as they search a high number of social science journals (Falagas, Pitsouni, Malietzis, & Pappas, 2008). ‘Olympics AND media AND gender’ were inputted into the domains of topic under an advanced search function for each search engine. The search was strictly limited to peer-reviewed, full-text articles, written in the English language, and published within the last 20 years (1997 – 2017). 1997 was chosen as a starting point for this review because with the exception of one outlying pioneering work by Lee...
(1992), there was little research on the topic before this time. Research on this issue may have flourished after the 1996 Olympics which significantly increased interest in and coverage of women’s sport (Coffey, 1996, p.41). Following a similar study (Schulenkorf et al., 2016) a 20-year timeframe should provide a wide enough window to examine the topic and to discover related research trends. Identical searching procedures were repeated for all databases, and a total of 920 articles were initially identified. Next the title and abstract were assessed to determine the relevancy of the publication to the review. Following this exclusion step, 98 articles remained. The final step eliminated duplicates (n=45). Finally, a total of 52 journal articles were included in this integrated literature review on media coverage and gender during the Olympics.

By comprehensively reviewing and synthesizing existing articles, the current study could make contributions to identifying the current gaps in research, developing new perspectives, and suggesting directions of future research in the field. As the analysis is still ongoing, a more comprehensive overview of the findings, discussion and suggestions will be presented at the conference. However, some preliminary findings indicate that most studies focus on general coverage of the Games with only n=14 articles specifically centering on one or multiple events. Moreover, the majority of the event specific discussion revolved around track and field, gymnastics, and ice hockey. Other notable trends included the form of media under review (e.g., print, broadcast, and new-media). Print media coverage (n=24) and broadcast coverage dominated with n=22 articles while new media including online coverage was much less abundant with n=5 studies. More specifically, the first study that dealt with new-media was published in 2013. In contrast to the two more traditional forms of media, these new-media studies also tend to focus on multiple countries and their results indicate less of a gender gap in the coverage of gender in terms of quantity. These results could be supported by new-media’s expandability and spatial parameters which are less restricted in new-media (Eagleman, Burch, & Vooris, 2014). One of the most evident gaps in the current literature is that most studies have focused on North American, European and other first world westernized regions such as Australia with very limited investigation into Asia or Africa. In this regard, issues of the media coverage on women at the Olympic Games in Asia or Africa could be a potential future direction of research.