

Beyond the Game: The Role of Mega-Sport Events and Media in Shaping Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

An Analytical Study of the International Olympic Committee's Influence on Media Representation and Social Change

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Scientific environment

During my pursuit of a PhD, I have had the privilege of engaging in two distinct scientific environments. Firstly, as a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Bergen, within the Department of Information Science and Media Studies. Secondly, my daily work has immersed me in the academic environment of Kristiania University College in Oslo, School of Communication, Leadership, and Organization, specifically within the Department of Leadership and Organization.



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Abstract in English

This thesis presents a comprehensive investigation into the dynamics between mega-sport events, media coverage, and their implications for gender equality and women's empowerment, with a particular focus on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and National Olympic Committees (NOCs). Amidst a backdrop of sociological, communication, and feminist theories, this research scrutinizes the mechanisms through which these entities influence gender representation in media and, by extension, in society. By integrating a mixed-methods approach, this study meticulously analyzes the portrayal of women in media coverage of the Tokyo 2020 and Beijing 2022 Olympics, employing semi-structured interviews, content analysis, and thematic analysis to dissect the complex interplay between media framing, agenda-setting, gatekeeping, and self-presentation within the Olympic context.

The thesis underscores the significance of media as a powerful architect in shaping public perception, revealing how strategic framing and gatekeeping decisions by sport organizations and media outlets perpetuate or challenge traditional gender norms. The findings highlight a nuanced landscape of gender representation, where incremental progress in media visibility and portrayal of female athletes coexists with persistent stereotypical narratives. This duality underscores the evolving yet enduring challenges in achieving gender equality in sports media.

The research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of the IOC and NOC in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment through sport, offering critical insights into the potential and limitations of current strategies. It calls attention to the need for more proactive, inclusive, and equitable approaches in media representation and sport governance to foster a more gender-balanced portrayal of athletes.

By weaving together empirical evidence and theoretical analysis, this thesis not only enriches the academic discourse on gender, sport, and media but also provides practical recommendations for stakeholders aiming to leverage mega-sport events as platforms for societal change. In doing so, it advocates for a more conscientious reflection on the part of sport organizations and media practitioners in their role as agents of gender equality, urging a reevaluation of practices that shape the narrative of women in sports.

Abstract in Norwegian

Denne doktorgradsavhandlingen er en omfattende undersøkelse av forholdet mellom store idrettsarrangementer, mediedekning og implikasjonene for likestilling og kvinners myndiggjøring, med fokus på Den internasjonale olympiske komité (IOC) og nasjonale olympiske komiteer (NOCs). Med bruk av sosiologiske, kommunikasjons- og feministiske teorier, utforsker denne avhandlingen mekanismene hvorigjennom disse organisasjonene påvirker kjønnsrepresentasjonen i media og i samfunnet generelt. Avhandlingen analyserer fremstillingen av kvinner i mediedekning av De olympiske leker (OL) i Tokyo 2020 og Beijing 2022 gjennom en «mixed methods»-tilnærming. Den består av semistrukturerte intervjuer, innholdsanalyse og tematisk analyse, som er brukt for å dissekere det komplekse samspillet mellom medieinnramming, agenda-setting, portvaktfunksjoner og selvpresentasjon i OL-sammenheng.

Avhandlingen understreker betydningen av media som en mektig arkitekt i å forme offentlighetens oppfatning av idrettsutøvere, og avslører hvordan strategiske utformings- og portvaktbeslutninger i idrettsorganisasjoner og medier opprettholder eller utfordrer tradisjonelle kjønnsnormer. Funnene viser et nyansert landskap av kjønnsrepresentasjon, der skrittvis fremgang i mediesynlighet og fremstilling av kvinnelige idrettsutøvere sameksisterer med vedvarende stereotypiske fortellinger. Denne dualiteten understreker de utviklende, men varige utfordringene for å oppnå likestilling i idrettsmedier.

Forskningen bidrar til en dypere forståelse av rollen til IOC og NOC i å fremme likestilling og kvinners myndiggjøring gjennom sport, og gir kritisk innsikt i potensialet og begrensningene til dagens strategier. Avhandlingen retter oppmerksomheten mot behovet for mer proaktive, inkluderende og rettferdige tilnærminger i medierepresentasjon og idrettsstyring for å fremme en mer kjønnsbalansert fremstilling av idrettsutøvere.

Ved å veve sammen empiriske bevis og teoretisk analyse, beriker denne oppgaven ikke bare den akademiske diskursen om kjønn, idrett og media, men gir også praktiske anbefalinger til interessenter som tar sikte på å utnytte store idrettsarrangementer som plattformer for samfunnsendringer. Avhandlingen tar til orde for en mer samvittighetsfull refleksjon fra idrettsorganisasjoner og medieutøvere i deres rolle som aktører for likestilling, og oppfordrer til en reevaluering av praksis som former fortellingen om kvinner i idretten.

List of Publications

Grabmüllerová, Aneta, and Hans Erik Næss. 2022. Gender Equality, Sports Media and the Olympics, 1984-2018: An Overview. In *Book Chapter in The Routledge Handbook of Gender Politics in Sport and PA*. Routledge.

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<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fspor.2022.825440>.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to explore the role of sport organizations' use of mega- sport events in social development, in particular gender equality and women's empowerment through media outlets. Print, broadcast radio, television, and internet media coverage of sports is critical in shaping public opinion. Given the global audience of mega-sport events, the media has a large effect on what stories are presented, what viewpoints are expressed, and even what issues people deem important. That power raises the specific question in this research of how women are portrayed in the media through the Olympic Games.

The emphasis of this portrayal is on gender representation and depiction in media material, as well as the consequences of framing choices, agenda setting, gatekeeping, and self-portrayal. Deciding these things involves 'what facts to include, what kind of story to tell, what kind of wording to use to describe the event and the athlete, and what pictures to use in order to underline the message' (Hartmann-Tews 2019, p. 268) and they are socially constructed, resulting from long-term interactions among various social actors (Hartmann-Tews, 2019). To understand and explain how this is done, this thesis explores these decisions and identifies what aspects of the process affect gender portrayal. Consequently, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of the role of sport organizations' impact on gender equality and women's empowerment through media outlets. More specifically, the role of the biggest sport organization in the world - International Olympic Committee (IOC) and its national constitutes, National Olympic Committees (NOC).

Empirically, this thesis rests upon mixed-methods studies of women's portrayal on social media during two Olympics – Tokyo 2020 and Beijing 2022.

Methodologically, I draw on established quantitative and qualitative research methods but also respond to a call for a new conceptualization of the research approach to gendered media content. Theoretically, I engage well-established research area discussions and frameworks as well as new perspectives. Fundamentally, my goal is to contribute to the understanding of sport organizations' impact on gender equality and women's empowerment through media outlets. The thesis's primary research question

may be stated simply: ‘As a media actor, what does the International Olympic Committee (IOC) do for gender equality and to empower women through major sporting events?’ To answer this question, this dissertation thesis is composed of a collection of three papers – one literature review and two empirical studies.

1.1 The structure of the thesis

The aim of this thesis is to review and explain the findings of the three publications and how they relate to the primary study issue. In the first chapter, I introduce the reader to the topic and the goals of this thesis. In the second chapter, I set the context of this study and elaborate on the significance of the issue. I concentrate on the overall research issue that connects the papers. In the third chapter, I survey the theoretical foundations of the key concepts incorporated in the thesis. In chapter four, I detail and remark on the methods of the research. In the fifth and last chapter, I synthesise and discuss the articles’ results in connection to each other and to the main research topic of the thesis.

1.2 Introduction to the collection of articles

With accordance with the research objectives, three studies have been conducted. First, a literature review on media coverage of female Olympians. This chapter was co-authored with my supervisor Hans Erik Næss. Documentation on the development of the IOC’s gender equality initiatives and gender-related research on media portrayal from the 1984 Olympics to the 2018 Winter Olympics resulted in a sample of 88 articles. We conducted a descriptive review of sources identified to explore existing interpretable patterns in the body of information. The results of this study were published as a book chapter ‘Gender equality, sport media and the Olympics, 1984-2018: An overview’ in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender Politics in Sport and PA*. This study not only provides an overview of the existing research, but also illustrates the state of the field. This acted as a directive for the next studies.

Since the NOCs are a constituent of the Olympic movement under the leadership of the IOC in their respective countries, their communication is the focus of the second article. According to the Olympic Charter, the NOCs are responsible for fostering, promoting, and safeguarding the Olympic movement in their respective nations. Because of the organisational commitment to support IOC's policies and be loyal to the latter's visions, they represent an important intermediary for national audiences. Therefore, the focus of the article was the commitment of three European NOCs to the production of gender-balanced content on social media. To investigate this, the key methods were 1) qualitative interviews with representatives of the Olympic movement and 2) content analysis of respective social media accounts. The results of this study were published as a journal article 'Social Media and the Olympics: A Chance for Improving Gender Equality' in 'Frontiers in Sports and Active Living'.

The third study focuses on sportswomen's empowerment and answers the second part of the research question 'As a media actor, what does the International Olympic Committee (IOC) do for gender equality and to empower women through major sporting events?' In the study "'Women are here, women are hungry": Exploring Articulations of Empowerment and Feminism in Digital Spaces,' I analysed sportswomen's self-presentation practices during the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. Employing a new conceptual approach to 'tell stories differently' (Cooky & Antunovic, 2022), I explored how narratives of feminism and empowerment circulated in the contemporary digital media spaces. This article was presented at the 14th annual conference of the Transnational Working Group for the Study of Gender and Sport and has been submitted to the Special Issue of *Mediapolis Journal of Communication, Journalism and Public Sphere* 'Olympism: Contributions from media, journalism and communication studies.'

The empirical articles were built on the observations made while conducting the literature review. The most common approach to study gender in Olympic media coverage is quantitative content analysis. As this approach has been criticized (Bruce, 2016; Delorme, 2014) and I considered this criticism in my second article by employing a mixed-methods approach and triangulated quantitative analysis with

semi-structured interviews. This study reflects the ‘traditional’ research approach that is employed in the field. Recently, scholars, mostly from feminist studies, have started to call for new research designs (Cooky & Antunovic, 2018) and revision of the traditional interpretations (Bruce, 2016, Rowe & Silva, 2023). The third article therefore responds to this call by offering a this ‘new’ approach for the study of gender in sports media. While the objects of those two studies differ, the goal of this dissertation thesis is to offer both approaches and reflect on the contributions of each.

2. Contextual Setting

This chapter explores the contextual setting of the IOC, delving into its historical evolution and contemporary role at the intricate intersection of sports, politics, and societal values. Additionally, the mediatization and digitalization of the Olympic Games is explored, tracing its evolution from a global spectacle to a commercial venture, emphasizing the critical role of media and sponsorship. The chapter further delves into gender dynamics and initiatives, providing a detailed account of the IOC's efforts to promote gender equality and address representation issues. Ultimately, the chapter concludes by scrutinizing criticisms faced by the IOC, highlighting its enduring impact on the global stage.

2.1.1 The International Olympic Committee

The IOC is a non-governmental sports organization based in Lausanne, Switzerland. The IOC was founded in 1894 following Pierre de Coubertin's Paris convention, with the aim of reviving the ancient Olympic Games. Since then, the IOC has developed into an entity responsible for supervising several Olympic events, including the Summer, Winter, Youth, and Continental Games. All of these entities are stakeholders in a truly multi-organizational social system that has grown more complex over time (Chappelet, 2021). Today, the IOC controls the world's biggest athletic events and exercises considerable power on the world stage (Nelson & Cottrell, 2016). As the IOC states, it acts as:

a catalyst for collaboration between all parties of the Olympic family, from the National Olympic Committees (NOCs), the International Sports Federations (IFs), the athletes, the Organising Committees for the Olympic Games (OCOGs), to the The Olympic Partners (TOP) partners, broadcast partners and United Nations agencies, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) shepherds success through a wide range of programmes and projects (IOC, n.d.-b).

The IOC, as the apex authority and governing body of the Olympic Movement, operates within a structured framework designed to oversee and promote the principles

of Olympism on a global scale. Olympism is defined as a ‘philosophy of life’ that blends sport with culture and education in order to create ‘a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles’ (IOC, n.d.-d). All of that with the goal to develop humankind harmoniously and promote a peaceful society with ‘the preservation of human dignity’ (IOC, n.d.-d).

The primary decision-making body is the IOC Session, an assembly comprising all IOC members, which convenes at least annually. During these sessions, crucial matters are addressed, including the election of the IOC President, vice presidents, and members of the Executive Board (EB), as well as determinations related to host cities for future Olympic Games and amendments to the Olympic Charter. EB serves as the executive arm of the IOC, charged with implementing decisions and policies set forth by the IOC Session. Comprising the IOC President, four vice presidents, and other members elected by the Session, the EB convenes regularly to deliberate on various issues integral to the functioning of the Olympic Movement. The President, elected by the Session, stands as the symbolic head of the IOC, presiding over both the IOC Session and the Executive Board. With a renewable term of eight years, the President plays a pivotal role in shaping the strategic direction of the Olympic Movement.

Within the IOC’s organizational structure, various commissions address specific facets of its operations. These commissions, dedicated to areas such as athletes, marketing, finance, and ethics, contribute to informed decision-making by thoroughly studying and recommending actions on pertinent matters. The collaboration with NOCs is also fundamental, as each NOC assumes responsibility for promoting the Olympic Movement within its respective country and organizing the nation’s participation in the Olympic Games. IFs, as sports governing bodies at the global level, work in close collaboration with the IOC to oversee the organization and promotion of their respective sports during the Olympic Games. Additionally, each edition of the Games is facilitated by a local organizing committee, collaborating closely with the IOC to ensure the successful planning and execution of the event.

2.1.2 Medialization of the Olympic Games

During the 1970s, the Olympics substantially gained significance and started to captivate the attention of the media and sponsors (Chappelet, 2021). Olympics reached a landmark as a global spectacle by selling television rights (Chappelet, 2021), TV ratings skyrocketed and more private TV networks bidding for the Olympics TV rights raised rates (Preuss, 2002). By turning the Olympics into a commercial venture as much as a sporting contest, the Games ‘revitalized the flagging Olympic Movement and provided it with a new cultural template that would keep the Olympics relevant in the twenty-first century’ (Llewellyn et al., 2015, p. 1).

Today, the Olympics are undoubtedly the world’s greatest spectacle with a unique and unthreatened position. The latest editions of the Olympics were watched by billions of people (IOC, 2021b, 2022d). In the US, the Games represent the single most watched events in the history (Billings et al., 2017). Television and broadcasting rights account for three-quarters of the IOC’s revenue (Chappelet, 2021). Sponsoring has become the second biggest source of Olympic financing, which provides funding to all NOCs, to the OCOGs (Organising Committees for the Olympic Games) and the IOC. Their own international marketing program called ‘The Olympic Program’ (TOP) unprecedented record high profits (Dyreson, 2015; Preuss, 2002). Even the payments of TV rights are dependent on sponsors who buy advertisement time during the Olympic broadcasting (Preuss, 2002). This shift is symbolized by the fact that more media representatives than athletes attend the Games (Preuss, 2002).

In the last two decades, the landscape of mass media communication has undergone a profound transformation with the rise of digital technologies and social media. Today, a wide array of digital technologies is readily accessible for personal use, blurring the traditional lines between mass and personal media. Users now have the active role of both consumers and producers, transcending the conventional boundaries associated with institutional or professional contexts in mass media production (Lüders, 2008). This shift became particularly relevant to portrayal and representation issues. Despite the IOC’s initiatives and encouragement to athletes to share their experiences through social media (IOC, 2022a), the IOC also limits what athletes may share and how they may do so. For example, before and during the

Games, athletes are also not allowed, in accordance to Rule 40, to promote any brand, product, or service (IOC, n.d.-c). No audio or video recordings are allowed to be made during the games to safeguard the rights of broadcasters and sponsors (IOC, 2022a). Recently, the rules concerning demonstrations and propaganda have been eased and the new Rule 50.2 grants athletes the right to express their views on several occasions including (but not limited to) through traditional media, digital media, and social media (IOC, 2021c).

2.1.3 Women at the Olympic Games

Even though women were never banned from the Olympics, their participation was low in terms of numbers. For example, while women were already competing by the second edition of the Games in 1900 in Paris, they were only 22 out of 997 participants. Furthermore, only five sports were open to women compared with 19 to men (IOC, 2022c). Half a decade later, women constituted 10 per cent of participants. In 1988, women accounted for 25 per cent of participants.

Since the 80s, gender equality and women's participation started to be taken seriously and the IOC started to introduce new rules and initiatives. In 1991, gender equality was introduced in the IOC's agenda, when the IOC decided that any new sport included in the Olympics must include women (Koenigsberger, 2017). A subsequent milestone was the Working Group on Women and Sport established in 1995, which was elevated to the status of commission in 2004 and renamed the Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Commission in 2022. In 1996, gender equality was included in the Olympic Charter. Furthermore, National Olympic Committees (NOCs) were encouraged to create special committees or working groups to design and implement a plan of action with a view to promoting women's participation in sport (IOC, 2012b).

Over the years, the IOC's efforts have become increasingly institutionalized. The IOC's World Conferences on Women and Sport have taken places every four years. In 2014, the IOC and the United Nations (UN) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to strengthen their collaboration and promote girls' and women's empowerment. In the same year, an IOC Session adopted a strategic

roadmap ‘Agenda 2020’ with 40 recommendations on how to safeguard the Olympic values and strengthen the role of sport in society (IOC, 2014). While subjected to harsh criticism for being rhetoric rather than remedy (MacAloon, 1987; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2019), it provided gender equality initiatives with necessary top-down momentum. Most recently, a new strategic roadmap Agenda 2020+5 has been adopted, in which fostering gender equality is again one of the recommendations (IOC, 2021a).

The Olympics eventually achieved nearly equal representation of men and women in 2020, and it is currently expected that the 2024 Olympics in Paris will be the first Summer Games to have a balanced number of men and women. Since the 2018 Buenos Aires Games, the Youth Olympics have been gender-balanced, and the 2022 Olympics were the most gender-balanced Winter Games to date, with women accounting for 45 percent of athletes. However, women remain excluded from some, more complicated, processes on structural, cultural, and interactional levels (Hovden, 2010). The IOC failed to adhere to its policy mandating that 20 per cent of IOC members be female by 2005. As of 2012, just 20 of 106 (or 18.8 per cent) IOC members were women (IOC, 2012a). Currently, 33.3 per cent of its executive board and 37.5 per cent of its committee members are women (Honderich, 2021).

In addition, the media was reluctant to recognise female athletes, not only because society was slow to acknowledge and accept them, but also due to commercial interests and pressures (Lee, 1992). In 2017, partnership between the IOC and UN Women resulted in a major review project on gender equality, the Gender Equality Review Project, which recognized that raising awareness about gender inequality through campaigns and conferences is not sufficient as it does not lead to substantial change (IOC, 2018). Thus, the project offers 25 action-oriented recommendations considering five themes. Three of those recommendations are related to ‘Portrayal’, concerning balanced portrayal of both genders, communications partnerships and organising committees (IOC, 2018). The IOC also published Portrayal Guidelines for Gender Balanced Representation for media (IOC, 2022b) as well as IOC Social and Digital Media Guidelines for athletes (IOC, 2022a).

For female Olympians, the digitalization of media was initially seen as having transformative potential, holding the promise to challenge male hegemony and gender disparities in sports media (Antunovic, 2022; LaVoi et al., 2019). However, notwithstanding the historic surge in female participation in the Olympics concurrent with the advent of social media, established patterns of media representation persisted, perpetuating marginalization of sportswomen, even within the digital sphere (LaVoi & Calhoun, 2014). The transformative potential of digital media remains uncertain; however, Antunovic highlights instances of ‘counterhegemonic discursive practices’ that bring visibility to under-represented athletes and sports. Antunovic (2022) posits that while social media and digital technologies may be implicated in the perpetuation of deleterious social constructs, including racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, they concurrently function as instruments for community-building, disruption, and empowerment. The expansive nature of the internet provides spaces for self-promotion, enabling female athletes to bypass media gatekeepers (Toffoletti et al., 2022).

2.1.4 Criticism of the IOC

The IOC serves as a distinctive and influential entity that adeptly manoeuvres the complex intersection of sports, politics, and societal values. It operates within both public and private realms, spanning governmental and non-governmental spheres (Nelson and Cottrell, 2016). It is, therefore, no surprise that the IOC has faced criticism on a variety of issues over the course of recent history.

Financial considerations have been a focal point of criticism, as hosting the Olympic Games entails substantial costs for the selected cities and countries (Flyvbjerg, Budzier & Lunn 2021). The IOC stands as a billion-dollar brand with the authority to determine Olympic Games hosts and select corporate partners, all with minimal oversight. Instances of bribery and vote-buying during the selection process for Olympic host cities have marred the reputation of the IOC and raised questions about the transparency and integrity of its decision-making processes (MacAloon, 2011). Also environmental impact constitutes another dimension of criticism directed at the IOC (Geeraert & Gauthier 2018).

Furthermore, the IOC has faced scrutiny for its choice of host countries, particularly when human rights issues are at stake. Host countries have faced allegations of suppressing freedom of expression, curtailing dissent, and discriminating against marginalized communities, sparking debates about the ethical implications of staging the Olympics in such environments (Næss, 2020). Some have questioned the administration of the Olympics and the inclusion or exclusion of particular events (Longman, 2013; Lund, 2022). Others have disputed the IOC's answers to concerns of social exclusion, such as the lack of female athletes (Nelson & Cottrell, 2016).

The tension between Olympic principles and the realities in some host nations underscores the intricate interplay of sports, politics, and human rights globally. According to Nelson and Cottrell (2016), the IOC leverages its moral authority to maximize profits, securing a virtual monopoly on the Games. Recognized as the sole legitimate governing body for the Olympics (Chappelet, 2021), the IOC's perceived universality enhances its societal influence and power. The social foundation of the IOC's influence is amplified by the symbolic significance of sports, which plays a crucial role locally, nationally, and internationally. Many people, indoctrinated to value sports and emblematic events like the Olympics, view them as apolitical, providing a sense of stability in a volatile global atmosphere (Boykoff, 2014).

From its origins to its current status, the IOC holds a distinctive place in world society. Despite facing criticism and various challenges, the IOC has demonstrated a commitment to addressing these concerns over the years. For example, the evolution of gender equality initiatives, institutionalized efforts, and collaborations with organizations like the UN reflect the IOC's acknowledgment of its responsibility to promote inclusivity. However, the dynamic landscape of media, especially in the digital age, introduces new complexities, raising questions about representation and athletes' freedom of expression. As the IOC moves forward, the balance between maintaining the integrity of the Olympic Games and embracing societal changes will continue to shape its role and impact on the global stage. It is consequently essential to evaluate the IOC's language and strategies for maintaining it.

2.2 Mapping the research field

Over the last four decades, sportswomen and their representation in sports media have been researched extensively. Representation patterns have been studied through quantitative and qualitative content analysis with the main focus on the persistent masculine hegemony (Cooky and Antunovic 2022). The results indicate that sportswomen receive less airtime (e.g. Billings 2008; Eastman and Billings 1999; Billings 2007), and less space in news (e. g. Pratt et al. 2008; Duncan 1990; Lee 1992). Media also tend to pay more attention to ‘feminine’ sports and are reluctant to cover sportswomen competing in ‘masculine’ events (see chapter ‘Sociology of Gender’) (Higgs et al., 2003; Higgs & Weiller, 1994; Vincent et al., 2002). Furthermore, female Olympians are depicted ambiguously; they are subjected to more stereotypical remarks and criticisms about their appearance (Andrews, 1998; Jones et al., 1999; Kinnick, 1998; Shields et al., 2004). Media also remain male-dominated as they continue to use more male journalists, male pundits, and announcers (Billings and Eastman 2002; Tuggle, Huffman, and Rosengard 2002; Capranica and Aversa 2002).

While these findings provide empirical proof of the continuing diminishment of female athletes in sports media, in most cases they omit the complexities of contemporary media culture (Bruce, 2016). In the last 20 years, most studies concerned with Olympic coverage focused on one type of news, the majority of the analysed content being traditional news such as newspapers and television (Geurin & Naraine, 2020). As more people choose to consume news via digital sources, social media, and short-form sites on phones, it is critical to expand research into these forms of media because they seem to be more relevant to today’s media audience (Moe & Ytre-Arne, 2022; Peters & Schröder, 2018). Furthermore, the rise of digital media causes consumption to be complex and intertwined as audiences consume information from several sources, and often simultaneously (Keightley & Downey, 2017).

Previous research has indicated that gender portrayal is related to the gender of the producer (Devitt, 2002), cultural repertoires (Benson & Saguy, 2005) and the organizational environment (Silcock 2002, Pfister 2010). Hence, it is crucial to further investigate the role of those factors in media processes. Furthermore, scholars

suggested that sports coverage of female and male athletes is not only affected by gender, but also by other considerations such their percentage share of their participation (Delorme, 2014), success (Bruce et al., 2010), nationalism and culture (Capranica et al., 2005), and the producers themselves (Hardin, 2005; Xu, 2019). Therefore, scholars should broaden their focus beyond media coverage and emphasize the human aspects of Olympic media using methodologies that go beyond quantitative content analysis. This is especially so since many of the content analyses that reported the under-representation of female Olympians proved to be biased or in some other way deficient (see chapter ‘Content Analysis’) (Delorme, 2014).

With the emergence of digital media and Web 2.0 (Hine, 2020), news media are no longer the sole producers of sports news. Instead, sport governing bodies, as well as athletes (and others), became content creators reporting on sports in real-time. For example, the official Olympic broadcaster, NBC, is followed by 1.2 M Instagram users (January 2024), while the Olympic Games account has 7.3 M followers (January 2024). Also athlete-produced content can attract substantial attention. For example, the 13 year-old Brazilian female skateboarder Rayssa Leal, who won a silver medal at the Olympics, gained five million Instagram followers in the eight days surrounding her performance at the Tokyo Games. However, in spite of the fact that sports organizations and athletes became significant media producers with a massive following, research on media consumers, content creators, sports’ governing bodies, and athletes is largely missing from the current literature (Geurin & Naraine, 2020). Scholars have mostly examined media frames and the consequences of framing and agenda setting but very little research has been dedicated to how these frames are produced (Carragee and Roefs 2004, Borah 2011).

Sportswomen, who have long been marginalized in news media, have successfully exploited the new digital media ecosystem to bypass media gatekeepers, magnify their views, and engage with the public. Initially, it was the blogosphere, and later social media, that disrupted the masculine hegemony of sports media (Antunovic, 2022), allowing sportswomen to create new discourses about their experiences for a variety of reasons, including sharing their personal life, establishing a connection, gaining sponsorship, and self-promotion (Geurin, 2017). The strategies with which

athletes share photos and information on social media are significant because they shape audience perceptions, which in turn can affect support for women's sports (Lebel et al., 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). While content written and created by women about women does not necessarily transform the media landscape, it certainly challenges the masculine perception of sports fandom and provides an alternative perspective (Antunovic, 2022). By enabling female athletes to increase their visibility on their own terms, create communities and places of support, exchange information, and assert their authority and validity as athletes, social media may serve as a feminist tool to challenge dominant representational regimes (Bruce & Hardin, 2014).

Even though social media provide people with control and agency over their online portrayals, self-representation cannot be described as a solely personal endeavour. According to (Bortree, 2005), self-representation is a constant negotiation between one's own aims and one's perception of audience demands, both of which may be substantially affected by the social context. For example, according to Xu and Armstrong (2019, p. 324), 'living and competing in a highly hegemonic society, athletes might internalize patriarchal gender values and adjust self-portrayals to social expectations. For many sportswomen, digital presence has become a way to finance their sports careers (through sponsorship, collaborations, appearances, or crowdsourcing) (McClearen, 2021). Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) defined the digital work sportswomen do to raise awareness for themselves and their sport as an 'athletic labour of femininity'. However, they have to do so in accordance with market appeal as well as cultural expectations (Toffoletti et al., 2022).

The majority of the above-mentioned studies regardless of methodological and/or theoretical approach came to the conclusion that, despite some qualitative improvements, sportswomen remain mostly under-represented and trivialized in media. This keeps researchers motivated to keep monitoring media coverage and provide consistent results (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018). However, the majority of the research that focused on the representational and relational dimensions of women's sports, relied on media analysis methods and, in a few cases, interviews with media producers (Toffoletti et al., 2022). Consequently, these studies report an 'almost obligatory recitation of marginalization, trivialization, ambivalence and sexualization

of sportswomen' (Bruce, 2016, p. 367), which accordingly to Toffoletti, Ahmad, and Thorpe (2022) led to severe limitations in sports media research.

Antunovic and Whiteside (2018) proposed several ways in which to employ feminist media theories that can serve as points of departure and provide new insights and future directions for research, which will create better connection between gender-related issues in sports media and broader social issues. Digitalization and the emergence of social media provided feminist researchers with a great opportunity to create innovative mixed-methods that provide room for many different perspectives of sportswomen's construction of their identities that might 'challenge mainstream sports media discourse' (Heineken, 2015, p. 1035). Taking the shift towards digitalization into consideration, Fullagar, Parry, and Johnson (2018) suggest new opportunities to expand methods for exploring sportswomen's media experiences:

The theoretical and methodological inventiveness of feminist work in digital culture is part of wider debates (new materialist feminism, third and fourth wave feminism, feminist science and technology studies, digital humanities) that are reshaping the ontological, ethical, and epistemological boundaries of 'doing' knowledge to effect change (228).

Also Toffoletti, Ahmad, and Thorpe (2022, p. 41) stress the importance of advancing 'the field of inquiry in sociologically attuned and feminist-oriented ways' to bring focus to social injustice that perpetuates gender inequalities in sports media. Several other scholars urged the expansion of conceptual boundaries of sports media (Bruce, 2016; Cooky & Antunovic, 2022; McClearen, 2018; Toffoletti et al., 2018). For example, McClearen (2018, p. 942) argued that 'scholarship that focuses on how sports media objectifies women athletes or how patriarchy marginalizes women in various sporting contexts doesn't often tell us anything new.'

Toffoletti (2016, p. 199) stated that 'feminist sports scholars who once identified the role of media in producing images of women in sport as trivialized, sexualized, and objectified under patriarchy are now faced with new conceptual challenges [...]. Antunovic and Cooky (2022, p. 4) echoed the need for a new approach and suggested the use of feminism not just as a theoretical and interpretative

lens to analyse sports media content, but to ‘illustrate how feminism itself becomes integrated in sports media narratives and networked spaces.’ With this new approach, scholars can ‘purposefully seek out feminism in networked sports spaces to identify the ways in which feminism has become popular in sports media’ (Cooky & Antunovic, 2022, p. 5).

The two presented approaches have been evident in the field of gendered sports media studies. While the ‘conventional’ method of media content analysis continues to be valuable, there is a demand for a new strategy that reflects on developments in the sports media sector. This thesis reflects on the status of the subject and offers both methods and, as a result, tries give a comprehensive overview of the topic.

3. Theoretical frameworks

In the previous chapter, I situated my study in the contextual setting of, and influential research into, gendered media coverage. The main points of my review were that, although the discipline provides a lot of intriguing and pertinent insights into certain important topics, it is clear that new approaches are necessary. Therefore, I will draw on relevant theoretical perspectives traditionally found in the field of research as well as new concepts. The intention of this chapter, however, is to discuss the overarching concepts and perspectives that have informed the thesis. Therefore, I will begin with the sociological perspectives on sport, gender, women, and feminism before I turn to relevant mass communication theories.

3.1 Perspectives from sociology of sport

Sport sociology is a sub-discipline of sociology that focuses on the study of sports as a social phenomenon. It examines how sport and physical activity intersect with society, culture, and institutions. It is concerned with ideologies, values and beliefs that are rooted in the sport environment. Sport sociologists analyse various aspects of sports, including their impact on individuals, communities, and larger social structures. Some of the key areas of study within sports sociology is gender and media.

Sport contains cultural and social attributes that make it the subject of anthropological or sociological analysis. Such analyses aim to explore the relationship between society and sport that often reflects the variability of basic views of the world. Gender research thus focuses on the contribution of sport to gender relations and the construction of gender ideologies (Theberge, 1991), that is, how sport reproduces or challenges hegemonic masculinity and the social conditions that underline and enable these processes (Dunning & Coakley, 2000). Sport sociologists use feminist lenses to examine this power to expose systematic inequality, under-representation, exploitation, and marginalization of women in sport and use this knowledge to inform social change.

Social institutions help define and endorse the social construction of gender and sport. Undoubtedly, the media is one of these (McQuail, 2010). Media play an important role in the creation of gender stereotypes, they constantly provide us with templates of how women should behave or look (Fernandez & Menon, 2022). The image of a man and woman that they present reflects and uses the definition of gender roles in the respective society.

Similarly, media play an important role in constructing the social perception of sports. They often present sports performances as examples of heroic acts, which supports the idea that athletes play an important role in our society and represent societal values. Sport can thus be understood as an expression of the given socio-cultural system in which it occurs and as a mirror of society's values. Professional sport is eager to be the centre of public attention to attract maximum interest from media, sponsors, and the audience. Dramatic changes in, and growing importance of, the media and professionalization give sport growing social and cultural status. This is demonstrated by the prominence of sports news on the front pages of newspapers, prime time television, and its ability to captivate a large audience.

3.1.1 Sociology of gender

In many cultures, sport is greatly influenced by the values and stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. To understand the perception of male and female roles, it is necessary to distinguish between sex and gender. Sex refers to the biological differences between a female and a male. Gender, on the other hand, is about culture. Goffman (1979) points out that gender is an expression of natural differences between men and women in everyday life. However, the meaning of 'natural' is formed through cultural practices. Social definitions of biological distinctions between men and women create the conception of the masculine or feminine human nature which intertwine with social relationships. Goffman refers to the ritualized behaviour as gender display. Also, Zimmermann and West (1991), describe gender as a routine and repetitive implementation of a certain complex of socially conditioned behaviour. It is a situational action that is institutionalized within the whole society.

Sociology of gender investigates how culture shapes our perceptions of masculinity and femininity and how this affects identity, social behaviour, and the power dynamics that emerge from the existing gender order. Bourdieu (2001) believes gender is a social construct that attributes a certain set of characteristics based on the biological determinants of the individual. A world divided into masculine and the feminine then seems completely natural. Gender stereotypes are simplistic descriptions of what a masculine man and a feminine woman should look and be like (Renzetti and Curran, 2003). According to Koivula (2001), the societal creation of gender stereotypes and perceived gender disparities underlies the categorization of many activities as feminine or masculine.

For a long time, sport has been male-dominated. The founder of the modern Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin, rejected the idea of women competing alongside men. According to de Coubertin, the Olympic Games strived to achieve a celebration of men's sports, where women's role is only to applaud men's performance (Fuller, 2006). Theories about the negative impact of competitive sports on women's health prevented women from mass participation. There were no women in the first edition of the Olympic Games in 1896 and even though the number of female athletes has risen over time, it did not reach 10 per cent of participants until 1952 (O'Neill, n.d.).

Gradually, sport was formed in accordance with the given logic of relations between the sexes. The characterisation as gender-neutral, feminine, and masculine is seen differently depending on several attributes, including femininity and beauty, risk and danger, speed and masculinity. These beliefs are consistent with gender stereotypes for both men and women and the sports they engage in (Koivula, 2001). People usually think of such stereotypes in a binary way: a man is the one to engage in action, combat, physically demanding sports such as boxing, lacrosse, hockey, football, or basketball, while a woman is to focus on aesthetically pleasing disciplines such as figure skating, gymnastics, synchronized swimming, or beach volleyball.

The key concern surrounding women's roles in sport is tied to issues of authority and autonomy. If men determine which activities women can practise, judge women's athletic excellence, or the degree of support accorded to women's and men's

sports, then women experience the injustice of not being treated with due respect (Davis & Weaving, 2009). Yet it is exactly this attitude that underlies male dominance in sport, where women remain in many respects subordinate to men. This masculine hegemony is rooted from a very early age as children cultivate their physical abilities in a self-conscious manner. Boys' physical activity and achievements are encouraged, recognized, and rewarded in society, while girls' physical activity and achievements are often discouraged and sometimes ignored (Davis & Weaving, 2009). Also, women and girls tend to be directed to feminine disciplines. If a woman dares to break these expectations and engage in sports with full commitment, she often does so under great stress and judgment (Davis & Weaving, 2009). However, if she is empowered to join masculine sports, she challenges existing gender roles, stereotypes, and patriarchal structures (Davis and Weaving, 2009), which can challenge the existing barriers, prejudices, and predesignated roles in society (Huggins and Randell, 2007).

3.1.2 Empowerment and feminism

Feminist sociology is a subfield of sociology that focuses on understanding and analysing social experiences, structures, and inequalities through the lens of gender. Feminism within the sociology of sport constitutes a specialized field of inquiry that critically examines the intricate interplay between gender, sports, and societal structures. One primary focus involves scrutinizing and challenging the enduring gender inequalities that persist in sports, encompassing issues ranging from unequal opportunities and resource allocation to disparities in pay and media coverage between male and female athletes.

The representation of athletes in the media and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes within the sports culture are central themes explored within this field. Within the scope of this thesis, feminist theories seek to elucidate the dynamics of gender (in)equality in both the realm of sports and in a media landscape that presents contradictory portrayals of female athletes as both sexualized and abundant. Third-wave feminism, postfeminism, and neoliberal feminism are three current feminist perspectives that address the shifting dynamics of gender relations and the articulation

of gendered subjectivities in a modern era marked by fragmentation, uncertainty, and risk (Giddens, 1990).

Postfeminism

Feminists have engaged with the concept of post-feminism to make sense of the social and cultural conditions under which feminism has been seen as unnecessary for women (Gill, 2016). In the post-feminism era, feminism seemed to be 'taken into account' yet 'repudiated' (McRobbie, 2009). In the media setting, post-feminism became used as a way to make sense of the different ways women were portrayed (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). On one hand, women's power has been celebrated but on the other, proclamations about gender equality were set against the rise of misogyny and claims that any lingering discrepancies were not caused by sexism but rather by inherent differences and the decisions of women and men (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020).

Definitions and applications of the word post-feminism remain diverse and debated, but it is widely accepted that post-feminism is interpreted in two separate ways (Thorpe et al., 2017). According to Gill (2016), one prevalent perspective is that it is the pushback against feminism, a time following second-wave feminism that heralds the passing of a certain approach to the feminist movement and thought. This is often a method used to evoke post-feminism in feminist sport studies. The second perspective sees postfeminism as a cultural sensibility for analysis that enables feminist critics of media and culture to gain insight into the effects of neoliberal, late-capitalist society on gender (Gill, 2007). With such an approach, scholars can analyse situations in which sportswomen express postfeminist attitudes and discourses in the media and thus learn more about the contemporary power relations between women and men (Gill, 2007).

Critiques of postfeminist sensibility identify the paradoxical situation in which women are seen as powerful independent subjects that can choose how to present themselves now that they are supposedly no longer subject patriarchy, but only within a set of social circumstances in which a cultural focus is placed on subjectification, sexualization, and the body (Thorpe et al., 2017). It became difficult for scholars to be

critical of the portrayals of women in the contemporary media that send mixed messages and put the blame on women for being seen as objects (Thorpe et al., 2017).

The postfeminist sensibility may be utilized to approach sport institutions, cultures, practices, and representations as postfeminist objects of critical examination, and sport research is starting to take this into consideration (Thorpe et al., 2017; Toffoletti, 2016). The focus is on exposing the cultural mechanisms that encourage women ‘to perform and enact their gendered, feminine subjectivities, which includes a celebration of individualism, promotion of one’s bodily capital, and a focus on consumerism and choice as a path to self-actualization’ (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 370). Postfeminist sensibility helps us to identify the expression of women’s self-responsibility to meet certain expectations and gain visibility for themselves and their sport.

Third-wave feminism

Third-wave feminism dismisses judgment of individual women’s choices by recognizing and appreciating the diversity of identities women may choose to inhabit. Third-wave feminism accepts the messiness and complexity of how gender is represented in society today and emphasize the reclaiming of feminine traits as liberating, rather than as disempowering (Cocca, 2014). In this perspective, female athletes’ engagement on social media may be interpreted as proof of their familiarity with the allure and potency of popular culture. They use the internet to present alternative realities and tell the stories that mainstream media have overlooked (Heywood & Drake, 1997; Thorpe, 2008). From this point of view, female athletes do not have to compromise between femininity and athleticism but can embody both (Bruce, 2016; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Moritz, 2011). What might have previously been considered as sexualization by a second-wave feminist view has been re-interpreted as ‘pretty and powerful’ (Bruce, 2016). Sexually posed or nude pictures do not need to signal objectification or sexual availability but rather strength, confidence, and attractiveness (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003).

Third-wave feminists suggest that we should take seriously sportswomen’s own sense-making rather than condemning them as falsely empowered, powerless or

manipulated (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Weaving, 2012). They embrace media presence as a key aspect of their identities (Cocca, 2014; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Feminist critiques of postfeminism, on the other hand, question how these complexities are used to keep unequal power relationships between men and women in place through talk of individual choice and self-making. However, Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce (2017) argue that such portrayal does not challenge the dominant discourses on femininity that prioritize youth, whiteness and heterosexuality. Neither it is available to everyone, rather it seems to predominantly benefit sportswomen who embody the attractive white western femininities and use this to their advantage (Thorpe et al., 2017).

Neo-liberal feminism

Critical feminist media and culture scholars point to a strong connection between postfeminism and neo-liberal feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Thorpe et al., 2017). According to Banet-Weiser et al. (2020), neo-liberal feminism, outright affirms gender inequality while simultaneously denouncing the socio-economic and cultural institutions that shape our lives. In contrast to third wave feminism and postfeminism, neo-liberal feminism focuses on the market and how women are encouraged to become entrepreneurs that oversee their own lives by carefully planning their economic futures. According to Rottenberg (2014), those who are entrepreneurial are motivated to maximize their resources via constant analysis, independent judgement, and invention.

Neo-liberal feminism represents a fresh take on mainstream feminism in which gender inequality is acknowledged (rather than denied), and responses and reactions to such inequalities are confined to neo-liberal discourses of individualism and economic independence. In other words, women who successfully overcome institutional disparities on their own to achieve financial independence and prosperity are valued and respected (Thorpe et al., 2017). To examine how sportswomen are internalising neo-liberal discourses of self-entrepreneurship in connection to their self-branding and usage of social media, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) suggest employing a neo-liberal

feminist viewpoint as it could explain ‘the rise and proliferation of discourses of sexual entrepreneurship’ (Harvey & Gill, 2011, p. 52) among sportswomen.

Neo-liberal feminism explains sportswomen’s femininity and sexualized presentation through economical reasoning. According to Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce (2017), third-wave feminism might perceive images that are sexy, carefree, and unconstrained to go against the idea of strategic entrepreneurship, however, neo-liberal feminism suggest that this is a key part of how female athletes can build a successful brand. It fits with what society expects from women: that they seem real and down-to-earth, instead of obsessed with fame and money. In this way, women athletes aren’t seen as a real threat to men’s sense of economic and/or cultural power, and their apparent self-branding strategies seem efficient in the current market (Thorpe et al., 2017).

Feminism is closely related to empowerment. While feminism is a movement that advocates equality between men and women, women’s empowerment is the process that enables women to participate more fully in all sectors of society. According to Kabeer (2005), empowerment refers to the ways people who have previously been denied the ability to freely make decisions, gain the power. To be empowered means to have meaningful and evident alternatives. For decades, female athletes have been under-represented in both participation in sport and their representation in sports media. Challenging traditional masculine concepts of sport leads to athletes’ empowerment, self-discovery, and progress (Cronan & Scott, 2008). Similarly, sportswomen’s ability to present themselves on social media in their preferred way can be empowering (Kerns, 2021).

From the neo-liberal perspective, sportswomen’s obvious self-subjectification on social media and their justifications for empowerment and entrepreneurship may be seen as ‘instances of the neo-liberalization of feminism’ (Prügl, 2015, p. 626). In the neo-liberal context, empowerment has become a subject of restructuring personally accountable selves, with women more inwardly compelled to develop themselves in a global market as entrepreneurs and consumers (Prügl, 2015). In that sense, the duty to change/address wider gender inequities is placed on individual women, and the market

and self-management is presented as the answer (Thorpe et al., 2017). In the sport context, sportswomen are expected to self-market and build their brands in order to get more media exposure.

3.2 Perspectives from Theories of Mass Communication

Serving as a framework, mass communication theories offer insights into analyzing the impact that media messages may exert on audiences. Mass communication plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, influencing social trends, disseminating information, and connecting people. According to Tewksbury and Scheufele (2007, p. 10), ‘media has strong, long-term effects on audiences, based on the ubiquitous and consonant stream of messages they present to audiences.’ By selecting and prioritizing a particular topic, media forms a framework defining the quality and quantity of messages. Media not only provide people clues on what to think about but also how to think about it (McQuail, 2010). Media content can maintain and strengthen a dominant version of the symbolic world, and thus preserve and legitimize an institutional order (Berger and Luckmann 2011).

In what follows, I will discuss how framing theory, agenda-setting theory and gatekeeping theory explain what role media plays in the creation of public meaning. While framing theory describes how information is communicated, agenda-setting theory is concerned with what topics are given space in media and to what extent. Both theories have been widely used by scholars examining Olympic media coverage (e.g. Billings, Angelini, and Holt Duke 2010; Billings and Eastman 2003, Eagleman 2015) and sport media (e.g. Eagleman 2011, Wensing and Bruce 2003). Finally, to explore how and why certain pieces of information pass through ‘gates’, gatekeeping theory is helpful.

3.2.1 Framing theory

In recent years, a vast and increasing body of work in frame studies has arisen from a variety of disciplines and academic contexts. Framing theory has been incorporated in various fields including sociology, economics, psychology, political science, and media studies (Borah, 2011). Framing has two primary conceptual foundations: social

and psychological. For the purpose of this thesis, the focus is on the sociologically based studies that relate to the way people communicate. Such studies are concerned with ‘words, images, phrases, and presentation styles’ (Druckman, 2001, p. 227) that are utilized to create news articles, as well as the procedures that develop them.

One of the first researchers to establish the broad notion of framing was Goffman (1974). According to Goffman, framing is a situation-defining theory based on organizational ideals that impact social happenings and our engagement in them. He defined framing theory as the perspective of a person based on their unique experience. The context of the observed situation is crucial and forms one’s perception. Consequently, perception is subjective. From the audience’s point of view, framing theory is concerned with the capacity of a human to comprehend an event (Goffman, 1974). As a result, the impression is based on the individual’s abilities rather than on communication style.

In communication, framing theory and agenda setting are used to explain the function of media in the development of public meaning. Frames, according to Semmel and Gitlin (1983), are mechanisms that help journalists arrange massive volumes of information and present it effectively to their audience. According to Entman (1993), framing is the process of selecting specific features of an event and giving them more prominence than others in interpreting or assessing the event for an audience. Frames are used to identify problems, elucidate their causes, form moral judgments, and provide remedies. As such, media has a considerable impact on the construction of public meaning (Entman, 1993). Cappella and Jamieson (1997) defined framing theory as a method of describing and reproducing an event through a certain choice of words, titles, and rhetorical elements. The choice is determined by the author’s or gatekeeper’s view on what is significant. McQuail (2010) considers this choice as a targeted influence on an individual using reasoning, an emotional tone in the message, or a choice of themes to affect a certain person.

With the emergence of Web 2.0, anyone can become a media producer (Hine, 2020) and therefore a frames creator. Text, specific words, phrases, idioms, contextual connections, photographs, or videos all work together to form a framed message that

each person interprets differently. These frames provide constraints that determine how a message is seen and understood. The same statement might have distinct meanings in different contexts. The construction of the audience frame has been a major focus of scholars. For example, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) demonstrated that people's decisions are influenced by the presentation of substantially the same information. The researchers observed that people are more likely to take risks when they are presented with the possibility of 'losses'. On the other hand, people tend to avoid taking risks if the same information is provided in terms of 'gains'. This 'equivalency' approach analyses the impact of communications that are logically equal but have diverse meanings (Druckman, 2001). Every type of information and style is compared in this method so that the frame's true impact may be seen. Risk-gain experiments are often referenced in the 'equivalency' viewpoint (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979).

Entman (1993) provides another example - how American media reported on two air mishaps that killed many people. The USSR shot down a Korean airliner in 1983. The media presented the incident as a deliberate assault and emphasized emotions and life stories. When the US Navy shot down Iran Air flight 655 in 1988, the media presented it as a tragic event, not a crime. The impact of varying significance is explained by emphasis framing. Such frames indicate that particular characteristics are chosen, even accidentally, and given more or lesser priority in the communication channel (Druckman, 2001). As such, it is possible to convince people to concentrate on certain aspects of a message. When it comes to political frames, Druckman (2004) points out that it is not always possible to portray a situation in diverse but equal ways. In other words, emphasis framing effects relate to instances in which people are directed to concentrate on certain elements in the decision-making process by 'emphasizing a subset of potentially important considerations' (Druckman, 2004, p. 672).

These examples show how critical word choice is and how differently the same message may be understood. According to Tewksbury and Scheufele (2007, p. 10), 'media has strong, long-term effects on audiences, based on the ubiquitous and consonant stream of messages they present to audiences.' Present and absent gender in

the media text and image is closely related the concept of framing (Goffman, 1974). Such frames maintain the typical image of a masculine man and a feminine woman. One of the concerns is the fact that mediated texts have a deeply ancestral character in the way they are encoded. Gender colouring of content can also be studied in the production phase, as most of the agenda setting is done by male gatekeepers for presumed male audiences (Organista & Mazur, 2022).

Many sports media scholars have examined gender depiction and media framing through content analyses. These studies continuously report on women's quantitative under-representation in media coverage in terms of names mentions (Eastman & Billings, 1999; Xu et al., 2018, 2019), clock time (Angelini et al., 2012; Billings, 2008; Billings et al., 2008, 2010, 2014; Davis & Tuggle, 2012; Tuggle et al., 2002), and news stories (Dashper, 2018; Jones, 2013). Also qualitatively, the coverage of men and women differs as the descriptors used to explain their success or failure varies (Angelini et al., 2012; Billings, 2007; Billings et al., 2008, 2010; Billings & Angelini, 2007; Eastman & Billings, 1999). Journalists and producers, for example, use more technical phrases to describe men's performance (Eagleman, 2015), but when covering women's sports, they are more concerned with their emotions and looks (Billings et al., 2014).

Content research has played a large role in dealing with inequality in sports coverage, however, other topics have been left in the background, notably the sociological character of the idea, audience frame analysis, and experimental investigation of its impacts (Geurin & Naraine, 2020). Only one study investigated how frames are produced in Olympic coverage. Billings (2009) interviewed NBC producers and sportscasters concerning the role of gender in producing and conveying the Olympic telecast. While producers felt they have set the agenda for both men and women in a fair manner in which both are highlighted equally, content analyses showed otherwise. Many of the reporters admitted an unintentional or even unconscious difference in how they portray men and women. Considering this gap, I employed a mixed-methods approach and not only conducted content analysis, but also interviewed the producers of the content (See chapter 'Mixed Methods' and Article 2).

3.2.2 Agenda-setting theory

While framing theory is concerned with the way information is delivered, agenda-setting theory focuses on topics and to what extent they are given space in media. Frames accentuate certain aspects of reality while excluding others with certain language decisions, such as the words used to depict female and male sportsmen. Agenda-setting is based on a strong correlation between the media's priority for particular themes and the significance of comparable concerns for the general public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Scholars studying Olympic media coverage have utilized both theories extensively (e.g., Billings, Angelini, and Holt Duke 2010; Billings and Eastman 2003, Eagleman 2015).

The term agenda-setting theory was defined by McCombs and Shaw (1972). The fundamental tenet is that the news media inform the public on the major problems of the day, and thus form their perception of the importance of those topics. In other words, people are told what to think about (McQuail, 2010). According to McQuail, there is a link in between the order of importance given in the media to certain issues and by politicians and the public. Agenda-setting is commonly used in political science. According to Dearing and Rogers (1996), agenda-setting is a process in which protagonists continuously compete for the attention of media professionals, the public and policy elites. In the political context, it's the voters' conviction that the issues presented by politicians are the most important ones. From the mass media perspective, Dearing and Rogers (1996) point out that the position of an issue on the media agenda consequently mirrors the issue's salience in the public agenda. Furthermore, even in the contemporary ever-changing online news environment, various mass media tend to agree about the salience of certain issues (McQuail, 2010).

In sports media research, agenda-setting is commonly incorporated into content analysis of gendered media coverage. By emphasising some events or stories over others, the media leads the audience in a certain direction. This implies that the selected content is the most significant and is what the audience should be thinking about. If more attention is devoted to a certain sport or group of athletes because of their gender, race, or place of origin, an agenda has been set, whether consciously or unconsciously (Arth et al., 2018). For example, the discrepancy in coverage between

men and women in the Winter Olympics suggests that the audience should concentrate on the men's events (Arth et al., 2018).

With the increasing number of media covering the Olympics, it would be a logical consequence that more is shown and less gets scrapped. As a result, there should be less choice of what to cover and less of an agenda to define as in the infinitive space of internet, everything can be shown. However, there is no doubt that media producers still give, consciously or not, greater attention to certain events and athletes. These events and athletes will, for example, be promoted throughout prime time, thereby shaping the network's agenda (Arth et al., 2018). Similarly, in online news some sports and athletes are highlighted by the editors on the front pages, while others are hidden in the subcategories of the sports section.

Scholars have revealed that female participants are more likely to get covered if their sports and events are considered 'feminine' or 'socially acceptable' such swimming or gymnastics (Billings et al., 2014; Coche & Tuggle, 2018; Tuggle & Owen, 1999). Such sports are seen as 'socially acceptable' for women as they adhere to the conventional definition of femininity; these sports are regarded by society as visually beautiful and enable women to maintain their elegance and non-aggression (Koivula, 2001).

The consequences of such agenda-setting go beyond how many male or female athletes are visible to audiences. Women's under-representation frames women as docile, submissive, and sexually emphasized (Berg & Streckfuss, 1992; Dominick, 1979; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991), as well as resulting in biased information processing (Theberge & Cronk, 1986). However, research has shown that when female athletes are featured, female viewers are happier and feel empowered, proving the benefits of covering women's sports (Angelini, 2008). Even though studies in which media producers were interviewed suggest that it is the audience's interest that forms the media agenda (Billings, 2009; Organista et al., 2021; Xu, 2019), mass media also have an important role in shaping social values and norms (Rintala & Birrell, 1984), even though some do not accept or like it (Organista et al., 2021). Furthermore, the value of increased coverage of women's sports is related to an increase in women's

and girls' sports engagement (Cooky et al., 2013). Coverage of female athletes conveys a message to society that women's sports and women in general are as significant as men.

3.2.3 Gatekeeping theory

The process by which judgments are made in media work, particularly those addressing whether or not to let a specific news story pass through the 'gates' of the medium into the news channels, has been frequently referred to as 'gatekeeping' (McQuail, 2010). The gatekeeping theory is described by Shoemaker et al. (2001) as the process through which social reality communicated by the news media is produced, where 'selecting, producing, transmitting, and shaping information' occurs on multiple levels in various networks of people who produce sports media (Creedon 2014, p. 17). Gatekeeping theory involves a variety of factors that play a crucial role in preventing or promoting the flow of information and content from one channel to another and influencing if and how the information is ultimately released. The theory does not apply only in news media but also in all kinds of editorial and production work including marketing (McQuail 2010). The gatekeeping process is crucial because it determines how viewers will ultimately consume news and visuals (Shoemaker et al., 2008).

Since its first use, the gatekeeping idea has undergone revisions. One (initial) gate, one primary set of selection criteria, a simplistic perspective of the news supply, and a propensity to individualize decision-making are some of its weak features. Shoemaker (1991) has expanded the original model to include the larger social context and numerous aspects that play a role in the process. Frequently, decisions are made in groups. Shoemaker points out the strong influence that public relations, pressure groups, advertisers, and 'news managers' have on decision-making. According to Shoemaker's concept, gatekeeping often comprises a series of consecutive acts of selection that consider not just content but also audience demographics and financial concerns throughout the entire news-producing process. In a broader sense, it refers to the authority to provide or deny access to various voices in society and is often a source of contention (McQuail, 2010). There are a variety of factors that affect

whether a prospective news event that reaches a gate or gatekeeper will break or remain one of the millions of everyday events that go undetected by the general audience. However, according to McQuail, more crucial is the degree to which gatekeeping is an independent (journalistic) decision rather than one primarily influenced by external or internal economic pressure on the news organisation.

In the sport context, gatekeeping theory has been applied in studies of news producers to explore what aspects influence the amount of coverage given to women's sport (e.g., Organista, Mazur, and Lenartowicz 2021; Organista and Mazur 2022; Billings 2009; Hardin 2005; Knoppers and Elling 2004). It is the gatekeepers who decide who and what is valued, relevant and interesting enough to be given attention (LaVoi et al., 2019). Since sport is constructed as a male domain, it is not surprising that sports media professionals tend to be more familiar with it and cover sportsmen more enthusiastically. The lack of knowledge of women's sports might lead to a more generic and plain coverage (Dashper, 2018; Xu, 2019). The main justification for the media's scant coverage of women's sports is the need to satisfy audience demands and to base choices on financial considerations. However, judgments are often personal and based on presumptions of what would be of interest to the audience (Hardin, 2005; Organista & Mazur, 2022).

Furthermore, even if media did research the public interest, any audience view is still reliant on content that has been provided in the media for years (Hardin, 2005). There is no guarantee that the audience is getting the content it wants (including perhaps more women's sports) because the content is determined in advance by the providers themselves. The idea of a male-dominated audience is another consequence of the presumption that women are less interested in sport than men. This perception may have an impact on women's real interest in sport since they may see it as unfeminine (Organista & Mazur, 2022). Media producers fail to consider their possible role in increasing interest in women's sport because they base their judgment on private interests and beliefs (Organista & Mazur, 2022). At the same time, they refuse the responsibility for interest development in women's sport (Knoppers & Elling, 2004; Organista & Mazur, 2022).

Maintaining attitudes that see sport as a mostly male domain eventually devalues female athletes' accomplishments and marginalizes women's sports in the media. Women's sport is impacted by the environment where gendered practices and standards of information production are tolerated. These editorial decisions have an impact on public perceptions about what sports are prominent. Cultural hegemony affects the selection criteria and maintains women's under-representation in sports, which has negative consequences on their opportunities to attract sponsors (Gee & Leberman, 2011).

3.3 Conclusion

While the sociological perspectives on gender, sports culture, and women's role in it inform the thesis as whole, the respective mass communication theories corresponded to each of the articles. In the first article, we revealed the most employed theories to study gendered Olympic coverage. This was a helpful step in order to make predictions about what I might find in the following research and to understand the underlying causes of the social phenomena. Consequently, I used these theories in the empirical and conceptual articles to provide a framework for understanding and interpreting data. Goffman's framing theory, agenda-setting and gatekeeping theories provided a framework for the second article, in which I analysed NOC's social media content and interviewed personnel of the respective organizations. Feminist theories were a useful point of departure for the third article to explore sportswomen's media self-portrayal. These theoretical considerations further informed the research design and strategy that will be explained in the following section.

4. Research design and methods

A research design is the reasoning behind the way data is gathered and conclusions drawn that are relevant to the study's aims (Yin, 2003). From choosing the units of analysis to the data collection and the analytic approach, this chapter aims to present and explain the whole research process behind this study. This thesis is based on a research design combining an exploratory approach, qualitative and quantitative data, thematic analysis and a conceptual framework. To explain how this was operationalized, and discuss its pros and cons, the remainder of this chapter is structured as follows; I first introduce the research design and strategy and how each of the papers contributes to the overall aim of this thesis. Secondly, I introduce each of the methods employed in these papers and discuss both their benefits and their limitations.

4.1 Research design and strategy

Research is a systematic process encompassing multiple premeditated steps, which begins with the research question itself (Neuendorf, 2017). There are several approaches that can be used to answer research questions in the social sciences. The sort of research question and the logic of inquiry dictate the role of theories and concepts in the given context (Blaikie and Priest 2019).

The research question for this thesis is 'As media actor, what does the International Olympic Committee (IOC) do for gender equality and to empower women through major sporting events?', with the following objectives for each of the studies:

- 1) To identify both progress and shortcomings in relation to key issues around gender representation, which may aid the IOC's work and establish new incentives for further research on gender equality in sport media coverage.
- 2) To explore gender representation on social media linked to the IOC.

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- 3) To explore how the commitment of the IOC to gender equality is reflected in their social media communication.
 - 4) To explore how the IOC's commitment to women's empowerment is reflected in their social media communication and sportswomen's self-presentation.

The following factors were evaluated in order to answer the study question and achieve the objectives:

First, the aim of the study is to provide an *understanding* of a social phenomenon. The research question is therefore a 'what' question and is exploratory in its nature (Blaikie & Priest, 2019) and consequently, this study had an exploratory composition. Exploratory research is a type of research that is conducted in order to gain a better understanding of a topic or problem. Exploratory research is often used to generate new ideas, to test hypotheses, or to identify trends or patterns in data (Swedberg, 2020). According to Blaikie and Priest (2019, p. 80), 'to explore is to attempt to develop an initial description, or an understanding of some social phenomena.' It is a flexible and open-ended approach that allows researchers to explore new areas of research and to gather a broad range of information (Swedberg, 2020).

Exploratory studies are suitable in situations where little is known about the researched topic or new a hypothesis can be derived (Swedberg, 2020). Such studies, according to Merton (1957), raise more questions than they provide answers. Swedberg (2020) further argues that exploratory studies maximize creativity in research by applying abductive logic. Abductive reasoning is a method of inference that is used to generate new hypotheses or explanations for a given set of observations or data. It is a process of moving from an observed phenomenon to a possible explanation for that phenomenon, rather than simply testing preconceived notions or hypotheses. It is a flexible approach that allows for the incorporation of new information as it becomes available and can be used to address a wide range of research questions and problems (Blaikie & Priest, 2019). Abduction adds something

new to the factual situation and addresses empirical issues but is not necessarily based on empirical facts (Swedberg, 2020).

One of the first steps in any exploratory study is to review the existing literature on the topic as this can help identify key concepts, theories, and gaps in our understanding. Therefore, in accordance with the first objective, a descriptive literature review was conducted. This publication offers a review of research linking media, the Olympic Games and gender equality between 1984 and 2020. After reviewing the literature, the next step was to collect data that would help to address the second and third objectives. This was done through a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Once the data was collected, it was analysed to identify patterns, trends, and relationships. To explore gender representation, I conducted a quantitative content analysis of NOC's social media. To explore the commitment of the NOC's personnel and other aspects influencing their work, semi-structured interviews were selected as a method.

To address the last objective and the limitations of traditional academic disciplines (Naples, 2016) and further engage with an exploratory research method (Swedberg, 2020), a conceptual study was conducted. The key to knowledge generation in exploratory research is to approach the study issue or topic with an open mind, to be flexible in one's approaches, and to be willing to change assumptions when new evidence becomes available.

Overall, to effectively respond to the study topic with a consideration of the state of the field, a combination of methods was recognized as an effective blend of approaches. In the subsequent chapters, I will examine each study approach in greater depth.

4.2 Literature review

Effective literature reviews are crucial for advancing knowledge, comprehending the range of research on an area of interest, synthesizing empirical data, developing theories, or offering a conceptual framework for further study, and identifying the areas or research domains that need further investigation (Cooper, 1988; Mulrow,

1994). Without gathering or analysing any primary data, a literature review that qualifies as a unique and worthwhile piece of research aims to summarize or synthesize the literature in a certain field (Paré et al., 2015). According to Cooper (1988), review articles can be written for a variety of purposes, including tracking the development of a field, aggregating findings or resolving conflicting findings from earlier studies, assessing the implementation of a theoretical framework or methodological strategy, or creating a new theory or research model.

To look for observable trends in the selected body of data, we decided to undertake a descriptive review. The advantage of a descriptive review, as opposed to other review formats like integrative (Torraco, 2016) and systematic reviews (Xiao & Watson, 2019), is that it provides a broad perspective of how research has addressed the issue across a variety of fields. Descriptive review adds to the consideration of why certain phenomena survive while others do not, in a manner that is less constrained by the academic traditions that must be considered, for example, in a systematic review.

The aim of descriptive reviews is to identify if and to what extent a group of empirical studies in a certain area of research support or show any patterns or trends that can be understood in relation to existing propositions, theories, methods, or findings (King & He, 2005). Descriptive reviews gather, organize, and analyse data that indicate the frequency of the subjects, authors, and methodologies of the existing literature to ensure the generalizability of the findings (King & He, 2005). Each included study is treated as a unit of analysis; characteristics such as publishing year, research techniques, data collection processes, and results are collected to form findings. The descriptive review acts as a database for detecting any interpretable patterns and trends, and broad inferences regarding the validity of current conceptualizations, propositions, methodologies, or discoveries may be drawn based on the findings. Based on the results, the state of the art in a certain area of research can be identified (Cooper, 1988).

4.3 Mixed methods

In the last two decades, it has become evident that in the field of sociology of sport and sport communication, focusing only on quantitative or qualitative research methods is limiting and can cause the crucial aspect of a narrative to be missed. Scholars have shown that combining methods often yields better results (Hollstein, 2014).

Combining and integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies provides credible and usable knowledge (Molina-Azorin & Fetters, 2019). Mixed methods help us comprehend social issues more thoroughly and broadly by fusing several points of view. Such a strategy makes it possible to compare the quantity of material provided and provide the justification for it (Hollstein, 2014).

However, Blaikie and Priest (2019) point out the controversies of mixed methods, as there has not been general agreement on nomenclature. Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis and the concerned article, mixed-method approach is understood as ‘the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon’ (Denzin, 1978, p. 291). The strengths of both quantitative and qualitative strategies have the potential to make up for the weaknesses of each. Mixed-method designs try to bring together quantitative and qualitative research methods in a way that enrich both (Hollstein, 2014) and cancel out the inherent bias in any particular data source, investigators, and methods (Denzin, 2017). According to Hollstein (2014), the inadequacy of qualitative research is supposedly due to random sample selection and a lack of representativeness, which raises concerns about the generalizability of findings and makes it difficult to compare examples systematically and test causal hypotheses. The seeming disregard of the specific social environment in which actors give meaning to their acts, on the other hand, is one of quantitative research’s weaknesses, as is its possibly lesser sensitivity to new, undiscovered, or peripheral social phenomena and changes.

Blaikie and Priest (2019) put forward additional strengths such providing more comprehensive evidence, answering research questions that cannot be answered by only one method, and encouraging the use of multiple points of views and paradigms. As a consequence, according to Denzin (1978, p. 14), ‘the result will be a convergence

upon the truth about some social phenomenon.’ Denzin (1978) describes how triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data leads to three alternative outcomes: convergence, inconsistency, and contradiction. Blaikie and Priest (2019, p. 216) add: ‘it is the comparison of data produced in different ways that is of greatest value.’ However, the authors also stress the importance of treating the data with great caution and judgment based on knowledge and experience rather than naively accepting the idea that ‘the aggregation of data from different sources will unproblematically add up to produce a more accurate or complete picture’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 184).

4.3.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Exploratory research is often based on qualitative data as it aims to gain highly detailed opinions, feelings and motivations and data is presented through words and long paragraphs (Taylor, 2005). Qualitative interviews are a valuable method for gaining a deeper understanding of ‘what occurs’ in social contexts and how individuals make sense of themselves, their experiences, and their place in these situations. The objective of qualitative research is to delve deeply into a topic and give thorough insights into a phenomenon.

A semi-structured interview is a verbal exchange in which the interviewer uses questions to try to extract information from the subject. Semi-structured interviews provide participants with the option to explore subjects they believe are significant while allowing the interviewer to use a list of pre-prepared questions (Clifford et al., 2016). The advantage of the approach is the loose structure that can be prepared beforehand while allowing respondent to provide insights relevant to the study which may have otherwise been missed. In semi-structured interviews, participants are allowed to give freely their feelings and experiences surrounding the topic of interest and to allow for a comparison with the current literature on the topic (Silverman, 2016).

The interviews were conducted in semi-natural setting, within what Blaikie and Priest (2019) describe as meso-social phenomena, where the source of data are organizations with established goals. Individuals representing the organizations were

asked to report on their activities as they occurred in their natural settings. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews but one were conducted online. In accordance with Clifford et al. (2016), all respondents were offered their choice of online platform to conduct to interview to ensure familiarity with the software. As Clifford et al. (2016) further state, the main consideration is that the respondents feel comfortable. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Sampling

Sampling involves the process of selecting and recruiting a specific group of the organizations from which to collect data for a research project (Latham 2007). Researchers in qualitative research have to consider the purpose of the research, the type of participants or data they are studying, and the research setting. The choice of method will be determined by all three. Blaikie and Priest (2019) divides sampling methods along two dimensions: probability and non-probability, and single-stage and multi-stage. For the purpose of this study, a non-probability judgemental (purposive) sampling method was selected. The key characteristic of this method is that the researcher deliberately chooses the sample based on their own judgement, rather than using a random or probability-based method. The researcher may use specific criteria to select participants or data that will be most informative for the research question (Gentles et al., 2015).

Since purposeful sampling is not based on probability, it is less likely to be representative of the population, and the results may not generalize to other groups. It does, however, allow researchers to choose people or data that are especially relevant to the study issue and can give rich, comprehensive information. It is an effective method for investigating a limited, inaccessible, or specialized population, as well as when the researcher wants to select certain types of participants or data relevant to the research question (Gentles et al., 2015). According to Blaikie and Priest (2019), this method is optimal for selecting some cases of particular type in order to study some aspects of organizational behaviours. In such cases, the selection of the sample is a matter of judgement, which may be informed by theoretical consideration. According to Gentles et al. (2015), it is essential that whenever researchers use purposeful

sampling, the context and reasoning needs to be explained. Following this recommendation, the reasoning is provided in the respective articles.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and Validity encompass the objectivity and credibility of research (Silverman, 2016). Reliability of research is based on consistency, and consequently the possibility to replicate both the processes and the results of research (Leung, 2015). Validity in research is concerned with the accuracy of the findings (Cypress, 2017). Validity indicates how truthful the results are and to what extent the research is truly measuring what it claims to measure (Cypress, 2017). In qualitative research, a degree of variability is tolerated, however, studies should maintain similar dimensions (Leung, 2015). Qualitative research is rather interpretive as it seeks to evaluate personal experiences and opinions and it is more difficult to analyse, especially in comparison to quantitative data. Consequently, scholars have adopted alternative terms such as quality, rigour and trustworthiness (Golafshani, 2003). The interview guideline is provided in the appendix, and the study can be replicated in different settings to support generalization.

4.3.2 Content analysis

Content analysis is the systematic, impartial examination of communication features (Neuendorf, 2017). Berelson (1952, p. 18) described content analysis as a 'research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.' According to Berelson, traditional content analysis is the oldest, most important, and currently most extensively used form of study, and it has been employed in a broad range of topics, including gendered sports media coverage. In fact, 77 of the 88 scholarly publications analysed for the literature review in this study used content analysis.

The traditional method means 'breaking apart' content in order to obtain frequency counts of individual phrases or types of images used, or to analyse the amount of coverage given to a certain topic. Conclusions might then be formed regarding the amount of coverage given to certain individuals or the number of times specific derogatory comments were used about one side or another. The limitation of

this approach is that when content is divided in this manner, the context in which the content is used gets lost, and the real meaning and tone of expression might be obscured (Devereux, 2007). However, Krippendorff (2018) argues that quantification cannot be the defining principle for content analysis and that content is always qualitative to begin with.

In the gendered sports media study field, it was Delorme (2014) who pointed out the importance of context in content analysis. The majority of content analysis studying gendered media coverage compared the percentage of media coverage according to sex with to a standard (50%) or theoretically expected distribution (chi-square) (Delorme, 2014). Studies looking at gendered Olympics coverage often analysed the event as whole seeking parity. However, as Delorme pointed out, there are still sports and events women do not take part in and consequently, have less medal opportunities. According to Delorme, equal media coverage would ideally be proportional to each gender's representation in the Olympics but several variables have to be taken into consideration such as a) the global representation of each sex, b) the representation of each sex, c) the percentage of available events for each sex, and d) the representation of each sex in the number of events for which a given country fields a team=athlete need to be considered (Delorme, 2014, p. 128).

Another methodological challenge of content analysis lies in the differences between sports. Coverage of an athlete competing in multi-day events with qualification rounds will differ from that of those competing in one-time events. Additionally, several scholars have discovered considerable nationalistic disparities (e.g., Billings and Eastman 2003; Billings and Angelini 2007). Indeed, the Olympics Games incite significant patriotic fervour among populations (Vincent et al., 2002; Wensing & Bruce, 2003). While this can be considered in content analysis to some extent by the national representation of each sex, it omits the culturally and historically given preference and national popularity of some sports. All these aspects were, therefore, considered and discussed in the content analysis of NOC's social media content.

4.3.3 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a common qualitative method of analysing interviews that is both flexible and widely applicable across various research domains. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), the purpose of thematic analysis is to identify, analyse and report patterns in the collected data. The authors provide a comprehensive step-by-step guide for conducting thematic analysis starting from data familiarization, coding, and theme development to the final analysis and report writing. They highlight the critical role of the researcher's reflexivity throughout the process, encouraging researchers to engage deeply with the data and remain open to evolving interpretations.

Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis involves a six-phase guide: 1) Familiarizing oneself with the data through repeated reading and note-taking, 2) Generating initial codes across the data set, 3) Searching for themes by collating codes into potential themes, 4) Reviewing themes to ensure they work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, 5) Defining and naming themes with a clear narrative, and 6) Producing the report, weaving the analytic narrative with vivid data examples. The process involves a dynamic engagement with the data, starting from initial data immersion to the intricate process of coding and theme development. Researchers are encouraged to iteratively revisit the data and codes, refining themes to ensure they accurately represent the data set. This iterative process is crucial for achieving a nuanced understanding of the data, highlighting the importance of flexibility and reflexivity in qualitative analysis.

Themes and patterns of meaning within the data that are related to the research question were identified by employing inductive and theoretical thematic analysis. Theoretical thematic analysis is guided by existing theories or frameworks that inform the coding and theme development process. It starts with a specific theoretical lens and uses this to interpret the data, making it more deductive in nature. Inductive thematic analysis, conversely, is data-driven, with themes emerging from the data without the constraint of a pre-existing theoretical framework. This approach is more open and exploratory, allowing unexpected patterns and insights to emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). According to the authors, those two methods are commonly combined, as a theme can be considered something that captures the key idea related

to the research question and which signifies some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

4.4 Reflection – the role of a researcher

Reflexivity is essential in qualitative research (Broom et al., 2009). The researcher and the context of an interview play a significant role in the data collection and its interpretation. Several scholars have demonstrated that the personal background and gender of a qualitative researcher have a significant influence on the conduct of qualitative studies, methods, methodology and analysis (Arendell, 1997; Oakley, 2016) as each personal interaction includes a gendered context with cultural practices (Oakley, 1998). Gender, as a social construct, constantly orients us and is therefore inevitable in an interview. It influences our concepts of understanding as well as the questioning and justification of activities. The interview setting is no different; like any other interaction, it includes a gendered context and processes where interviewers and informants behave according to socio-cultural expectations including *femininity* and *masculinity* (Oakley, 1998). As such, researchers need to acknowledge participants' expressions of gender identity as they might determine how the story is being told and interpreted (Broom et al., 2009).

People's interactions are profoundly determined by sociocultural constructs which influence how individuals interact and discuss issues (Broom et al., 2009). Informants may figure out what 'sits well' with the interviewer and act accordingly during the interview (Broom et al., 2009). To arrange and conduct a successful interview, researchers are supposed to establish a friendly relationship. However, the informant must be seen to remain to some extent as an object under observation, therefore a balance must be established between the friendliness required to establish joint understanding and the detachment required to report on it (Oakley, 2016). On the other hand, researchers should not adopt an exploitative attitude and treat informants solely as a source of data (Oakley, 1981). Instead, Oakley suggests a flat or non-hierarchical approach is more beneficial as a certain trust and confidence in the

research and researcher is encouraging. If possible, we should establish a rapport as human beings with the goal of gaining scientific knowledge (Nett & Sjoberg, 1968).

However, this process is gendered, as individuals of the same gender expect to share certain experiences and compassion (DeVault, 1990). Women interviewing men find informants projecting their former experiences and issues on them (Broom et al., 2009), trying to prove their masculinity and negotiate their power position (Presser, 2005), or stating opinions reflecting ‘a deterministic model of gender differences’ to avoid appearing sexist (Williams & Heikes, 1993). Williams and Heikes (1993) describe this as a *social desirability bias* – the adjustment informants make in their description of reality so that it sounds more interesting, relatable, and *desirable*. This bias tends to occur in interviews, in which informants are particularly interested in the research topic or have an agenda (Jacobsson & Åkerström, 2013; Williams & Heikes, 1993). In such interviews, respondents tend to avoid critical or socially disagreeable opinions when they answer (Williams & Heikes, 1993).

The interviewer is often regarded as the more powerful one (Kvale, 2006) – she plans the interview, has an interview guide with prepared questions and will possess the recording of the interview for future analysis, and therefore enters the relationship in a dominant role. However, this power situation can become asymmetric, where the interviewer feels inferior to the informant. This can happen when there is a significant age difference, when the informant is a powerful member of the community or an organization, or the interviewer is inexperienced and fails to lead the interview (Jacobsson & Åkerström, 2013). For female researchers interviewing men, the urge of the subjects to exhibit or enact their heterosexual and dominating versions of masculinity is a major challenge, especially in countries with a strong hierarchical structure. Foremost, the female researcher struggles to gain an access to the male-dominated setting (Easterday et al., 1977).

According to Broom, Hand, and Tovey (2009), if researchers want to create high-quality analyses, they must first comprehend the spectrum of interpersonal interactions that might affect qualitative interview situations. Strong reflexivity and the context of data collection including their source should be part of the data collection

process (Presser, 2005). Researchers should reflect on ‘who asked the interview questions; to whom; in what contexts; what interview style(s) was used; and what dynamics emerged within (and across) interviews’ (Broom et al., 2009, p. 63). Mason (2002) sees this ‘active reflexivity’ as one of the essentials of qualitative research and stresses the importance of understanding the researcher’s role in the process and the subject’s own reactions to the same critical scrutiny.

Recognising this fact and my role as a young female researcher, I composed a self-reflection following each of the interviews. During a particular interview, I encountered an asymmetrical power dynamic where I perceived myself as being inferior to the informant. Nevertheless, this had no impact on the interview in terms of the information exchanged. After that particular interview, I also noted that I suspect that this informant may have been answering according to what ‘sits well.’ However, when I triangulated his answers with the content analysis, my suspicion was not confirmed. His answers correlated with the results of the analysis. This reflection and finding only highlights the importance and benefits of the mixed-method approach.

The idea of the neutrality of social science has been diminished. Interviewing is a process in which neither the influence of the researcher, nor the informant can be eliminated (Acker et al., 1983). However, the personality of the researcher does not prevent them from conducting a reliable study by interviewing. Qualitative interviews allow informants to express their positions on the researched issue, frame their responses regarding the context and develop a joint understanding (Williams & Heikes, 1993). Admitting the effects of an observer’s attributed status does not mean sacrificing objectivity and suggests that observation can be objective if the observer is also observed (Easterday et al., 1977).

Given the background of this research project and the methods used, the author’s stance as an ‘empathetic researcher’ and ‘conscientizer’ can be seen as both an advantage and a weakness of the study (Blaikie & Priest, 2019). I was entering the interviews as a researcher, however with an extensive background in social media management working for various sports organizations and brands. It could have been seen as a limitation as it could affect my objectivity, but also as an advantage as ‘only

by grasping the subjective meanings used by the social actors can their actions be understood' (Blaikie & Priest, 2019). The researcher's knowledge of the industry is necessary for understanding the professional language and working processes and consequently understanding and interpreting the phenomena.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the research methods that were utilized throughout this study. By doing so, I have stated the justification for the methods employed and how they are appropriate to my research utilizing Goffman's theoretical frameworks. I've explained the processes I used for both data collection and analysis. These decisions have been motivated by my desire to offer a more complex understanding of how women have been portrayed in the media throughout the Olympic movement and to offer conclusions that will be helpful to both academics and practitioners. It has been my objective throughout to follow the words of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 17): 'the function of sociology...is to reveal that which is hidden. In doing so, it can help minimise the symbolic violence within social relations.'

5. Main findings and conclusions

In this chapter, I will highlight the key results in respect of the main study topic. The different articles will present, support, and debate the findings in greater depth, but because each article is published as a separate text, it is not always clear how each one relates to the other and to the central study issue, the focus of this section is on the empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions of the articles as a whole.

For more than 40 years, researchers have studied how sportswomen are portrayed mostly through quantitative content analysis. Hans Erik Næss and I have reviewed this literature in a review published as a book chapter in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender Politics in Sport and Physical Activity*. While we recognize that this kind of research is important for documenting the continuous under-representation of women in sports media, the main contribution of the paper to academic knowledge is the evidence that the most used method to study women's portrayal is insufficient. The methods, analysis and interpretations of the data of the analysed articles varied extensively, which is something that has already been pointed out and criticized by Delorme (2014).

Furthermore, the approach is limited by its nature. Quantitative content analysis of gendered media coverage provides a quantified overview of the analysed coverage. In other words, it tells us how many minutes, articles or pictures featured sportswomen usually in one selected media source and, in this context, during the two weeks of Olympic Games. In some cases, this analysis also included, to some extent, how those sportswomen were portrayed in terms of adjectives or pictures used. What they don't tell us is why is it like that, who is responsible for it or what are the consequences of it. Most of this research is based on framing theory, agenda-setting and gatekeeping theory, but it is what it is – a theory that was empirically tested to a limited extent in this particular context. A re-examination of concepts and methods is therefore critical.

The available, yet limited, research previously showed that media producers are often unaware of the frames they employ (Billings, 2009) or unwilling to change their coverage of female athletes (Organista et al., 2021). Their beliefs are often based on the widespread misconception that female athletes are inferior, and so their

performances are less attractive to watch (Fink, 2015), despite the proofs that there is no difference in arousal when watching male or female sports (Angelini, 2008; Xu, 2019). The small fraction of sports media coverage given to female athletes gives a limited opportunity for spectators to enjoy women's sports (Xu, 2019). These findings dispel the delusion that sport is a solely masculine interest and highlight why a change in our perspective and approach is so much needed. Research that focuses solely on the published content omits these complexities and provides only limited understanding of the issue.

Considering these limitations, I employed a mixed-method research in my next study. The aim was to provide content analysis as well as to explore the production of the content. The main findings of this study, published as an article in a special issue of 'Frontiers in Sports and Active Living', were twofold. First, the quantitative analysis of several social media accounts conducted with a consideration of a wider context and aspects that can skew the dedication of posts to female or male athlete resulted in a 'fair' coverage. By 'fair', I mean a coverage that focussed either on participants (and correlates with number of athletes) or success (and correlates with medals won). Which and if any of these aspects are more important and therefore fairer is perhaps debatable. While Pierre de Coubertin claimed that it is more important to participate than to win, the contemporary economy of visibility benefits from winning (in marketing terms). Therefore, I consider both coverage focused more on participation and coverage more focused on winners as 'fair.'

Intentionally, I do not use the word 'equal'. What 'equality' in media coverage means is unclear. Previously, it was used by many scholars as 50/50 distribution of coverage. However, as we argue in the literature review, equal coverage in that sense is unrealistic and even undesirable, which also became evident in the second article. To provide a better understanding of the results of the content analysis, I interviewed personnel responsible for creating and publishing the analysed social media accounts. Corresponding with previous findings, the interviews showed personal and institutional (IOC's) influence on the published content. However, the respondents also explained how the nature of the Olympics, its sports and events programme and participants in it influence the coverage. These findings confirmed what we had

previously discussed in the book chapter and validated my reasoning as to why media coverage cannot be 'equal'.

However, even this mixed-method approach showed its limitations. The content analysis provided numbers of posts dedicated to female or male athletes and correlation with contextual aspects. By interviewing the personnel, I was able to provide a deeper understanding of the results. However, what the quantitative analysis did not show is how the athletes were portrayed or how they were spoken about. Neither did I explore what are the outcomes of such coverage, how are the portrayals interpreted by the audience or how is the portrayal perceived by the athletes concerned. While it was not my research focus nor is it within the scope of an article (or thesis, for that matter), I try to demonstrate how limited the perspective and understanding content analysis or even mixed-method research provides.

Even though this analysis yielded 'fair' results for female and male athletes and therefore diverges from the 'obligatory recitation' of women's under-representation (Bruce, 2016), it does not represent a wider change in media representation. It does show, however, that the values and initiatives of the IOC regarding gender equality and more specifically women's portrayal in media are effective, at least, within the Olympic movement, which was not always the case (Xu, 2019). While I cannot argue, on the basis of this study, whether these initiatives have any influence on news media, the IOC is the biggest sports organization and its gender equality values and communication channels have massive global reach, demonstrating that fair portrayal coverage is not only the right thing to do but also sets an example for other media to follow.

Considering the limitations of the previous studies (mine included), the purpose of the last article, "'Women are here, women are hungry': Exploring articulations of empowerment and feminism in digital spaces,' was to employ a new approach to analyse women's portrayal in the contemporary media landscape and explore IOC's initiatives to empower women. Reflecting on the various calls for different methods to study women's portrayal in media, I employed a feminist lens to explore female Olympians' portrayal in digital spaces. I took sportswomen's self-portrayal as a point

of departure, which has been done before and has provided us with an understanding of sportswomen's self-portrayal habits on social media, but I extended the analysis to a broader digital space and included the portrayal of the selected athletes in various media as well. This allowed me to 'connect the dots' and provide a more nuanced picture of athletes' self-presentation. This allowed me to provide a deeper comprehension of the complexities surrounding female athletes' portrayal and provide insight into how sportswomen navigate media landscapes for feminist expression and empowerment. Adopting a holistic methodology, this research presents a comprehensive view of sportswomen's representation across various media sources, addressing past limitations.

To be more specific, while one specific social media account might give us a certain impression of how the athlete presents herself, by including other social media accounts, athletes' statements, and their coverage in news media, I was able to better understand their portrayal choices and follow how they influence their portrayal in media. Furthermore, unlike previous research which included certain criteria on whom to include in the study, which naturally resulted in a limited group of athletes with priority given to the most successful ones, I consciously drew on a more diverse sample including both the most popular athletes and the lesser known. This helped me to demonstrate how complex the current media landscape is, how female athletes navigate these spaces, and how feminism forms it. However, it comes with limitations – it is not based on a representative sample and the results cannot be generalized or quantified.

This highlights the continued need for further exploration. This thesis not only contributes to the existing body of knowledge but also encourages a re-evaluation of how gender is conceptualized within sports media studies. Questioning established theories and advocating a more inclusive and adaptable perspective steers us toward new avenues of inquiry.

5.1 Future research

This collection of three various studies represents the current state of the research field. On one side, there is a continuous need to document and report on the state of media coverage of female athletes, on the other we, researchers, need to be aware and careful about the limitations of these studies and search for other methods and concepts – not to replace the ‘traditional’ ones but to broaden our understanding, reflect on the ever-changing media landscapes and capture IOC’s and sportswomen’s role in it. Therefore, I have the following suggestions for future research:

5.1.1 Beyond media coverage

Scholars should delve beyond content analysis to discover strategies to highlight the human components of Olympic media, as media material is only the outcome of Olympic media coverage. With the majority of gendered media research of the Olympics being concerned with published content, other areas such as media audiences, content producers, athletes’ self-presentation and relationships with media are being largely omitted from the contemporary literature. While examining media content is still relevant, researchers should also be concerned with the management of media. By focusing on various stakeholder groups, Olympic media research can advance from a descriptive account to a more in-depth analysis, with results that are helpful for both practitioners and theorists working in this field. Content analyses are helpful in gaining a basic knowledge, but for researchers to make significant contributions, they must go on to a next stage that combines new approaches (Wenner, 2014). Deeper meanings and alternative viewpoints of Olympic media material can be uncovered using research methods such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, ethnographies, auto-ethnographies, and netnographies (Geurin & Naraine, 2020). Also, mixing these methods with content analysis proved to be useful.

This suggestion also relates to the commonly used theoretical frameworks. We used framing theory, agenda-setting and gatekeeping theory to interpret the findings of content analysis but it is time to expand our research scope and test these theories in practice. By doing so, we could gain a better understanding of 1) the effects of gendered coverage on audiences, 2) the processes behind agenda-setting and 3) the

reasons for gatekeeping. These findings would provide useful implications to inform social change.

5.1.2 Diversification of Research Context

This suggestion pertains to the origin of the content. Despite the digitalization of media and the shift in what represents media, scholars continue to analyse and generalize knowledge about women's representation based on traditional media like print and television. More diverse sources of media need to be considered. As demonstrated in this thesis, analysis of other sources may provide different findings from what we have taken for granted for the last few decades. The media environment is changing and our research approach needs to change with it.

Furthermore, diversification of the analysed content is needed. Interest in Winter Olympic Games is lower than that in the summer edition to begin with, but the Paralympics, Youth Olympics and IOCs' other events are entirely missing from the current literature. The level of media coverage given to these events can have far-reaching societal effects on topics like young people's attitudes toward, and engagement with, sports, the acceptance of those with mental and physical disabilities, and the prevalence of social media consumption (Geurin & Naraine, 2020).

The geographical scope is also limited. Analysing three European countries, I provided a more diverse study than most. More cross-national comparatives can provide an insight into how culture and nationality shape media consumption around the world. In addition, academics need to keep finding new ways to broaden the Olympic Games' settings and reflect on its global reach and popularity.

5.1.3 New Concepts

As it has been argued in many places in this thesis, content analysis of a particular platform has methodological limitations because media content is networked and shared across several stakeholders (Antunovic, 2022). We, scholars, analyse media in a way that does not align with either the ways in which audiences consume it or the ways in which ideas spread. In order to fully capture the interplay of production,

visibility, and consumption, we must think about mixed-methods approaches or more flexible methodologies.

Digitalization and the redefinition of what media content is and who media producers are brings us to new questions. We need to ask questions about the labour behind social media presence. What is the purpose and who benefits in the economy of visibility? Are social media transformative for women and marginalized groups, as many like to believe? Why do some digital and social media represent an improvement while others continue to be entrenched in hegemonic norms? The media environment has changed drastically. Not only is it more diverse in terms of media sources (news, TV, blogs, social media, etc) but new content producers and stakeholders such the IOC or athletes play a more important role than ever.

The understanding of the social construct of sport provided by these platforms is crucial. Deconstructing the ways that power functions in networked environments and uncovering structural issues are both key functions of sociological research. Although analysing content is vital, we need to look for new ways to explore the psychological, cultural, and political ramifications of the media landscape's structural shifts.

Source of data

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1. Appendixes

1.1 Informed Consent

Are you interested in taking part in the research project 'Gender in the making: Social media coverage of the 2020 Olympic Games'?

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to *investigate* what influence gender portrayal on social media of the National Olympic Committees (NOC). In this letter I will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

The goal of this research is to explore decisions and processes that influence gender portrayal on social media. Consequently, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of the role of sport organizations' impact on gender equality through media outlets. This project is part of a doctoral thesis.

Who is responsible for the research project?

Kristiania University College is the institution responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?

You were selected before you work for the media department in the National Olympic Committee.

What does participation involve for you?

If you chose to take part in the project, this will involve that you will be interviewed. Interview will take approx. 30 - 45 minutes. The interview includes questions about your work and daily tasks covering the Olympics. Your answers will be recorded digitally.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous unless you chose otherwise. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw. It will not anyhow affect your employment in the National Olympic Committee.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

Only the collector and her supervisors (Hans Erik Næss – Kristiania University College, and Lars Arve Røssland – University of Bergen) will have access to your personal data.

Collected data will be anonymized. Participants will not be recognizable in publications.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The project is scheduled to end in December 2021. Personal data will not be stored any longer.

Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with University of Bergen, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- University of Bergen via Aneta Grabmüllerová
- Our Data Protection Officer: Janecke Helene Veim
- NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS, by email: (personvertjenester@nsd.no) or by telephone: +47 55 58 21 17.

Yours sincerely,

Aneta Grabmüllerová
Project Leader

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project 'Gender in the making: Social media coverage of the 2020 Olympic Games' and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- to participate in an interview
- for information about me/myself to be published in a way that I can be recognised by name or my position within the organization

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. December 2021

(Signed by participant, date)

1.2 Interview guide

Warm-up questions:

1. What is your job title at the NOC?
2. What kind of work are you responsible for?
3. How long have been worked at the NOC?
4. Before working in the NOC, what kind of work and studies did you do?

General decision-making process:

5. What is the social media you use? Is there a one you would consider as the main one?
6. Could you describe your daily routine at the NOC?
7. (What is the process behind the content published on social media of the NOC?)
8. Who makes the decisions about what to cover? What is your role in that process? Who decides on how to 'tell the story'?
9. How do you select videos, news, and original series in practices?
10. What are the criteria (newsworthiness, performance, popularity etc.) in selecting news/videos/pictures?
11. What factors do you concern (number of likes, engagement, popularity, tradition etc.)?
12. What sources of video and pictures do you have?
13. What do you consider when selecting pictures/videos covering female athletes? Do you have any policy/guidelines?
14. The IOC published portrayal guidelines for gender balanced representation. Is it something you consider when creating content?
15. They talk about the issues of female athletes' portrayal in traditional media. Do you think it's different on social media? Is it something you reflect in your work?
16. **Market demand**
 1. Does the social media of the NOC have a targeted audience? If yes, what are the demographics of the targeted group(s)? Why so?
 2. What do you think interests your targeted audiences? Why do you think so?

The gender scenario

3. What amount of women's coverage do you think is ideal?

The number of women in sports institutions

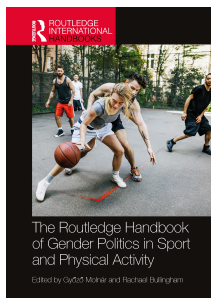
4. What is the proportion of female employees at the NOC media department?
5. Do you think that the biological sex of employees makes a difference in the contents production of the NOC? Both in your case and in general?
6. Do you think it is necessary to hire more women employees at the NOC?

Closing questions

7. To what extent do you think the NOC fulfil its promises in promoting gender equality?
8. Is there anything that prevents you from pursuing gender equality in your media coverage?
9. What do you think could improve and increase media coverage of women's sports? (In general)

1.3 Article 1

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The Routledge Handbook of Gender Politics in Sport and Physical Activity

Gyz Molnár, Rachael Bullingham

Gender Equality, Sport Media and the Olympics, 1984–2018

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2

Gender Equality, Sport Media and the Olympics, 1984–2018

An Overview

Aneta Grabmüllerova and Hans Erik Næss

Introduction

In 1935, Pierre de Coubertin – the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) – claimed that women’s roles at the Olympic Games ‘should be above all to crown the victors’ (Coubertin and Müller, 2000, p. 583). This idea of the Olympic competitions as a male domain would remain largely unchallenged until the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, which ‘provided it with a new cultural template that would keep the Olympics relevant in the twenty-first century’ (Llewellyn et al., 2015, p. 1). This template included a renewed focus on media, commercialization and female athletes. Even though only 1,700 of the 7,500 athletes at the 1984 Olympics were female, and only 73 of the 226 events were for women (Vecsey, 1984), it still represented a shift in the gender patterns of mega-events (Llewellyn et al., 2015). This shift was subsequently encouraged by the IOC’s decision that any new sport in the Olympics must include women in 1991 (Koenigsberger, 2017). Subsequently, a variety of commissions to support women’s participation were introduced, including the IOC Gender Equality Review Project in 2017 (IOC, 2018a). Consequently, the number of female participants in the Olympics has grown steadily. While women represented only 21% of the participants in the 1976 Games, that proportion increased to 34% at the 1996 Atlanta Games before reaching 45% in the 2016 Rio Olympics (Nunes, 2019).

While the increase in female athletes’ Olympic mass media coverage was observed between 1984 and 2018, the statistics on gender ratio reveal only part of the story. This chapter, therefore, offers a review of research linking media, the Olympic Games and gender equality. It opens with a brief explanation of the data and methods underpinning this review and offers three chronologically ordered sections on media and gender representation in the Olympics. Due to the dramaturgical opportunities sports offer media to exploit, we focus on findings related to ‘what facts to include, what kind of story to tell, what kind of wording to use to describe the event and the athlete, and what pictures to use in order to underline the message’ (Hartmann-Tews, 2019, p. 268). Finally, a brief discussion of five key patterns in these findings precedes our summary of the practical implications and further research directions of this review.

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Data and methods

Data for this chapter was gathered through the Oria search engine, which contains 70 international and Norwegian scientific databases, including Web of Science, and resources of the Olympic World Library in Lausanne, Switzerland. From April 2020 to January 2021, we searched those databases and resources for documentation on the development of the IOC's gender equality initiatives and gender-related research on media portrayal since the 1984 Olympics till the 2018 Winter Olympics. By using English search keywords such as 'media', 'coverage', 'portrayal', 'Olympic(s)' and 'gender', we accumulated an English-based sample of 88 articles. As mediatization processes and gender equality initiatives in sport go conjointly in the selected period (e.g., Bruce, 2013; Djerf-Pierre, 2011), we chose to conduct a descriptive review of sources identified to explore existing interpretable patterns in the body of information (Paré et al., 2015). In contrast to other review forms, such as integrative (Torraco, 2005) and systematic (Xiao and Watson, 2019), the benefit of a descriptive review is its overview of how research has addressed the construction of gender in Olympic media coverage across a range of disciplines (e.g., sociology, sport management, gender studies, communication and media studies). This form of review, therefore, contributes to discussion about why some forms of representation and stereotypes persist and others do not, in a way which is less bound by the disciplinary traditions which are necessary to consider, for example, in a systematic review. Finally, drawing upon the analytic dualism, mentioned by Loy et al. (2009), between equity and legitimacy, our overview is presented as a timeline with an emphasis on how sportswomen have struggled to achieve equality with their male counterparts ('equity') and to overcome stereotypes related to their participation ('legitimacy').

1984–1996: Almost exclusive male dominance

In this period, most of the research was concentrated on the American television company NBC, as it became the exclusive broadcaster of the Olympics in the USA from 1988 onwards (Armour, 2014). At this time, men competed in nearly twice as many events and, in terms of *equity*, received more coverage and name mentions (Eastman and Billings, 1999). NBC also used more male experts, and most announcers were men (Tuggle and Owen, 1999). Positively, in the Australian TV, the amount of airtime for the 1988 and 1992 Olympics was distributed proportionally to the number of men and women on the national team, and interestingly, the most watched sports (swimming, gymnastics and track and field) were the ones that offered the most gender-equal representation (Toohey, 1997).

Two longitudinal studies showed that until the 1980s, sportswomen were inadequately portrayed in the Olympic coverage (King, 2007; Urquhart and Crossman, 1999), but with their increasing participation, the media attention devoted to them increased as well (Pfister, 1987). Women became well represented in the coverage of gender-appropriate sports (Vincent et al., 2003), and men remained overrepresented in sports that emphasize strength, endurance and risk (Lee, 1992). These sports are perceived by the society as more masculine, while sports that require aesthetics are seen as feminine. This is a result of 'gendertyping', which is a process in the social practise of gender that influences the segregation of sports (Sobal and Milgrim, 2019). In terms of *legitimacy*, the trend was to focus on other gender differences such as first-name calling (Messner et al., 1993) or sexualization (Higgs et al., 2003). Sportswomen also received more stereotypical comments and remarks about their appearance (Shields et al., 2004). Even though media started to notice female athletes and devote more airtime to them, their sporting achievements were still under communicated.

1996–2006: The more (sportswomen), the merrier (coverage)

During the 2000 Summer Olympics, it seemed that the issue around *equity* of female vs male athletes was starting to even out with fairer depiction of gender balance in athletes' name mentions. Yet, NBC devoted more prime-time coverage to men (Billings and Eastman, 2002), while most of the coverage of sportswomen remained confined to feminine sports only (Tuggle et al., 2002). Male announcers, speakers and experts also continued to dominate mass media platforms (Capranica and Aversa, 2002).

Confirming this trend, female athletes received greater headline coverage in the British news during the 2004 Summer Olympics (King, 2007) and outnumbered males in the Australian News Online (Jones, 2006). Bruce et al. (2010) performed a content analysis of the 2004 Olympics coverage across 18 countries. The results showed that women generally received less coverage than their male counterparts; however, in most cases, the amount was related to their participation and/or to success. Similarly, NBC prime-time coverage of the 2004 Olympics mirrored men's greater participation and medal success and, as result, they received the majority of the coverage time and name mentions (Billings, 2008). Also, Italian television coverage was closely related to the proportion of Italian athletes in 2000 (Capranica and Aversa, 2002), and national success overrode gender in 2004 (Capranica et al., 2008). However, NBC persisted in employing fewer female journalists (Tuggle et al., 2007). British media continued to trivialize female athletes by depicting them only in feminine sports and located female athletic achievements in the latter pages of the sports section (King, 2007). At this point, it is interesting to note that while the media coverage of the Summer Olympics, in general, began including sportswomen more equitably, the coverage of Winter Olympics did not display any change in longitudinal terms and women still remained as underrepresented as in previous iterations (Billings and Eastman, 2003).

At the same time as the gender patterning of media coverage remained the same, national differences began to occur. In terms of *legitimacy*, studies of newspapers in European countries (Belgium, Italy, Denmark, France, Sweden and Finland) concluded with fair representation of sportswomen corresponding with their participation and number of events (Capranica et al., 2005; Laine, 2016). However, while in Sweden, women were portrayed as serious athletes, Finnish newspapers trivialized and sexualized their sportswomen. In a similar vein, analysis of NBC's coverage of ice-hockey revealed that men are often referred to as role models for women players who are often compared to them (Poniatowski and Hardin, 2012). Furthermore, female athletes continued to be characterized according to their domestic roles and presumed emotional states (Daddario and Wigley, 2007). Billings (2007) revealed that associating women with emotions and domestic roles happens more frequently in sports that are based on aesthetic performances which are judged by individuals (e.g., gymnastics) than in sports with objective assessment (e.g., track and field).

2008–2018: New media, new vistas?

The *equity* of female athletes and women's sports did not initially change much in traditional mass media outlets in this period. Male athletes received more prime-time in the NBC coverage of the 2008 Olympics (Davis and Tuggle, 2012), more performance descriptors in Slovenian coverage (Ličen and Billings, 2013) and the majority of the stories in Australian, British, Canadian and American online news (Jones, 2013). Furthermore, in traditional media, female athletes remained underrepresented in Serbia (Stojiljković et al., 2020), Turkey (Ayvazoglu, 2017), Sweden (Hedenborg, 2013), Great Britain, USA, Australia, Brazil, China and Kenya

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(Eagleman et al., 2014). Interestingly, at the same time, NBC devoted more time to women's beach volleyball despite the fact that both American men and women won gold medals (Smith and Bissell, 2014).

In terms of *legitimacy*, women were less likely to be depicted in action. Instead, the attention remained on their roles as wives and mothers (Jones, 2013). A significant portion of the media coverage remained ambivalent, and sportswomen were stereotyped, infantilized, genderized and sexualized (Xavier, 2014). For example, men's gymnastics was described in the US news in more technical language while women's coverage focused on their physical appearance (Eagleman, 2015). Only a French newspaper, *L'Equipe*, placed emphasis in their coverage on success rather than gender (Delorme and Testard, 2015).

Despite these setbacks from a gender equality perspective, both equity and legitimacy issues related to female athletes were challenged at the 2012 London Olympics (Arth et al., 2018; Boykoff and Yasuoka, 2015). For the first time, NBC devoted more airtime and name mentions to women (Billings et al., 2014). An improvement was also noticed in media coverage of sportswomen competing in more masculine sports (Delorme and Testard, 2015). For the first time in the history of the Winter Olympics, women were featured more prominently than men during NBC's broadcast in 2014 (MacArthur et al., 2016). Also, in the two following Olympics in 2016 and 2018, NBC continued to increase airtime for women's sports (Billings and Angelini, 2019; Coche and Tuggle, 2017). Yet, a pattern of national preferences persists. For instance, Chinese broadcasts devoted more coverage to male athletes in three most prominent winter sports in China despite women's greater success (Xu et al., 2019), and its gymnastic coverage gave men more airtime and name mentions even during women's events (Xu et al., 2018).

A key characteristic of this era was the emergence and growing influence of social media, such as Twitter (launched in 2006) and Facebook (launched in 2007). Consequently, we can observe a shift in academic research and new opportunities for fairer gender representation in sport. The ramifications of this shift, however, remained insignificant until around 2016. Nevertheless, towards the end of this era, social media outlets have transformed sports coverage into an interpersonal, intercultural and global public domain (Creedon, 2014), exposing many of the offensive remarks made by television commentators and newspaper headlines (Villalon and Weiller-Abels, 2018). With the rapid development of social media, Olympians gained their own voice, and their communication came under extensive scrutiny. Again, the impression is mixed. Litchfield and Kavanagh (2019) analysed social media accounts of the Australian team and Team GB. Despite some prevailing stereotypes, the British coverage offered fair representations of gender, but Australian women remained underrepresented on the Australian Olympic Team Twitter site (@AUSOlympicTeam). Xu (2019) analysed gender portrayal in the online Olympic Channel, an over-the-top Internet television operated by the IOC, over 16 months from 2016 to 2018, revealing that 60.1% of pictures of news stories were devoted to men with greater focus on masculine sports, and that women only received 39.9% of the coverage. Despite the IOC's efforts to enhance the gender representation, sportswomen continue to be underrepresented not only in media but also in IOC's own communication.

Discussion

Our examination of existing research reveals a gradual increase and a more balanced portrayal both in terms of equity and legitimacy of sportswomen's coverage in the Olympics between 1984 and 2018. However, the development is cluttered with reservations, and research

Gender Equality, Sport Media and the Olympics

findings are sometimes contradictory. For example, Arth et al. (2018) claimed that women received more coverage than men for the first time during the Winter Olympics in 2018, but MacArthur et al. (2016) claimed that this had already happened in 2014. Consequently, the development in women's media portrayal can be and has been interpreted in different ways, which means that our findings on the Olympics (1984–2018) represent gender-significant portrayal patterns rather than an exhaustive list of themes and development trajectories. Below we discuss five mass media portrayal patterns that are essential in unfolding the gender-media-sport interconnection.

The first pattern centres around the development of media coverage of Olympic sports and is characterized by *ambivalence* as it 'incorporates representations that oscillate between valorizing female sporting prowess and undermining or trivializing it' (Bruce, 2013, p. 130). As an example of this ambivalence, an Australian online news coverage study of the domestic Sydney 2000 Olympics indicates an increase in the proportion of coverage dedicated to female athletes and the range of sports. However, it notes the retention of stereotyping of female athletes as emotionally vulnerable and dependent adolescents (Jones, 2004). Metcalfe (2019) analysed how such ambivalent coverage is interpreted and understood by the audience. All interviewees, but one, said that they expected male athletes to receive more coverage. Since unconsciously accepting social signals fails to challenge masculine hegemony, media-generated gender stereotypes prove to be detrimental for many young people (Metcalfe, 2019).

The second pattern concerns *market demand*. While the coverage of sportswomen and sportsmen competing in different sports will differ and the sports media industry remains men's territory, both male and female journalists argue that the media are responding to audience interests (LaVoi et al., 2019; O'Neill and Mulready, 2015). Evidently, sports media often decide with reference to only their own opinion what will appeal to an audience that they see as mainly male (Dashper, 2018; Villalon and Weiller-Abels, 2018), even though women spend similar amounts of time watching the Olympics (Tang and Cooper, 2012). The issue with Olympic broadcasting appears to be that the rights often belong to one media company for decades (e.g., NBC in the USA) and the audience has no choice but to follow the Olympics through their lens. The majority of the audience watches the Olympics in long, continuous segments, not selectively. Consequently, they are 'ultimately becoming immersed in the frames employed by NBC gatekeepers' (Billings and Eastman, 2003, p. 583), who are largely men (Billings, 2009).

The third pattern regards the *production of content*. Previous research identifies the decision-making processes in editorial sports departments as mainly masculine (Hardin, 2013). Billings (2009) found that the NBC Olympic producers feel they set a fair agenda; however, content analysis proved otherwise. Xu's (2019) study with the Olympic Channel personnel revealed that individuals have substantial impact while claiming considerable agency and autonomy, with their own personality and perspective influencing production, challenging the prevalent ideology of 'gender neutrality' in sports newsrooms. Therefore, the lack of knowledge of women's sports might lead to a more generic and plain coverage (Dashper, 2018). According to O'Neill and Mulready (2015), who interviewed UK journalists during the 2012 Olympics, sport organizations play an important role in the co-creation of sports coverage. The respondents in their study criticized sport governing bodies for not utilizing their female athletes in a way which promoted women's sport.

The fourth pattern concerns the role of *nationalism and success*. The strong nationalistic fervour ignited by the Olympics seems in some instances to override gender bias (Capranica et al., 2005; Wensing and Bruce, 2003). The amount of coverage dedicated to certain sports and events corresponds with national medal expectancies, success and participation, and,

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therefore, gender may not be the most crucial matter for media coverage of mega events (Billings and Angelini, 2019; Capranica et al., 2005; Delorme, 2014, p. 201; Jakubowska, 2017; Markula et al., 2010; Toohey, 1997; Wehden and Schröder, 2019). But medal success is not the only indicator (Hedenborg, 2013; Pfister, 2010). Some sports are also more complex than others and have, as a result of their rules and time limits, a structural advantage that yields greater coverage times (Wehden and Schröder, 2019). For example, while some events last seconds (e.g., sprint swimming or track and field), others stretch over longer timeframes (e.g., tennis, ice-hockey). Related to this, the cultural background must be considered as regional differences in media coverage depend on local sport preferences (Capranica et al., 2005). For example, in the case of snowboarding, the amount of viewing of men's or women's events directly influenced the perceptions of the sport as either more masculine or more feminine (Jones and Greer, 2012).

The fifth pattern concerns *methodology*. Research often looks at the coverage of the Olympics as whole, seeking parity, while there are sports and events women did not take part in. Therefore, the same amount of coverage devoted to female and male can hardly be expected. Delorme (2014) re-analysed 18 academic articles that investigated coverage of female and male athletes at Summer Olympics from 1984 to 2008 and revealed methodological irregularity and lack of consideration of other factors affecting the coverage. He suggests that the number of participants and events on both international and national level should be considered when quantitatively analysing media coverage. Considering this view, women were underrepresented in 24.24% of cases. Furthermore, Eastman and Billings (1999) suggested that only medal events attract viewers and, therefore, there should be parity in name mentions. However, in the analysed Olympics, women won the most medals despite their lower participation on the US team. Based on this logic, women should have received more coverage but that was not the case. For that reason, not only participation but other aspects such as nationalism, success and culture need to be considered in studies of gender in the Olympics before drawing any conclusion.

Conclusion

Our review of research on gender equality, sport media and the Olympics from 1984 to 2018 reveals that while male and female athletes in the Olympics have become nearly equal in participation ('equity'), there are still great differences in their respective media coverage ('legitimacy'). Although both quantitative and qualitative sources point towards less gender-based stereotyping and prejudice, contradictory aspects of this development also generate new questions, especially around what factors cause progress or setbacks when it comes to gender representation in sport media. Specifically, there is one main question that is worth pondering upon: is the progress we have observed so far the effect of the IOC's own initiatives? To answer such question, special attention should be given to the IOC Gender Equality Review Project (IOC, 2018a), mentioned in the introduction. It contains 25 action-oriented recommendations within five themes, among them some related to 'Portrayal' – i.e., balanced representation of both genders, communications partnerships and organizing committees. So far, its actions have had limited effect, and research has shown that the IOC struggles with translating its goals into action (Matthews et al., 2019). For researchers as well as the IOC, it is, therefore, pertinent to consider the entire media coverage process, including the gender ideologies of media production and the IOC's role and not only to evaluate the results and theorize about the effect it can have on female athletes.

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1.4 Article 2



Social Media and the Olympics: A Chance for Improving Gender Equality

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The purpose of this paper is to explore whether social media content by the National Olympic Committees (NOC) during the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games strengthens or weakens the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) gender equality ambitions. As the media play an important role in creating the impressions that people cherish during and after the Olympics, the IOC has since the 1990s increased its responsibility for fair media portrayal of athletes and competitions by revising its own media production. In the past decade, this most notably concerns social media. Not only has it become an inseparable part of global sports consumption, but it is also seen as a tool for changing the biased and stereotypical portrayal of female athletes in news media, even though male and female athletes have become nearly equal in numbers of participants. Studies of media production and equality-informed decisions are, however, rare in sport. Drawing upon a quantitative analysis of social media accounts of three National Olympic Committees (NOC) (Norway, Czech Republic and Switzerland) and qualitative in-depth interviews with key informants—NOCs' and European Olympic Committee's (EOC) social media personnel—this study therefore explored the decisions and processes that influenced gender portrayal during the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Findings of the study showed that media personnel have a significant influence on gender portrayal in their respective communication channels. In contrast to news media, they were aware of the frames they apply, and they applied them in alignment with the Olympic values. Consequently, they set a fairer agenda for both male and female athletes and strengthened the gender equality mission of the IOC.

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the invention of sport, women have been in a minority in terms of participation, and their underrepresentation, marginalization and repression has been mirrored in media coverage. Some of the reasons for this are that traditional media coverage is based on values that reproduce traditional conceptions of gender and national identity (Crossan et al., 2021) and it has been oblivious to female athletes (Fink, 2015). Only women's success in mega-sport events such as the Olympic Games has disrupted this practice (Arth et al., 2018). Every other year, billions of eyes are on the biggest sporting event in the world, observing how national pride and values at times override gender (Billings and Angelini, 2007).

With the advent of digital media in the previous decade, sports coverage evolved into an interpersonal, multicultural, and worldwide public realm (Creedon, 2014). Some scholars expected that this development would result in more equitable coverage for female athletes (LaVoi et al., 2019). However, initial studies suggest that old patterns of media representation are being reproduced (LaVoi and Calhoun, 2014; Adá-Lameiras and Rodríguez-Castro, 2021). To rectify this flaw, the IOC has been transformed into a large producer, rather than a conveyor, of media content. This allows them to create their own image rather than rely on news media. It operates the Olympic Channel, an over-the-top Internet television service, and several social media accounts with millions of followers. For example, on Instagram the IOC is followed by an audience of 5.2 million users. Similarly, each of the National Olympic Committees (NOC) runs its own account. How are these media outlets used for promoting the IOC's vision for increased gender equality? Recently, the IOC updated their Portrayal Guidelines for gender balanced representation (IOC, 2014) and its partnership with UN women resulted in a major review project on gender equality. The result of this project are 25 action-oriented recommendations, with three focusing on balanced portrayal of both genders.

Due to the organizational commitment of the 206 NOCs and the European Olympic Committee (EOC) to support IOC's policies and be loyal to the latter's visions, they represent an important intermediary with national audiences. But how do NOCs translate this commitment in terms of producing gender-balanced content on social media? Sports coverage has been described as a hierarchical institution dominated by men with minimum coverage dedicated to female athletes (Cooky et al., 2015). To some extent, this has been caused by the patriarchal environment and hegemonic values in sports newsrooms (Hardin and Shain, 2005). Previous research revealed that journalists are influenced by their personal attitudes to female sport (Organista et al., 2021) and gender distribution of produced news is based on those attitudes (Billings, 2009). Furthermore, they justify women's underrepresentation by their masculine audience assumptions (Dashper, 2018).

Media research has also massively focused on newspapers coverage despite the prevalence of digital media formats (Geurin and Naraine, 2020). Against this backdrop this article contributes to the field by addressing an underexplored issue. Whereas there are many studies of media coverage related to the Olympics (Grabmüllerová and Næss, 2022) only a handful of studies focus on the production of Olympic media content. The research questions in this article are, consequently, threefold:

- What is the gender distribution in social media posts on NOCs' Instagram's accounts?
- Does the number of posts devoted to men and women on social media of Norwegian, Czech and Swiss NOCs correspond with participation and performance?
- How is the commitment of the Olympic movement to gender equality and women's empowerment reflected in NOCs' social media communication?

To answer these questions, this article couples theoretical perspectives on agenda setting and framing decisions with a mixed-methods approach based on social media content analysis

and semi-structured interviews. The analysis demonstrated how the commitment of the Olympic movement to gender equality and women's empowerment are reflected in their social media communication. The main findings show that personal influence had a significant influence on the provided content. However, unlike the news media (Organista et al., 2021), the media personnel identified themselves with the Olympic values and commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment. Consequently, it resulted in fairer portrayal of female athletes. This demonstrated how important a role organizational culture plays, a finding that can serve as a guide to news media houses that aim to improve gender equality in sports media coverage.

Theoretical Framework

In recent years, a vast and expanding framing-theory literature has arisen from a variety of disciplines (Borah, 2011). Its application in media and communication studies has emerged from sociological perspective and is now perceived as a construct of social reality. On the one hand, media frames reality in a way that is comprehensible and predictable (McQuail, 2010). On the other hand, the audience has its own individual frames that help them to process information (Entman, 1993). Media producers may be influenced by social-structural, organizational or individual values and beliefs that leads them to select some aspects of perceived reality in order to make them more salient in communication (Entman, 1993). At the media level, frames then facilitate how media producers organize big amounts of information and deliver them to audiences. They can employ certain linguistic choices and highlight some aspects of reality while excluding others and/or impose a causal theme on their stories (Scheufele, 1999). Framing is a crucial aspect in understanding how the media establish relevance and importance (Fink and Kensicki, 2002).

Together with agenda setting, framing theory explains what role media plays in creation of public meaning. While framing theory describes how information is communicated, agenda setting theory is concerned with what topics are given space in media and to what extent. Agenda setting is based on the strong connection between the importance that mass media put on certain issues and the significance given to these issues by mass audiences (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). In this way, media can systematically affect how the audience perceives events (Price et al., 1997). Both theories have been widely used by scholars examining Olympic media coverage (Billings and Eastman, 2003; Billings et al., 2010; Eagleman, 2015) and sport media (Wensing and Bruce, 2003; Eagleman, 2011). In the past decades, scholars have mostly examined media frames and the consequences of framing but very little research has been dedicated to how are these frames produced (Carragee and Roefs, 2004; Borah, 2011). As Scheufele (Scheufele, 1999) noted, framing is a complex process involving frame (agenda) building, frame setting, individual-level effects of framing; and a link between individual frames and media frames. Geurin and Naraine (Geurin and Naraine, 2020) point out the lack of research concerned with the 'human elements of Olympic media' as there is a lack of examination of social actors, including politicians, organizations and social movements who determine and influence media creation. This is therefore a gap that needs to be filled, especially if

we consider that ‘media has strong, long-term effects on audiences, based on the ubiquitous and consonant stream of messages they present to audiences’ (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007, p. 10). Ambivalent sports media coverage of female athletes, as defined by Duncan and Hasbrook (Duncan and Hasbrook, 1988), has a negative consequence on public meaning and society and continues to obstruct the advancement of women’s sport. As Bruce (Bruce, 2013) further develops, media coverage of sport matters because it tells us who and what is important, and in what way.

To connect the theoretical framework with the case presented in this study, gatekeeping theory helps explore how and why certain pieces of information pass through so-called gates. Gatekeeping is a process of ‘selecting, producing, transmitting, and shaping information’ that occurs on multiple levels in various networks of people who produce sports media (Creedon, 2014, p. 17). It’s the gatekeepers who decide who and what is valued, relevant and interesting enough to be given attention (LaVoi et al., 2019). The common lack of knowledge of women’s sports might cause more generic and plain coverage (Dashper, 2018; Xu, 2019) and therefore reinforce the male domination of sports media production and consumption. Hence, it is crucial to further investigate the role of those actors in framing processes.

Literature Review

Scholars continually report on sportswomen’s underrepresentation in news media (Mesner et al., 1993; Eastman and Billings, 1999; Eagleman, 2015; Litchfield and Kavanagh, 2019). Their findings indicate that female athletes receive less airtime (Eastman and Billings, 1999; Billings, 2007, 2008) and less space in newspapers (Duncan, 1990; Lee, 1992; Pratt et al., 2008). Gender portrayal is also related to the gender of the producer (Schoch, 2013), to the cultural repertoires (Benson and Saguy, 2005) and the organizational environment (Silcock, 2002; Pfister, 2010). Furthermore, some have suggested that sports coverage of female and male athletes is not (only) affected by gender but other aspects such their percentage participation (Delorme, 2014), success (Bruce et al., 2010), nationalism, culture (Capranica et al., 2005), and the producers themselves (Hardin, 2005; Xu, 2019). Media also tend to pay more attention to “feminine” sports and ignore female athletes competing in “masculine” events (Vincent et al., 2002; Higgs et al., 2003). Furthermore, female Olympians are portrayed ambivalently (Bruce, 2013) and receive more stereotypical comments and comments about their appearance (Kinnick, 1998; Jones et al., 1999; Shields et al., 2004). Media houses also remain male dominated as they continue to use more journalists, male sources and announcers (Capranica and Aversa, 2002; Tuggle et al., 2002).

During the 2016 Olympics, social media really came to prominence and organizational communication gained in significance as they became an indispensable communication channel providing organizations with their own voice (Litchfield and Kavanagh, 2019). Some hoped that the open online space would challenge male hegemony in sports coverage (Bruce, 2013; LaVoi et al., 2019). However, Jones (Jones, 2013) and LaVoi and Calhoun (LaVoi and Calhoun, 2014) discovered

that major public broadcasters continued to underrepresent sportswomen even in online spaces. On the other hand, North American Olympic broadcasters generally framed gender along equitable lines on their social media accounts (Johnson et al., 2020). Together with traditional media, social media provide an important source of information and reference points for its audience (Darnell and Sparks, 2005). This implies that understanding the importance of media-intensive sports events like the Olympics requires a knowledge of the processes by which media texts are formed, as well as the reasons why they are constructed in specific ways.

While the IOC puts great importance on gender equality, it failed to translate its own media recommendations and guidance into practice. (Xu, 2019) analyzed gender portrayal in the Olympic Channel over 16 months from 2016 to 2018 revealing that 60.1 per cent of pictures of news stories were devoted to men with greater focus on masculine sports, and only 39.9 per cent to women. Litchfield and Kavanagh (Litchfield and Kavanagh, 2019) analyzed Twitter accounts of the Australian Olympic team @AUSOlympicTeam and Team GB @TeamGB. Despite some prevailing stereotypes, the British content offered fair representations of genders, but Australian women remained underrepresented.

Compared with the proliferation of media content studies, investigations of media content production processes within the Olympic setting are quite rare. Only three publications were discovered in this literature review. The first two focus on media production processes in news media. O’Neill and Mulready (O’Neill and Mulready, 2015) interviewed UK journalists during the 2012 Olympics. The respondents indicated that sports organizations play an important role in media production and they don’t do enough to promote women’s sport. As demonstrated on the Simon Whitfield case (Darnell and Sparks, 2005), media exposure play a vital role in the construction of athletes’ public image, which can endorse their marketability. At the same time, it is in the media producers’ hands to decide to whom they will provide the exposure (MacNeill, 1996).

Billings (Billings, 2009) explored whether NBC Olympic producers and sportscasters make choices that privilege one gender over another. He revealed that the producers felt they had set a fair agenda for both men and women, however, content analysis proved otherwise. Furthermore, they admitted they unintentionally and unconsciously report ambivalently on men and women. With regard to social media, Xu and Billings (Xu and Billings, 2021) contributed to the understanding of production of digital media in a sports organization committed to gender equality and women’s empowerment. By interviewing the media professionals working at the Olympic Channel, they discovered that individuals and their personalities have a significant influence on news production.

Notwithstanding the recent emergence of social media studies in relation to the Olympics, we know very little about how these platforms affects content production processes and existing content analyses of social media yielded mixed results. To address this gap, this study aims to explore how gender is constructed on social media accounts of the Olympic Movement. To that end, the next section will introduce the materials and methods used.

TABLE 1 | Analyzed accounts.

Instagram accounts	Number of followers (October 2021)
Czech Olympic committee @olympijskytym	179 k
Swiss Olympic committee @swissolympicteam	51.2 k
Norwegian Olympic committee @olympicteamnorway	20.2 k

Methodology

Although many studies have examined gender distribution in coverage of major sports events, few studies have used mixed methods to explain the ongoing underrepresentation of female athletes. To fill this void, a mixed-methods approach was applied to this study. The reason was twofold. First, it provides credible and usable knowledge by combining and integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Molina-Azorin and Fetters, 2019). By combination of different perspectives on social phenomena, mixed methods contribute to broader and deeper understanding of them (Hollstein, 2014). Such an approach enables a comparison with and contrast to the amount of content given and provides reasoning behind it. Secondly, while it has been commonly employed by social media researchers (Snelson, 2016), it has not yet been used to study production of the Olympic social media content.

A mixed-methods approach is here understood as “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon” (Denzin, 1978, p. 291). Ideally, this means that “the bias inherent in any particular data source, investigators, and particularly method will be canceled out when used in conjunction with other data sources, investigators, and methods” (p. 14); and that “the result will be a convergence upon the truth about some social phenomenon” (p. 14). Denzin (1978), moreover, outlines the emergence of three possible outcomes from triangulation: convergence, inconsistency, and contradiction. Which of these outcomes characterized this study, and how the integration of different data types was analyzed, typically a conflict theme in methodology debates (Johnson et al., 2007), will be explained below. But first, the rationale for each method and corresponding data must be introduced (Table 1).

Method 1: Content Analysis

Content analysis of social media network Instagram was employed. This analysis served to answer the first two research questions regarding the gender distribution and its connection to participation and performance. Instagram was used because it had the highest engagement rate¹ across social media networks used by the selected NOCs. To select relevant data, a non-probability judgmental (purposive) sampling method was used. Following Blaikie & Priest (2019), this method is optimal for selecting some cases of particular type in order to study some aspects of organizational behaviors. In such a case, the selection of the sample is a matter of judgements, which may be

¹Engagement rate is calculated as a percentage of interactions per overall number of followers.

informed by theoretical considerations. For the purpose of this study, three European countries with diverse national identity, culture, economy, language, and sport habits were selected. Those countries are also situated in different parts of the scale of the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap report (World Economic Forum, 2021). The selection includes Norway, a country with long-term high ranking, the Czech Republic, a post-communist country that continuously ranks low, and Switzerland, a country that was one of the last in Europe to recognize women’s rights, yet nowadays sits in the upper part of the scale. Such studies can focus and compare different aspects of individual attitudes, values and beliefs, and aspects of organizations, institutions and structures (Blaikie and Priest, 2019).

The data collection was conducted during the 2020 Tokyo Olympics that was held from 23rd July to 8th August 2021. Data was recorded manually and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. The data were recorded by the author and then validated by a disinterested but competent peer in the “peer debrief” process (Hail et al., 2011). Peer debriefing is defined as a “process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a way similar to an analytic session for the goal of examining parts of the inquiry that could otherwise stay simply implicit inside the inquirer’s thinking” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 308). Statistical software R was used to analyze the data, calculate descriptive statistics and tests (Spearman correlation coefficients, tests of significance of the correlation coefficient and tests of independence). Categorization was adopted from the Portrayal Guidelines for gender-equal, fair, and inclusive representation in sport published by the IOC (IOC, 2014). “Visibility” category evaluating who is featured in the content was limited to: number of posts, type of post (picture or video), sport, and gender. Data in each category was compared to gender, participation, and medal success and used to establish a standard of comparison for quantity of media content.

Method 2: Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were of use to answer the third research question the commitment of the Olympic movement to gender equality. Combining then the semi-structured interview method with quantitative measures allowed the former to bring nuance and depth to the latter’s panoramic qualities. What is characteristic about the interviewee sample in this article’s topic is that it is only a handful of persons that are responsible for social media in NOCs and the EOC. Given that “the content of inquiry is such that complete or in-depth information cannot be expected from representative survey respondents” (Kumar et al., 1993, p. 1634), the four informants included here are thus considered “key informants”. These informants “serve as gatekeepers regulating access to people and information and as cultural experts explaining culture to an outsider” (McKenna and Main, 2013, p. 116). As this research had an exploratory dimension (Blaikie and Priest, 2019), allowing participants to give freely their own experiences and feelings regarding their work habits, performances and management styles, the composition of the sample is crucial (Crouch, 2006).

Four interviews were conducted with media personnel of three European NOCs and the EOC with the aim to extract

professional experiences and insights and gain understanding of their working processes. Individuals representing the organizations were asked to report on their activities as they occurred in their natural settings. Following Blaikie and Priest (Blaikie and Priest, 2019), four main kinds of data of individuals' characteristics were collected: demographic characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, and reported behavior. Respondents were contacted and recruited by the researcher through email and LinkedIn. All respondents were anonymized. Three interviews took place from June to September 2021 around the time of the Tokyo Olympics, and one interview was conducted earlier as part of different but relevant study. Due to the pandemic, all the interviews were conducted via Zoom or Teams (based on respondent's preference). All the respondents were white, in their young adulthood, educated and had several years of experience in the field. Two respondents were women, two were men.

Literature on content production in sports and discussion with media experts preceded the development of the interview guide, which started with general and non-controversial questions (e.g., what is your job title?). After rapport was established, more probing questions were asked (e.g., to what extent do you think the NOC fulfills its promises in promoting gender equality?). After transcribing the interviews verbatim, thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data and understand how social media personnel constructed athletes' identity during the Tokyo Olympics. Themes and patterns of meaning within the data that were related to the research question were identified by employing inductive and theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Thematic textual analysis is a systematic and repeatable approach for analyzing texts. It is a method of deciphering the meanings of text to comprehend their greater cultural relevance. To evaluate the collected data, qualitative data analysis tool NVivo was used. Following this (Braun and Clarke, 2006), transcripts were reviewed to gain a sense of the information gathered. Then, the transcripts were processed to extract patterns and code the data. These codes were then re-examined and grouped into themes. Each theme was identified and named and is represented by quotes in the results section.

Results: Content Analysis

The content analysis revealed the gender distribution on the social media accounts on the Czech, Norwegian and Swiss Olympic Committee's Instagram accounts. A total of 432 posts were analyzed. To provide a context, the participation and medal success of the teams are presented in **Table 2**.

The Tokyo Olympics was 'first ever gender-balanced' with overall participation at 48.8 per cent women and 51.2 per cent men. All the three analyzed teams were represented by a similar number of athletes (CZE: 115, SUI: 107, NOR: 93). The Czech team consisted of 64.3 per cent men and 35.7 per cent women, similarly the Norway ratio was at 63.4 per cent and 36.6 per cent, respectively. Swiss representation was 44 per cent women and 56 per cent men. In terms of success, the Czechs won 11 medals, 9 of them by men, 2 by women. Similarly, Norwegian men won 7 out of 8 medals for Norway. Switzerland received 13 medals, 10

of them won by women. Participation and performance figures provide a standard of comparison for quantity of media content.

The number of posts was analyzed based on participation proportion and success. In the case of the Czech Republic and Norway, the gender distribution of posts corresponded with the participation ratio. In the case of Switzerland, women received a higher number of posts (60 per cent). However, that can be explained by their medal success as they won most medals for Switzerland (76.9 per cent). In all three cases, media content was related to athletes' participation by sport. The Spearman correlation indicated that there is an association between sport participation and the amount of social media content (CZE: $r_s = 0.534$, $p = 0.01$; SUI: $r_s = 0.904$, $p \leq 0.001$; NOR: $r_s = 0.615$, $p = 0.01$). In the case of the Czech Republic and Norway, this association increased where the athlete is female; the more women participate in each sport at the Olympics, the more content they will receive (CZE: male: $r_s = 0.445$, $p = 0.04$; female: $r_s = 0.591$, $p = 0.004$; NOR: male: $r_s = 0.571$, $p = 0.03$; female: $r_s = 0.801$, $p < 0.001$). On the other hand, in the case of Switzerland, the association increased when the athlete was male (male: $r_s = 0.936$, $p < 0.001$; female: $r_s = 0.733$, $p < 0.001$).

In all three cases, the correlation of medal success and media content was significant for both male and female athletes (CZE: $r_s = 0.928$, $p < 0.001$; NOR: $r_s = 0.937$, $p < 0.001$; SUI: $r_s = 0.814$, $p < 0.001$). Sports in which athletes won medals resulted in more content. However, it's not only success that influences the amount of content but also its expectation and structural advantage of some sports. Sports that resulted in medal success received most of the posts in both Norway and the Czech Republic. This was especially true for Czech female athletes as only nine posts (16 per cent) were dedicated to sports, in which female athletes did not succeed. On the other hand, for the Swiss Olympic Committee medal success was not decisive. More posts were dedicated to sports that did not result in medal success.

Results: Semi-structured Interviews

Even though the quantitative and qualitative data collection was ongoing simultaneously, the qualitative interviews served an explanatory and validatory role (Johnson et al., 2007) in this study. As Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (Johnson et al., 2007) state, "during the data analysis stage, qualitative data can play an important role by interpreting, clarifying, describing, and validating quantitative results, as well as through grounding and modifying." Through this process, not only the third research question was addressed but also convergence of the two data sets was identified. In all three studied cases, content analysis revealed fair amount of content dedicated to female athletes with focus on both: their participation and success. This was stressed by the respondents:

"The whole coverage is based on our shared beliefs of being one team. We don't distinguish between sports or athletes; instead, we aim to cover all types of sports."

At the same time, one respondent described the additional content dedicated to successful athletes:

"We had graphics with a medal or position during the Olympic Games, but we didn't prepare it just for the medalists;

TABLE 2 | Number of participants, medals, and posts.

	Czech republic		Norway		Switzerland	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Number of participants	41 (35.7%)	74 (64.3%)	34 (36.6%)	59 (36.6%)	47 (44%)	60 (56%)
Number of medals	2 (18.2%)	9 (81.1%)	1 (12.5%)	7 (87.5%)	10 (76.9%)	3 (23.1%)
Number of posts	56 (36.1%)	99 (63.9%)	29 (34.9%)	54 (65.1%)	45 (65.1%)	30 (40%)

we had it for top 10 as that is still a wonderful accomplishment for us.”

Reflecting on the quantitative findings, three main principles were identified through the qualitative interviews: individual agency (the role of gatekeepers), living up to Olympic values (Organizational role), and social responsibility.

The Role of Gatekeepers

Given that one of the IOC's key goals is to promote gender equality, it is not unexpected that the Olympic values have been embedded in the NOCs' communication. Media personnel of the NOCs expressed consensus that both men and women should receive equitable amount of content. The Olympic representative very specific about how Olympic values play an important role in their work:

“The coverage of the Olympic movement and its sports is our primary aim. Our fundamental concept is that we are one team, one sport, and our aim is to encourage a healthy lifestyle and sports participation in everyday life.”

And how they promote them despite the possible lower engagement:

“We have projects that are important to us as an organization and we see that there is a good reaction to it that encourages to do more, but we also have Olympic values content that is maybe not so popular, but we still like to do it because it's important to us. Like this we can implement it in the population or at least in the sport.”

This seemed to have a direct influence on the equality in the portrayal:

“We are really conscious when it comes to diversity. We want to portray both female and male athletes, to cover the broad range of different athletes and different sports that are out there.”

However, in some cases the respondents found it difficult as some sports and attire are more revealing:

“We avoid sexual connotation, pictures or anything like that but it's difficult in some sports like beach volleyball. Some sports naturally put the body in focus, but I think we are pretty sensitive to the topic.”

Notwithstanding the fact that they claimed to have considerable autonomy to express their individual personalities and opinions in their reporting, they stressed the importance of collaboration with colleagues:

“It's mostly my decision but if it's a controversial image, I ask someone else if this is okay, but I think we really try to show the sports.”

“Because the material is created by a large group of individuals, my job is to ensure that everything satisfies those specifications [of our identity]. I'm the one who approves it and decides whether or not it should be published.”

Furthermore, they explained the importance of balanced mixed gender teams in the work processes:

“It also helps that I'm a woman myself. I don't have a different view on it [women's and men's performance] and that's what's great with our department that consists of both men and women. We have those different perspectives, and we can always challenge each other when it comes to portrayal of athletes. I think it's our strength. We live up to the fact that we see them as athletes and it's not dependent on gender.”

All the three NOCs had mixed gender teams, and some stressed how their personalities and experiences had a positive impact on gender equality in the social media content:

“Maybe it's also personal because I was working with para-athletes before and there the pictures are even more important and sometimes it's sensitive pictures. So, I think I am a bit more aware what an image can do.”

Organizational Role

The IOC recently published Portrayal guidelines “*recognizing that sports coverage is very influential in shaping gender norms and stereotypes*” with the aim to “*raise awareness and call for gender-equal and fair representation of sportspeople across all forms of media and communication*” (IOC, 2014). This seemed to have a great influence on the quality of the content, even if some of the NOCs did not follow specifically the IOC's guidelines but had their own internal rules.

“I think it's really important [the guidelines] and from our side, we follow these guidelines. I try to find a good balance between male and female portrayal also in our newsletter, on our website, or social media posts. We try, we are careful about this topic, we work hand-in-hand with the IOC. So basically, we follow the principles.”

Despite the document's recommendatory character, it seemed to also exercise a controlling effect:

“I think the IOC does have supervisory body during the games and I don't know which kind of system they use to catch the wrong message or the wrong attitude but since they have the guidelines that should be respected, I suppose that they do have some system to oversee this activity.”

On the other hand, they also mentioned how diverse structure of the Olympic events play role in the post's distribution:

“We want to maintain our communication continuous during the Olympics since certain events, endure for several days while some other sports have only a one-day competition. All of this must be considered.”

It is part of the IOC's Gender review project (IOC, 2018, p. 8) to have an “*equal representation of women's and men's events in the competition schedule*” and to ensure the competition formats

to be equal in the distances, duration of competition segments, number of round etc. However, this goal hasn't been met yet.

Social Responsibility

Sports journalists previously justified men's domination of media coverage by financial profit and denied the responsibility of promoting women's sports (Vincent et al., 2003; Knoppers and Elling, 2004). In comparison to news media, the IOC's own media production is not a primary activity or source of finance. Media personnel of the NOCs do not therefore have to follow that logic:

"I think that there is a difference in between the traditional media and the Olympic movement. I see a lot the different points of view. We don't focus just on the consumption but also on the values."

"We are not run by engagement and likes and that popularity contest that is already out there. For us, it's never been a big goal to grow or get a ton of engagement on each post."

Most coverage that athletes receive is controlled by mass media, however, social media let athletes create their own portrayal. For athletes, social media provide a way to connect with fans, stakeholders, and sponsors. They can be especially beneficial for athletes from sports who usually do not receive mainstream coverage as social media is a tool to build and promote their own personal brand (Eagleman, 2013). While mass media ignore athletes' preferences of portrayal, media personnel of the NOCs took that into consideration:

"If we have a campaign and I use an athlete's picture, I ask if they are okay with that picture. Like now with the Olympic Games, we want to ask everyone if the photo is okay."

"We always want to please the athlete, even though we don't need their consent to work with their pictures."

"I'm not in direct contact with the athletes but a lot of us are, and if we use pictures that are not okay, then we will have a bad reaction from them directly."

Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016) explained that it is NOCs' interests to develop strong relationships with their athletes as it helps to create a positive impression of both the athletes and the sports organizations. Furthermore, athletes' self-representation also influences the reputation of their respective sports organizations. One of the respondents explained how this is executed:

"[My daily routine] includes keeping the relations with athletes...how should they communicate or what they should post, or if they want and advice—they come to us."

Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016) further explained that while NOCs cannot control athletes' social media accounts, they should develop a strong understanding of effective social media practices to further an athlete's desired long-term brand image. Ultimately, this a mutual relationship—NOCs influence the audience's perception of the athletes and the other way round.

DISCUSSION

The first two research questions were: (1) What is the gender distribution in NOCs' social media communication? and (2) Does the number of posts devoted to men and women

on social media of the Norwegian, Czech and Swiss NOCs correspond with participation and performance? The content analysis showed equitable social media content in all three countries reflecting athletes' participation and performance. While in the case of the Czech Republic and Norway, success was a more prominent factor, Switzerland dedicated content to all participants regardless of performance. In comparison to previous studies that continuously drew attention to sportswomen's underrepresentation in sports coverage, the three NOCs provided fair amount of content dedicated to both female and male athletes. These results demonstrated that if media content is analyzed with consideration of participation and national success, masculine hegemony, and cultural preferences of certain sports disappears.

Even though medal success increased the number of posts dedicated to particular sports, less successful participants also received a proportional amount of content, and this applied to both genders. Seemingly equally important was the expectation of success, which bears out some of the previous studies (Bruce et al., 2010; Ličen and Billings, 2013; Crossan et al., 2021). Athletes that were favorites in their disciplines received more national coverage with no regard to their gender. At the same time, some sports are more complicated than others and have a structural advantage that results in more coverage (Wehden et al., 2019). Some events differ in length and advance structure as men's events tend to be longer and/or include more teams. Together with national success in these events, it naturally leads to more coverage.

From the perspective of framing and agenda setting, it is understood that media play a vital role in creation of public meaning. Therefore, fair portrayal of female athletes has an important impact on the consumer's perception of sport and its medialization. However, this study is limited to frame (agenda) building and frame setting. While the literature documenting gender distribution in Olympic coverage has been extensive (Grabmüllerová and Næss, 2022), the actual consequences of gender framing on audience remain understudied. Therefore, the individual-level effects of framing should be explored in future studies. More studies such Metcalfe's (2019) or Jones and Greer's (2012) exploring audience attitudes influenced by media consumption are needed.

In previous studies, sports journalist were described as misogynist and reluctant to cover female athletes claiming they are not responsible for the improvement of gender equality (Knoppers and Elling, 2004; Organista et al., 2021). In other studies, journalists who claimed fair agenda were contradicted by the actual content analysis (Billings, 2009; Xu, 2019). This study showed convergence of the quantitative and qualitative data (Denzin, 1978). Perhaps this is a result of more balanced Olympic content production teams (gatekeepers) comparing to the overly masculine environment of sports journalism (Knoppers and Elling, 2004). From the framing and agenda setting perspective, social media personnel consciously decided to cover athletes based on their participation in the Olympics and their success. Agenda and frames were described as result of collective work, however, at the end of the media process was one gatekeeper who had a significant individual influence on the final outcome

and consequently gender portrayal and distribution in their respective communication channel. As described earlier, those gatekeepers decide who and what receives attention (LaVoi et al., 2019). NOCs' media personnel were conscious about setting a fair agenda for both male and female athletes and aware of the frames they apply.

This answers the third research question: How is the commitment of the Olympic movement to gender equality and women's empowerment reflected in NOCs' social media communication? Loyalty to the Olympic movement and its values seemed to be vital to set a fair agenda in the content production. Social-structural or organizational characteristics, as well as individual or ideological variables, may influence producers' framing of an issue at the media level (Scheufele, 1999). During the interviews with the NOCs' media personnel, it became clear that this is the case. Organizational and personal dedication to gender equality was the key aspect. In this regard, it can be argued that the increased women's visibility in the social media is influenced by the IOC's gender equality policies and organizational context of the Olympic movement.

On the other hand, the cultural context did not influence the production or opinions on gender equality. Despite the different nations in this study, the same attitudes were identified in the interviews and female athletes were fairly represented in all the analyzed accounts. This can be explained by the commitment of the NOCs and their personnel to the IOC and Olympic values. While the European cultural context did not have an influence on the amount of content dedicated to female and male athletes, it affects female's involvement in sport in general. Professional sportswomen's participation and success is heavily associated with national gender regimes and women's higher empowerment in a society is reflected in elite sport participation (Meier et al., 2021). Therefore, more localized initiatives to promote gender equality in sport and society are needed. For future studies, more culturally diverse sample would be beneficial as it can provide an understanding of what role ethnicity and race play.

Despite the positive findings within the Olympic movement, outside of the period of major sport events, sportswomen's coverage in news media drops to minimum as one of the respondents mentioned:

"Very impressive figure is that only 4 per cent of the media coverage is dedicated to women in sport. And this is a very sad figure, and we should ask ourselves many questions about why it happens? I think the IOC is committed to this cause."

The IOC's initiative to increase women's participation and consequently opportunity to succeed is essential as this is mirrored in media coverage. Despite the claimed balanced participation in the Tokyo Olympics (Tokyo IOC, 2020), there are still sports and events that differ for female and male athletes. For example, men's football started with 16 teams while the women's tournament had only 12 teams. Similarly, ice hockey will feature 12 men's teams but only 10 women's teams in the upcoming Winter Olympics. Differences also remain in individual sports, for example men's longest cross-country skiing event is 50 km while women compete on a 30 km long track. This results in shorter events which can sway the gender distribution of the coverage.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to explore the context of Olympic content production and gender distribution. The analysis showed that all three National Olympic Committees offered fair amount of content of female athletes corresponding with their participation and performances. Interviews with the media personnel showed convergence with the content analysis. The set fair coverage was a result of the personal and organizational commitment of the Olympic movement to gender equality and women's empowerment. This is an important finding for the theoretical perspectives of framing, agenda setting and gatekeeping as well as for the IOC and other media producers who wish to improve coverage of female athletes, as it provides an explanation of the contradictory results in many other studies of the Olympic coverage and gender distribution. It also serves as evidence supporting the anticipation that disruptions of the persisting narratives will come from media forms other than sports news or live sport (Bruce, 2013). Social media and other alternative digital spaces might have the power to shift the existing cultural and media discourses (Bruce, 2013; Peeters et al., 2019).

The scope of this study is limited because of its nature as a case study. To expand, the sample consists of diverse demographics, however, it is limited to Europe and countries with fair attitudes toward gender equality. Therefore, only "natural generalizability" can be considered (Blaikie and Priest, 2019). Furthermore, this research analyzed gender distribution in social media posts only quantitatively. Future research should examine social media content through qualitative media analysis as well as to explore how is such content and its framing interpreted by the consumers. Especially, since Smith Clavio and Lang (Smith et al., 2021) identified the effects of visual framing of athletes on social media. Such studies would help us to better understand the framing effects of ambivalent gender portrayal and the importance of gender equality in sports media.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the understanding how social media frames are constructed in the Olympic movement and revealed the influence of gatekeepers in the agenda setting. The implications for further research are that more studies on social media coverage and gender distribution are needed. We can deduce from this study that to improve gender equality in news media, institutional change would be required as well as local initiatives to promote gender equality in society. Media gatekeepers play an important part in it as they have the power to influence the audience's view of social reality by imposing their own perceptions on their media content (Xu and Billings, 2021).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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1.5 Article 3

EMPOWERMENT AND FEMINISM IN DIGITAL SPACES

1

"Women are here, women are hungry": Exploring articulations of empowerment and feminism in digital spaces

Abstract

This article explores the evolving landscape of digital media and its impact on the representation and self-presentation of female athletes. Focusing on the 2022 Beijing Olympics, it investigates how Olympians leverage social media to articulate feminism and empowerment, challenging traditional media paradigms in the context of Olympism. The study explores how sportswomen craft their identities, navigate gender discourses, and engage with postfeminist narratives. The findings reveal that social media offers a dual-edged sword: a platform for self-empowerment and identity construction, yet also a space where athletes confront market-driven pressures and gendered expectations. As a result, this study responds to the call for a feminist re-evaluation of sports media narratives, urging scholars to adopt broader methodological frameworks that transcend conventional media sources.

Este artigo explora o panorama em evolução dos meios de comunicação e o impacto na representação e auto-representação de atletas femininas. Tendo em foco os jogos olímpicos de inverno de 2022, em Beijing, foram analisados como é que as atletas femininas usaram a comunicação social para articular o feminismo e empoderamento, ao desafiar os paradigmas da tradicional comunicação social, em contexto de Olimpismo. O estudo explora como as atletas criam as suas identidades, através de discursos de géneros e ao envolverem-se com narrativas pós-feministas. Os resultados revelaram que os meios de comunicação oferecem os dois lados da moeda: a plataforma para o auto-capacitação e construção de identidade, mas também o espaço onde os atletas enfrentam as pressões do mercado e expectativas de género.

Keywords: Olympics, feminism, empowerment, social media

"Women are here, women are hungry": Exploring articulations of empowerment and feminism in digital spaces

Introduction

A fundamental principle of Olympism – the ideological and philosophical underpinning of the Olympic Movement – is ‘to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity’ (IOC 2023, p. 8). But for decades the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and its media partners have failed to recognize the part of this pledge to ‘man’ that involves female athletes (Grabmüllerová & Næss 2022). In contrast, the rise of social media and its global popularity have transformed the traditional media landscape, which often diminished sportswomen (Fink 2015). This shift has enabled female athletes to gain recognition on their own terms and enabled them to generate and distribute content to a worldwide audience, avoid the media gatekeepers, and create their own identities (Pegoraro, 2010). In that sense, social media have been perceived as empowering tools (Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

At the same time, there is still a need to explore how these tools are used and how female athletes engage with the feminist ideas (consciously and unconsciously) to *tell stories differently* (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018). The authors urged scholars to move away from the well-established methodological frameworks that are restricted to a limited number of sources of data and do not reflect the contemporary consumption of media. According to Antunovic (2022), it is important to analyse content shared across various platforms in order to reflect how audiences consume content and ideologies circulate. With this approach, it is possible to "capture the relationship between production, visibility, and consumption" (Antunovic, 2022, p. 21). Also Cooky and Antunovic (2020, p. 707) suggested that "one way to tell stories differently is to disrupt the well-established boundaries of what is considered sports media." Therefore, to explore how sportswomen’s articulations of feminism and empowerment were disseminated through digital spheres, this article analyses "any media content" (p. 697) produced by athletes, journalists, social media accounts, and sport’s governing bodies.

More specifically it explores how female athletes navigate the culture of online spaces for sportswomen during the 2022 Beijing Olympic Games. The IOC’s gender policies and efforts set the stage for sports to be seen as a powerful tool for women’s empowerment and an essential symbol of gender equality (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018). Understanding how Olympians present themselves in the media sheds light on how IOC’s initiatives to boost

women's empowerment is mirrored in female athletes' presentation. The analysis underscores the significant role of digital media in shaping modern feminist discourses in sports, offering a nuanced understanding of gender inequality and the potential for social change in the intersection between Olympism and female athleticism.

Sportswomen's use of social media: A literature overview

For decades, female athletes' presentation to a wider audience was dependent on news media gatekeepers, their agendas, and framing (Grabmüllerová & Næss, 2022). However, with the advent of social media, sportswomen gained the opportunity to create their own identities in ways that can contradict the dominant sports media discourse (Heinecken, 2015) and share stories that the media neglect (Bruce, 2016). In that sense, social media have the transformative potential to empower women to create alternative narratives and discourses, challenge the patriarchal sports environment, and advance feminist agendas (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a; Bruce & Hardin, 2014).

However, Thorpe et al. (2017) claimed that it is the opportunity to establish alternative discourses that is transformative rather than the content that female athletes share. For example, female athletes presented themselves in somewhat more suggestive poses on Instagram (Smith & Sanderson, 2015), and while previously it would have been perceived as blatant forms of sexualisation, hypersexual pictures are now recast as declarations of active and confident sexuality (Evans et al., 2010; Gill, 2008). As Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) stress: "It is the text used alongside such images that enables sportswomen to 'speak to' the image, and in so doing, perform an empowered self and thus deflect charges of objectification and passivity" (p. 26). Sportswomen on social media have a propensity to present their bodies in a manner that portrays them as in control and capable rather than objectified and passive (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a).

At the same time, female athletes are astute observers and critics of the societal expectations that surround their many and usually contradictory roles and identities (Fink et al., 2014), and they have accepted that in order to be recognized, they must often perform the feminine role. For example, the analysis by Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018b) of five Instagram accounts of female athletes revealed that their social media interactions with fans are driven by gender norms and arrangements that demand and reward their articulations of empowerment, entrepreneurialism, and individualization. Banet-Weiser (2015) argued that female athletic bodies that do not conform to the heterosexual, white norm and disrupt market demands remain invisible, while those who are less controversial, apolitical, and do not explicitly challenge gender norms tend to have a larger social media following. Even though

feminist objective are accessible and a variety of feminist ideologies exist, the ones that acquire traction are often those that do not aim to overturn existing social structures (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

A postfeminist sensibility

In this paper, I regard postfeminism as a sensibility (Gill, 2007a). 'Postfeminist sensibility,' as defined by Gill, encompasses a collection of interconnected topics: a shift from viewing women as sexual objects to recognizing their agency and active participation in sexually objectifying practices; the understanding that femininity is constructed through self-surveillance and body-related practices, with an emphasis on the importance of appearance for women's success and identity; the promotion of consumerism and appearance work as empowering and enjoyable experiences (Riley et al., 2017).

This perspective acknowledges the widespread presence of intricate and frequently conflicting conceptions of femininity. Postfeminism as a sensibility is often characterized by its support for female empowerment but also includes traditional aspects of femininity (Gill, 2007b). Initially, postfeminist sensibility promoted the idea of women being liberated and powerful, capable of making choices. However, these themes also constrained women's options to a focus on physical appeal through consumerism (Gill, 2007a). This phenomenon manifests in various ways, for example, when women exhibit agentic femininity through body language, personal consumerist choices, and acts of authenticity that alter perceptions of women from sexual objects to free, active subjects (Gill, 2007a, 2007b).

According to Banet-Weiser (2015), under these conditions, women are expected not only to combat gender discrimination but also to visibly demonstrate their entrepreneurial skills, success, well-being, and personal fulfilment in alignment with prevailing market norms. In this context, girls and women are increasingly pressured by the neoliberal economic imperative to be seen as actively investing in themselves in ways that meet the demands of a market eager for women who can showcase and commodify their empowerment, confidence, and self-worth. Therefore, this study's analytical approach is situated within the 'economy of visibility' – a media landscape focused on garnering views, clicks, and likes, where certain narratives are more visible than others (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Methodology

More than 1300 female athletes competed at the 2022 Winter Olympics. During the Olympic Games, medal success and nationalism are what drive media attention (Grabmüllerová & Næss, 2022; MacArthur et al., 2016). Therefore, to narrow down the

sample, the first step of the data collection involved determining which female Olympians won medals at the 2022 Olympics and had a social media presence. I generated a list of 87 individual female Olympic medallists. I conducted an online search for each athlete using the most popular social media networks to find evidence of user-generated activity. If the search was not successful, I resorted to a Google search. This approach proved to be successful as I was able to identify accounts of 77 athletes. The most popular network was Instagram, where 75 athletes were present. Other social media that were considered were Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and Weibo.

In the process of selecting athletes for analysis, the accessibility of online profiles, level of activity and multi-platform presence were considered. A key aspect in selecting athletes was their prominent public image, signifying their status as top representatives of their country, and a significant presence in traditional media outlets such as news broadcasts, advertising campaigns, and lifestyle magazines. Additionally, I have analysed Google trends during the Olympic period. This search confirmed that medal success indeed determines attention as all but one of the most-searched athletes were Olympic medallists. The additional name on the list was Mikaela Shiffrin, the all-time best alpine skier, who was a contender for another Olympic medal at these games but failed to win one.

Content published in connection to the Winter Olympic Games held in China from 4th February to 20th February 2022 was analysed. I looked for athletes who explicitly articulated a sense of empowerment or touched upon identified feminist issues on their social media accounts. At first, I looked at the content on their social media, linked sources, reshared content and referrals to media outlets (blogs, interviews, articles etc.). If this first search brought up a hit, I looked for additional coverage of the athlete. This search included the most popular news such as The New York Times, Yahoo or AP News but also nationally popular media such as RTL Niews. In the same sense, I analysed content created by the Olympics looking for 1) coverage of the selected athletes and 2) articulations of feminism, gender equality and women's empowerment. The content was frequently intermingled - stories and statements provided to the media were frequently shared on social media, and vice versa - media built their stories around athletes' social media posts. Even though the athletes included in this research came from a variety of countries, most of the postings and articles were published in English. Additional sources in athletes' native languages were translated and analysed.

In the analysis that follows, I approach the online portrayal of female Olympians as a feminist object of analysis. I use thematic analysis to examine how feminist viewpoints shape

the mediated personas of female athletes. The analysis presents how articulations of empowerment and feminism are adopted in digital spaces by different advocates and stakeholders and how they circulate inside and beyond those settings - which narratives and feminist articulations achieved attention in media coverage and how they were reproduced.

The aim is not to establish a quantitative prevalence, representative or exhaustive sample but rather to explore and demonstrate how articulations of feminism and empowerment are articulated by (some) female athletes and circulate through networked media. For those purposes, the article explores how sports media interact with athletes and how these are mutually constitutive in order to provide a deeper understanding of female athletes' presentation and how empowerment initiatives and feminism shape it.

Results

Narratives of self-empowerment

Jutta Leerdam is an Olympic silver medallist and one of the most popular Winter Olympians on social media. As of the latest update, the Dutch speed skater has up to date 4.3 million followers on Instagram. On her account, Leerdam gives her audience a glimpse into the life of a successful athlete and model. She shares pictures and videos of her food, her training, competitions, and personal life. These kinds of posts provide a sense of empowerment by guiding audiences on how to take charge of their athletic performance, from the foods they consume to the sport they choose, or the training they do (Kerns, 2021).

Most of the content highlights Leerdam's long blonde hair and a thin white body, both of which are characteristics of the idealised young, white, western woman (Thorpe et al., 2017). In that sense, Leerdam does not reject stereotypical representation of women; in fact, she celebrates it. Heywood and Dworkin (2003, p. 85) argue that female athletes "know exactly what they are doing" as they accept media prominence as an integral part of their identities (Cocca 2014). From this perspective, Leerdam is an example of an empowered sportswoman who has control over her portrayal and can be "pretty and powerful" at the same time (Bruce, 2016, p. 369). Her Instagram feed is full of photographs that reflect an emphasis on reclaiming femininity as strong rather than demeaning (Cocca 2014).

However, critiques of neo-liberal feminism call attention to the conflicting narratives that epitomise athletes like Leerdam as "savvy and sexualized, carefree yet calculating" (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 373). To elaborate, Leerdam framed her social media success as a coincidence, saying to RTL Nieuws:

It's kind of a crazy idea that so many people like what I do. I just enjoy doing it and that people appreciate it is a nice side effect (Samplonius & Voortman, 2022).

However, later in the interview, she acknowledged how economically beneficial her social media presence is:

Of course, it brings great commercial value and if I can bring new parties into skating with it, that is not only super good for the sport and in this case for our team but also for my own career (Samplonius & Voortman, 2022).

Also in an article for the Olympic website, not only did she acknowledge the intention behind her dapper appearance on the field of play ("That's my signature"), but was also described as a graduate student in the field of advertising and therefore, obviously knowledgeable about social media practices:

Leerdam has built up a massive following online. The marketing and commercial economics graduate has given over two million people a glimpse of life behind the scenes on the speed skating tour, sharing thrilling snippets from her races and her workouts (IOC, 2022).

Leerdam not only profits from her sporting and social media success, but she is also a model and owns a speed skating school. It might seem that her attractive and carefree image conflicts with the idea of a calculated and strategic approach, but in fact this is central to the neo-liberal perspective (Thorpe et al., 2017). She builds her brand within the social expectations of an authentic woman rather than an economically motivated businesswoman who chases money and fame. In this way, she does not challenge men's economic and cultural power (Thorpe et al., 2017).

Neo-liberal feminism concentrates on the market and explores how women are more driven to become entrepreneurs and economically independent in order to control their own future (Thorpe et al., 2017). This narrative has also been employed by the IOC on several occasions. For example, the IOC shared several posts about athletes with a dual career such as Elsa Desmond who is a luge Olympian and doctor (IOC (@Olympics), 2022). In a similar way, several posts shared on Instagram account Athlete365, the IOC's official community for Olympians, guided athletes on how to utilise sponsorship opportunities and build their own brand (Athlete365 (@athlete365), 2022b). In this respect, the Olympic media encourage ideals like individuality, inventiveness, and personal responsibility.

Challenging masculine hegemony

According to Banet-Weiser (2015) and the concept of the economy of visibility, those who conform to the 'white norm,' are apolitical, and less controversial tend to have a larger social media following. Despite this logic, Eileen Gu, one of the most prominent sportswomen of the Beijing Olympics, is neither white nor uncontroversial. The American-

born skier who represents China has 6.6 million followers on the Chinese social media platform Weibo and 1.9 million on Instagram. Gu is not only a talented freestyle skier but also a model, a Stanford student, and an influencer. In 2019, she announced she would no longer represent Team USA and that she would be competing for China at the 2022 Beijing Olympics. While her decision was widely perceived as controversial due to the state of US-China relations, Gu was prominently featured in the organizing committee's promotions as well as in the communication channels of the IOC. Gu tried to distance herself from any political comments or questions about her citizenship. Instead, she portrayed herself as an inspiration to others. In an interview with The New York Times, she stated: "I do corks in an icy, 22-foot, U-shaped snow structure. That's not political. It's pushing the human limit and it's connecting people" (Branch, 2022).

But on her Weibo account, she wrote:

I hope that through my pursuit of the extreme sport, I could enhance interaction, understanding and friendship between the Chinese and American people (Eileen Gu (@青蛙公主爱凌), 2022).

For apnews.com, she justified her decision:

In the U.S., growing up I had so many amazing idols to look up to. In China, there are a lot fewer of those. I'd have a much greater impact in China than in the U.S., and that's ultimately why I made that decision (Pells, 2022).

Gu's social media posts exhibit a fusion of her choice to present herself as an active subject and an inspiration to young women. In her posts, she presents herself simultaneously as a confident skier who is 'in love with fear' (Eileen Gu (@eileen_gu_), 2022a) and a model offering her "olympic lookbook" (Eileen Gu (@eileen_gu_), 2022c). Most commonly, however, she stressed her choice to be an inspiration to young women:

[...] I was resolute to achieve the two equally ambitious goals of 1) competing in the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and 2) spreading the (then-unheard of) sport of freeskiing in china. Having been introduced to the sport growing up in the US, I wanted to encourage Chinese skiers the same way my American role models inspired me [...]
[...] I've always said my goal is to globally spread the sport I love to kids, especially girls, and to shift sport culture toward one motivated by passion. Now, after hearing that over 300 MILLION Chinese people have started winter sports for fun, I'm blown away by how far we have come [...]
(Eileen Gu (@eileen_gu_), 2022b).

Gu is competing in freestyle skiing, one of the most dangerous sports in the Winter Olympics (Soligard et al., 2019), that is stereotypically perceived as more masculine. The narrative of challenging male hegemony is another manifestation of feminism in Gu's self-presentation.

During her Beijing 2022 press conference, Gu commented on how she perceives her participation such sport:

Extreme sports, we all know, are heavily dominated by men and stereotypically it has not had the kind of representation and sporting equity that it should. So I think that as a young biracial woman, it is super important to be able to reach those milestones and to be able to push boundaries, not only my own boundaries but those of the sport and those of the record books because that's what paves the paths for the next generations of girls.

Previous studies have shown that challenging 'traditional male concepts of sport' can lead to athletes' empowerment, self-discovery and progress (Cronan & Scott, 2008). During the conference, Gu was repeatedly asked by media representatives about her citizenship, but Gu made her mission at the Olympics clear: "We are all out here together, pushing the sport together, especially women's skiing." She further recognised the power her public prominence gave her: "I am using my voice to create as much positive change as I can." Although Gu has addressed the gendered challenges in her sport, media inquiries have predominantly centred on her citizenship and, at best, her success. This mirrors the postfeminist media culture that neglects the underlying structural barriers and the broader systemic challenges faced by women in sports (Gill 2016).

Vulnerability and online violence against women

To be successful online, female athletes are expected to market their glamorous sports lifestyle and conform to the expectations of what a female athlete should look like (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b). However, against this rationale, some athletes choose to portray a more realistic aspect of Olympic participation, highlighting instances of sexism and discrimination they encounter in their sport or the broader sports community, and using their platforms to amplify the voices of other women and demand change. Yet, these athletes still experience great popularity on social media.

Mikaela Shiffrin, three-times Olympic medallist in alpine skiing, was a favourite for another gold in Beijing. Before the 2022 Olympics, Shiffrin was portrayed as an athlete who is in control of her performance. The Olympics shared Shiffrin's quote: "You need to find the mentality to perform at your best" (Athlete365 (@athlete365), 2022a). However, Shiffrin failed to meet the medal expectations and did not finish her two main disciplines (slalom and giant slalom). Shiffrin was open about her "epic underperformance" (Olympics.com, 2022) and on her Instagram, she stated:

The girl who failed...could also fly. It's wonderful to train and compete alongside all of these courageous and incredible women, who have overcome so much in their life, just to get here. But being here can really hurt too. There's a lot of disappointment and heartbreak going around in

the finish area, but there's also a lot of support. [...] It's a lot to digest in just one event...let alone the whole rollercoaster ride of an entire Olympics [...] (Mikaela Shiffrin (@mikaelashiffrin), 2022).

Not only must Shiffrin's Olympic experience have been difficult, but during the Games, she also became a target of virtual hate. On her social media, she shared messages she received calling her 'a disgrace', 'dumb bitch', or 'loser' (Mikaela Shiffrin [@MikaelaShiffrin], 2022b). Major events such as the Olympics are for most athletes a high-pressure and stressful experience. Social media often offer them an escape, relaxation and positive reinforcement (Hayes et al., 2020). However, social media can be both empowering and oppressive; they can provide a platform for aggression, harassment, and marginalization (Litchfield et al., 2018). While social media have shown to be beneficial to athletes in many ways, it is also clear that with more interactivity comes the possibility of exploitation and abuse (Kavanagh et al., 2020). This is especially concerning since social media have become a place of falsely perceived proximity, freedom of expression, and stronger influence, which creates an 'ideal' environment for abuse. While online abuse is widespread across all sports and athletes as well as coaches, officials, and other stakeholders have all been the targets (Kavanagh et al., 2016), female athletes are the most vulnerable group (Osborne et al., 2021).

Speaking up against violence and injustice against women, like Shiffrin did, is a fundamental feminist value that has historically led to societal and legislative changes as well as the empowerment of other survivors to speak up. Shiffrin's testimonial elicited a response from several other female athletes. For example, multiple Olympic medallist Simone Biles commented on Shiffrin's post: 'I know this all too well. I'm sorry you're experiencing this! people suck...' (Mikaela Shiffrin [@MikaelaShiffrin], 2022b). At the same time, the hostile environment that female athletes can experience online forced some to leave social media altogether. For example, the gold medallist in alpine skiing, Lara Gut-Behrami, decided to be completely absent from social media after being insulted on her Instagram. The increasing number of athletes speaking out about online and offline violence and the rise of a collective voice in response to the dangers of online spaces is alarming and necessitates further attention in academic literature.

Disruption of journalistic practices

Despite some improvements, female athletes remain underrepresented, sexualized, and portrayed ambivalently in sports media coverage (Fink 2015; Grabmüllerová & Næss 2022). However, the accessibility of the internet and the wide spread use of social media provide a space for the disruption of such journalistic practices. The ubiquitous narrative of

sportswomen's empowerment is demonstrated in a quote from Austrian Snowboarder and twice Olympic Gold medallist, Anna Gasser: "Women are here, women are hungry, and they are not holding back anymore" (Busbee, 2022). Not only are they *here*, but they are not afraid to be themselves and call out journalists who do not portray them respectfully. Swedish journalist Tomas Petterson expressed suspicion that Russian cross-country skier Veronika Stepanova cheated on her way to a bronze medal in Beijing (Petterson, 2022). It didn't take long before Stepanova responded on her Instagram with a provocative picture of herself leaning towards the camera suggesting that Petterson "check in her undies":

I have a suggestion, Tomas why don't you demand to do a check in my undies [...] That headline surely would sell better, don't you think ?! (Veronika Stepanova (@stepanova_nika01), 2022).

She was not the only one who expressed dissatisfaction about her portrayal in the news.

Fellow cross-country skier, American gold medallist Jessie Diggins, called out New York Times journalist Matthew Futterman who wrote:

In a sport that has so many women with massive shoulders and thighs, Diggins looks like a sprite in her racing suit, and it's not clear exactly where she gets her power (Futterman, 2022).

Diggins, who previously suffered from an eating disorder (Diggins & Smith, 2021), objected to the article on her Instagram:

[...] I was only able to get to those start lines because I am healthy, happy and have a loving and supportive team around me. [...] The New York Times article that compared my body to the incredible women around me was harmful in many ways. So I want to be clear on this: as coaches, parents, teammates and friends, please, please do not comment on someone else's body, shape and size. Let's keep the focus on the things that really matter – being a great teammate, mental strength, competing clean, training with purpose and racing with guts (Jessie Diggins (@jessiediggins), 2022).

Sexism in sports media has evolved, now implying that female athletes must independently ensure they receive fair and accurate coverage (Toffoletti, 2016). Instances of sexist portrayal, ambivalence, or a lack of coverage are often framed as issues for female athletes to address themselves. Some athletes, like Stepanovova and Diggins, have actively challenged what they perceive as unfair or improper coverage. Their opposition to such portrayals has itself become newsworthy, garnering attention in the news media (e.g., Fossen, 2022; Perkins, 2022).

Discussion

Traditionally, female Olympians have used social media to share their sporting achievements, personal lives, and emotions (e.g., Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010; Geurin, 2017; Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce, 2017), while often not highlighting the

hard work and struggles that accompany them (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018a). The current landscape has shifted, with sportswomen in this study candidly sharing both the triumphs and tribulations of their Olympic journeys. They provide a holistic view of their experiences, from showcasing their fashionable outfits to addressing online abuse. While scholars have advised caution in what athletes share online to protect their professional image (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016) and emphasized the need for PR knowledge and professional conduct (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012), these recommendations seem to underestimate the deliberate and independent actions of athletes on social media (Geurin, 2017). As exemplified by Jutta Leerdam, there are indeed conscious decisions and strategies behind their social media personas. Leerdam herself has acknowledged crafting her online image with intentionality, as revealed in her interview with RTL Nieuws: 'I don't always show real life on Insta, why should I?' This indicates that the authenticity audiences feel when following their favorite athletes is often the result of a strategic and self-aware approach.

The digital era, especially social media, has emerged as a double-edged sword: it empowers (sports)women to dictate their narratives, yet it also burdens them with the management of their public persona. The obligation to maintain an active social media presence can be a distraction (Hayes et al., 2020), as well as a source of stress and significant time investment (Pocock & Skey, 2022). Therefore, it can be inferred that athletes who amass significant followings do so with targeted intent. After long being side-lined by mainstream media, social media have offered them a means to 'own' their media representation and reap economic benefits. Moreover, the portrayal of strong, independent, and inspiring women has been echoed in news media, reflecting a postfeminist media trend that celebrates individual achievement but may neglect the structural obstacles faced by women in sports.

The attention sportswomen receive during the Olympics not only helps them to build a social media audience but also empowers them to challenge traditional media narratives and share their perspectives on specific issues (Kane et al., 2013). Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) suggest that this shift 'acts as strong evidence of the power collapse occurring in a once-omnipotent institution' and illustrates 'the influence the online platform holds to affect social change' (p. 477). Athletes like Shiffrin, Diggins, and Gu have used the visibility provided by the Olympics to amplify their (feminist) voices and address pressing social concerns, contributing to the cause of social change. By sharing their personal stories, they serve as an empowering source of inspiration and motivation for others facing similar challenges. This resurgence in feminist activism is a beacon of hope, yet it unfolds in a context characterized

by heightened misogyny and the co-optation of feminist ideals by neoliberal forces, underscoring the persistent importance and flexibility of feminist thought in today's society.

Conclusion

The contribution to the field with this article is the conceptual identification of how stories can be told differently. By connecting a key principle of Olympism with theorizations of feminism and empirical data from female athletes' crafting of their own identities on various media, it enables researchers to overcome the limitations of the 'traditional' studies of sports media that typically focused on one specific source (Antunovic and Whiteside, 2018). This alternative approach provides a wider context and interpretation of athletes' presentation in media. As demonstrated in this study, athletes' portrayal can differ across various platforms and only cross-examination of all kinds of sources that the audience can consume can provide the whole picture and as such challenge what has become the "almost obligatory recitation" of sportswomen's discrimination in sports media (Bruce, 2016, p. 367).

Although the present research provides various new perspectives, it is not without limitations. This study is limited to the nature of the Winter Olympics which are formed to great extent by countries and athletes from the northern hemisphere. Therefore, future research may aim to include a greater number of athletes from different nations in order to undertake a bigger cross-cultural study. In spite of the study's limitations, I believe that the theoretical debate grounded in the presented cases helped show some of the complexity inherent in both modern feminist thinking, sportswomen's bodily performances and (social) media interactions and raised a number of new research opportunities. Future research should build on this study to interview the athletes themselves to gain further insight into their perception of benefits and challenges of using social media to build their own identities.

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