

A Content Analysis of Online Coverage of Female Athletes in the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics

Graceanne Killoran

Strategic Communications
Elon University

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in
an undergraduate senior capstone course in communications

Abstract

News coverage of the Olympic Games, considered one of the largest planned media events in the world, can play a prominent role in influencing audience perception across the globe. Past studies have concluded that women athletes are often marginalized within the Olympic sportscast. This paper studied common stereotypes that surrounded female Olympians in the online coverage of the 2016 Summer Rio Olympics. The author performed a content analysis on 40 articles from ESPN and The New York Times written during the Games. The research concluded that the online coverage did in fact contain female stereotypes that deemphasized their athletic ability and/or performance.

I. Introduction

Every two years, people around the globe huddle in front of televisions to cheer on their respective country in the Olympic Games, considered one of the largest planned media events in the world (Billings & Angelini, 2007). As a result, millions of viewers watch and read the content that various media outlets produce over the 16 days that the Games take place. Because the media play such a prominent role in influencing audience perception, it is crucial that their portrayal of the events are accurate. However, this is not the case in the Olympic Games: Research has shown that the content seen by television and print media audiences is not of the Olympics itself, but of an event that has been carefully produced by a media organization (Eastman, S. T., & Billings, 1999). More specifically, the portrayal of Olympic athletes is heavily controlled and biased, especially when it comes to the representation of female athletes. It is no secret that female athletes in general tend to be underrepresented in the media compared to male athletes. Billings (2007) noted that the Olympics have proven to be a primary venue to analyze gender bias in sport because it meshes men's and women's competitions under one athletic frame. As a result, several studies have been conducted surrounding the theory that athletes are generally portrayed in alignment with their gender stereotypes. The majority of these works have concluded that women athletes are marginalized within the Olympic sportscast (Billings & Angelini, 2007).

The current study focused on the print media coverage of female athletes in the most recent Summer Olympic Games, held in Rio de Janeiro from August 5 through August 21, 2016. In order to study the portrayal of female Olympic athletes, this study looked at articles in *The New York Times* and ESPN.

Keywords: Olympic Athletes, Sexism, Media's Portrayal of Females, Olympic Coverage, Rio Olympics
Email: gkilloran@elon.edu

II. Literature Review

In an effort to better understand the research topic, the author reviewed pertinent literature on the power that television has on viewer perception, historical depiction of male and female athletes in the media, framing theory, and gender schema theory. While the author did not analyze television coverage in this study, literature on TV was reviewed because it contributed crucial information that helped her identify trends and themes.

The Power of Television on Viewer Perception

Mass media have the power to influence the beliefs, attitudes, and values of consumers (Koivula, 1999). Through research, Eastman and Billings (1999) exemplified ways in which television narratives shape the way viewers interpret sporting events, specifically “in selection, narration, and description of the events” (p. 141). Because television is the primary way for consumers to experience the Olympic Games, the portrayal of the events should be unbiased and packaged for the sole purpose of viewer enjoyment. However, the Olympics are thoroughly mediated by producing organizations, especially when it comes to American network broadcasters (Eastman, S. T., & Billings, 1999). This mediation heavily controls the outlook that viewers have on the Olympic Games. Koivula (1999) noted that mass media play an even larger role when it comes to sports because the majority of sporting events are observed through media outlets, such as television. In addition, research has shown that the language used in media plays a prominent role in the depiction of gender distinctions in the media, especially when it comes to the portrayal of male and female athletes (Koivula, 1999). These findings confirm the evident control that television producers have over the messages that are sent to consumers, especially when it comes to sports and the portrayal of athletes. Further, this type of TV coverage influences the themes that are often found in print media.

Historical Depiction of Male and Female Olympic Athletes

Generally, sports, especially professional sports, are viewed as male territory and receive more attention from the male population. In regards to the depiction of women in sports, Koivula (1999) concluded, “It is well documented that women receive strikingly less coverage than men” (p. 591). Thus, male versus female athlete portrayal and representation in the media have often been called into question.

Research indicates that women are less likely to be mentioned in the media, and more likely to be portrayed stereotypically, with commentary relating to topics such as their physical attractiveness rather than their athletic ability (Billings & Angelini, 2007). Not only do female athletes receive less media coverage than male athletes, but in the circumstances where females are covered in the media, they are portrayed in a manner that creates the image of a woman first, and an athlete second (Smith & Bissell, 2014). Typically, media coverage of female athletes focuses on their appearance, emotions, and relationships, while male athletes are praised for their athletic ability, strength, and masculinity (Smith & Bissell, 2014). In addition, the descriptive language that is used by television commentators and print journalists surrounding female athletes typically involves descriptions and characteristics that are in alignment with female gender stereotypes (Eastman & Billings, 1999). Often, these phrases undercut women athletes’ achievements and recognitions, and focus more on their physical attributes.

Women, Koivula (1999) pointed out, also tend to be framed in terms of their social positions by the media, for example, as mothers, girlfriends, or wives. As a result, women are generally viewed as less athletic or able than men, when in reality, they perform just as well as, if not better than, their male counterpart. Smith and Bissel (2014) confirmed the notion that the continued marginalization of the coverage of women athletes impede not only their ability to build an audience or fan base, but support the ongoing idea that female athletes and sports are undeserving of the overwhelming support and attention that male athletes receive.

Theories Surrounding Gender Bias in Sports

Several theories can be applied to aid in the explanation of how people interpret information they consume. Goffman’s (1974) framing theory suggests that mediation provides social views that aid in the interpretation of events. In sports, Smith and Bissell (2014) noted, “Framing theory establishes that the framer has more agency than those being framed, thereby the theoretical connection between framing and hegemonic masculinity is that those framing female athletes through commentary and visual coverage of

them will do so with a lens that keeps female athletes with less power in the venue of sport” (p. 50). This means that the media’s portrayal of female athletes is going to sway and influence the way consumers view those athletes. For example, females are generally framed in a way that highlights their femininity through comments on their attractiveness and emotionality. As a result, viewers might recognize female athletes for these characteristics before recognizing them for their athletic ability (Smith & Bissell, 2014).

Gender schema theory, another theory behind viewer consumption, suggests that society has shaped the way individuals view one another through stereotypes and norms (Jones & Greer, 2011). In an effort to make sense of society, individuals develop expectations, or schemas, as to how one should act to meet societal norms. When this proposition is applied to gender, this creates what is known as gender schema theory (Jones & Greer, 2011). Individuals subconsciously attempt to fit gender norms, and base the stereotypes on these schemas. When the media subscribe to this type of gender schema, their portrayal of athletes reinforces the existing stereotypes.

The current study aimed to determine whether or not any prominent gender bias existed in the media coverage during the 2016 Summer Rio Olympics, specifically in their coverage of female athletes. Previous research on past Olympic Games found that men tend to receive more coverage in the media compared to women. In addition, the language surrounding male athletes in media coverage typically contributes positively to their image as an athlete, while the language for female athletes takes away from their athletic performance and ability. A content analysis study was performed to answer the following research question:

RQ: What themes were prominent in media coverage among female Olympians?

III. Methods

Content analysis has been used by scholars in communication research because it effectively analyzes quantitative data that is grouped and categorized in research (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). For this study, content analysis was chosen as the best method of research because the materials being analyzed will provide evidence that clearly answer the study’s research question. This study looked at the parts of each article for common themes or trends that would contribute to gender stereotypes that take away from the athlete’s performance, specifically female athletes, rather than each article in its entirety. The author read a total of 40 articles: 20 articles each from the websites of *The New York Times* and ESPN. These articles were chosen based on the date written, and whether they mentioned individual Olympic athletes. *The New York Times* had an average of 1.90 themes per article, while ESPN recorded an average of 1.75 themes.

IV. Findings

The author found that a female athlete was mentioned 180 times in 40 articles from *The New York Times* and ESPN combined. As shown in *Figure 1*, the analysis of these mentions revealed six common themes in order of decreasing frequency: physical appearance and/or age, female athletes mentioned or compared to their male counterpart; family; emotions; credit of female athlete success being given to a male or a coach; and the unnecessary use of belittling language, such as “an impressive time for a female.”

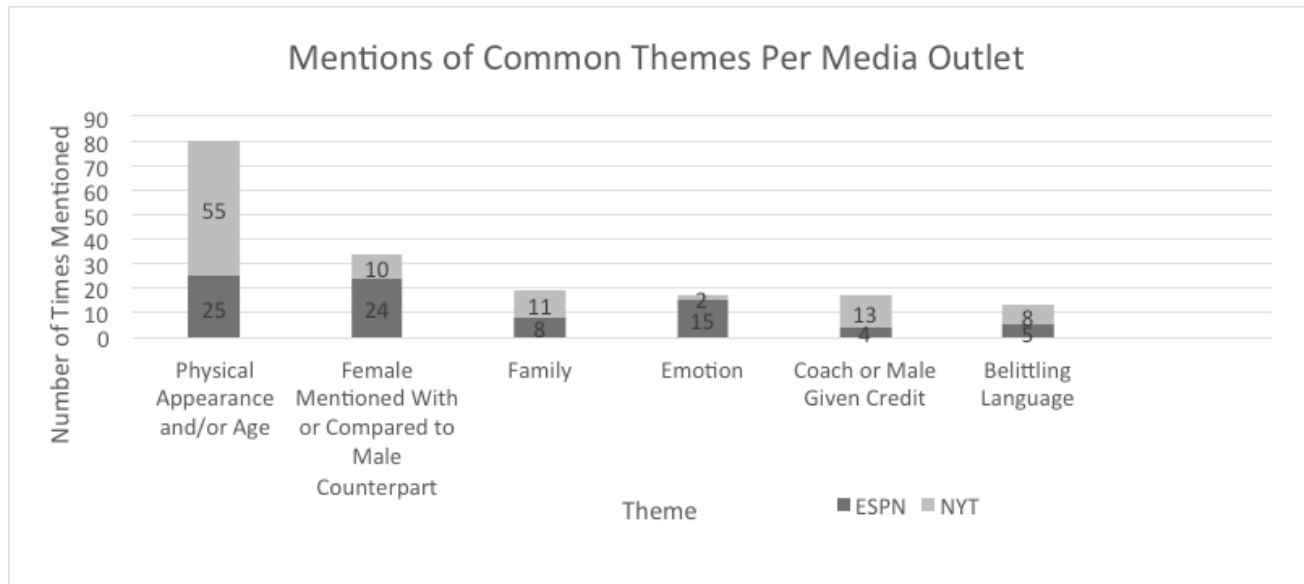


Figure 1. The number of times each theme was mentioned in the articles

The most common theme found throughout the articles taken from *The New York Times* and ESPN concerned the athlete's physical appearance and/or mention of her age (44.4% out of 180 mentions). For example, an article published in *The New York Times* titled "A 4-foot-9 Titan Stands Alone" described gymnast Simone Biles' small stature and "size 5 feet" when commenting on her athletic skills. Such information was not necessary when expressing the capability of Biles, and the article could accurately tout her abilities without. Further, a feature done on a gold medalist Kristin Armstrong was titled "Cycling; A Third Gold, at Age 42." Another article published by ESPN highlighting Olympic beach volleyball player Kerri Walsh Jennings was titled "How Kerri Walsh Jennings made it to a fifth Olympics at age 38." The article discussed the notable achievements of Jennings; however, it did so by referencing the fact that it was impressive for her age.

The second most common theme was female athletes being compared to their male counterparts (18.9%), as displayed in *Figure 1*. In multiple cases, a female athlete's success was unnecessarily accompanied by the feat of male athletes in the same field. An ESPN article covered Katie Ledecky's world record in the 400-meter freestyle, but not without mentioning that "Michael Phelps, the most decorated athlete in Olympic history, added a 19th gold medal to his staggering haul" shortly after discussing her accomplishment. Conner Jaeger, an Olympic silver medalist, told ESPN that Ledecky's stroke is "like a man's stroke . . . she swims like a man." In an article written about Simone Biles in *The New York Times*, Biles' male counterpart, Kohei Uchimura, was said to have a "resume [that] is even more impressive than Biles."

Mention of female athletes' families, the third trend, accounted for 10.6% of the total of 180 mentions. Several times female athlete's children and/or spouses were mentioned in a way that took away from their athletic performance, or put their athletic career second. An entire article published in ESPN about Olympic swimmer Dana Vollmer was titled "Game Changers: Can Olympian Dana Vollmer do what no other swimmer has done?" The article then explained how she still managed to win an Olympic medal even "after giving birth." The article is littered with phrases, such as "pushing her body to limits few would dream for a new mother" and "transforming her body from giving birth to a world-class swimmer." In addition, several articles published in both *The New York Times* and ESPN discussed female Olympians' current and or future plans for families, before or after noting their athletic accomplishments.

The fourth most common trend dealt with identification of female emotions (9.4%). These mentions pointed out and/or made assumptions about female athletes' emotions before, after, or during their respective events. One article in *The New York Times*, Olympic swimmer Missy Franklin "not only lost her smile, [but] she broke down in tears." Another instance was when Juliet Macur, a Times reporter, while describing a celebration of the American female Olympic gymnasts, painted a stereotypical image by writing that Aly Raisman "embraced her teammates in a happy, sparkly huddle." The language used in these descriptions is not only unnecessary, but it also takes away from female athlete performance.

Athletes' coaches and/or male companions, the category tied with the emotion category above, gained credit for a female Olympian's success in several instances. As displayed in *Figure 1*, multiple times a female athlete's success in an Olympic event was credited to her male coach. Most notably, much of swimmer Katinka Hosszu's success is attributed to her husband, Shane Tusup, who is also her coach.

The final theme was represented by phrases like "the only female to . . ." or "the first female to ever" being linked to the end or beginning of statements that were congratulatory of a female athlete's accomplishments (7.2%). These phrases, however, were not used when a male athlete broke an Olympic record or won a gold medal. For example, ESPN published that swimmer Debbie Meyer was "the only woman to sweep the three longer freestyle events." However, when noting Michael Phelps' success in the 4x100 relay, the author used the sentence, "As the most decorated athlete in Olympic history [...] he leaves Rio with five golds and a silver." No mention of 'the only male' or 'the most decorated male' was found during analysis of the articles.

V. Analysis

All 40 articles from *The New York Times* and ESPN contained at least one of six female stereotypes, taking away from female athlete performance and recognition. These findings confirm that the media coverage during the Rio Summer Olympics did in fact contain language that reinforced female gender stereotypes that took away from their athletic performance and ability.

The most common theme, commentary on physical appearance, was more prominent in *The New York Times* than in ESPN, as displayed in *Figure 1*. This is, perhaps, because *The New York Times* is a publication that covers more than just sports and caters to a wider audience than just sports fans. On the other hand, those seeking content that is strictly discussing sports statistical information or more in-depth look at sports will go to ESPN.

This research is in line with the prior research on female athlete stereotypes, which found that the media portrays female athletes in a way that takes away from their athleticism. The current study's findings support Pratt, Grappendorf, and LeBlanc's (2008) conclusion that print articles are more likely to focus on male athletes rather than female athletes. Pratt et al. noted that articles covering male athletes generally contain more quotes and language that focus on their athletic performance, while articles focusing on females featured more quotes from male athletes commenting on their family or appearance. This study also found that when females are mentioned in the media, the language surrounding their coverage generally takes away from their athletic performance.

VI. Conclusion

Overall, the research showed that ESPN and *The New York Times* both published articles containing language that ultimately reinforced gender stereotypes that took away from female athlete performance and recognition during the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio. The language in print media coverage surrounding female Olympians generally contained mentions of their family, emotions, and their male counterparts, while Olympian coverage of male athletes contributed more to their ability and performance.

The six most prominent themes that reinforced these gender stereotypes were the mention of physical appearance and/or age, mention of family, credit of female athlete success being given to a male coach and/or counterpart, mention and/or comparison of female athlete to their male counterpart, emotions, and the unnecessary use of a belittling phrase to describe "female" (for example, "an impressive time for a female"). Out of all 40 articles analyzed, all had one or more mentions of these themes.

Future studies may compare media in countries such as the United Kingdom, China, Canada, and others to American media to identify any differences in their coverage of female Olympians.

Acknowledgments

This author is thankful to Byung Lee, associate professor at Elon University, for his supervision and advice, without which the article could not be published. The author also appreciates numerous reviewers who have helped revise this article.

References

- Billings, A. C. (2007). From diving boards to pole vaults: Gendered athlete portrayals in the “Big Four” sports at the 2004 Athens Summer Olympics. *Southern Communication Journal*, 72(4), 329-344.
- Billings, A. C., & Angelini, J. R. (2007). Packaging the games for viewer consumption: gender, ethnicity, and nationality in NBC’s coverage of the 2004 Summer Olympics. *Communication Quarterly*, 55(1), 95-111.
- Eastman, S. T., & Billings, A. C. (1999). Gender party in the Olympics: Hying women athletes, favoring men athletes. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 23(2): 140–70.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Koivula, N. (1999). Gender stereotyping in televised media sport coverage. *Sex Roles*, 41(7-8), 589-604.
- Ličen, S., & Billings, A. C. (2013). Cheering for ‘our’ champs by watching ‘sexy’ female throwers: Representation of nationality and gender in Slovenian 2008 Summer Olympic television coverage. *European Journal of Communication*, 28(4), 379-396.
- Pratt, J., Grappendorf, K., Grundvig, A., & LeBlanc, G. (2008). Gender differences in print media coverage of the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, Greece. *Women in Sport & Physical Activity Journal*, 17(2), 34-41.
- Riffe, D., Lacy, S., & Fico, F. (1998). *Analyzing media messages: Using quantitative content analysis in research*. Mahwah, N.J.: Taylor & Francis.
- Smith, L. R., & Bissell, K. L. (2014). Nice dig!: An analysis of the verbal and visual coverage of men’s and women’s beach volleyball during the 2008 Olympic Games. *Communication & Sport*, 2(1), 48-64.
-

Appendix

Analysis of Themes Found in Print Articles

Name of Article	Source	Sport	Themes/ Topics
The Rules of Olympic Attraction	New York Times	Swimming, Volleyball	1
The Crying Games	New York Times	Swimming	1, 2
The secret behind Olympic gymnastics? Their coaches	New York Times	Swimming, Gymnastics	3
The Couple Who Turns Heads at the Pool	New York Times	Swimming	1, 3, 4
Tearful Franklin laments finishing 'so far behind'	New York Times	Swimming	5
Sure, These Women Are Winning Olympic Medals, but Are They Single?	New York Times	Swimming, Volleyball	2, 3
Stumbling to Center Stage	New York Times	Gymnastics	6
Simone Biles Calms Her Mother, Then Sends Crowd Into Frenzy	New York Times	Gymnastics	1, 2, 5
Rio Olympics Roundup: Simone Biles, Usain Bolt, and Ryan Lochte	New York Times	Gymnastics, Track, Swimming	1, 4
Why Do Gay Men Love the Olympics?	New York Times	Swimming, Volleyball, Gymnastics	1
Olympic Tennis Player Madison Keys Knows How to Make Her Makeup Stay Put	New York Times	Tennis	1
Olympians in Hijab and Bikini	New York Times	Volleyball	1
Olympian Style Inspires Kids--and Some Adults	New York Times	Gymnastics	1
Michael Phelps Powers U.S. to Victory and Wins His 19th Gold Medal	New York Times	Swimming	1, 4
Inspiring Her Daughter, an Olympic Runner, Was No Sweat for a Fitness Guru	New York Times	Track	1, 2, 3
Gymnast's Specialty: Returning to the Olympics. (She's 41. It's her 7th Trip)	New York Times	Gymnastics	1
Cycling; A Third Gold, at Age 42	New York Times	Cycling	1, 6
Biles Has One Peer in Rio. Or Maybe Ever.	New York Times	Gymnastics	1, 4, 5, 6
At the Olympics, Everyone's Looking. Especially at the Men.	New York Times	Swimming, Gymnastics	1
A 4-Foot-9 Titan Stands Alone	New York Times	Gymnastics	1, 5
Why we should frame Katie Ledecky's dominance in terms of women's sports -- not men's	ESPN	Swimming	1, 4
Bolt targets Olympic triple-triple in bid to rival Ali, Jordan, and Pele	ESPN	Track	1, 4
On this night, appropriately, Katie Ledecky eclipses Michael Phelps	ESPN	Swimming	1, 4, 5, 6
Kerri Walsh Jennings' gold-medal streak snapped in semis	ESPN	Volleyball	1, 2
Aly Raisman finds her all-around silver lining in Rio	ESPN	Gymnastics	1, 5
Gymnast's Specialty: Returning to the Olympics. (She's 41. It's her 7th Trip)	ESPN	Gymnastics	1
Game Changers: Can Olympian Dana Vollmer do what no other swimmer has done?	ESPN	Swimming	1, 2
Michael Phelps helps U.S. to 4x100m relay win in final Rio race	ESPN	Swimming	1, 4
Katie Ledecky breaks 800-free mark, wins 4th gold of Rio Games	ESPN	Swimming	3, 5, 6
Katie Ledecky wins 400-meter freestyle in world-record 3:56.46	ESPN	Swimming	4
Lilly King wins 100 breaststroke gold, topping rival Yulia Efimova	ESPN	Swimming	3, 5
Katie Ledecky is the Present and the Future	ESPN	Swimming	1, 4, 6
How Kerri Walsh Jennings made it to a fifth Olympics at age 38	ESPN	Volleyball	1
Gabby Douglas calls social media critics 'hurtful' after ending Olympic career	ESPN	Gymnastics	1, 2, 5
Bronze, silver, braveharts and Bolt	ESPN	Track	4

Brazil ends Kerri Walsh Jennings' gold-medal run in straight sets in semis	ESPN	Volleyball	4
April Ross on body image and training for the Olympics	ESPN	Volleyball	1
Australian hurdler Michelle Jenneke jigs, but crashes out of hurdles heats	ESPN	Track	1
Australian coach queries 'half-baked' Jenneke	ESPN	Track	1, 3
U.S. women win medley relay, giving Team USA 1,000th all-time gold	ESPN	Swimming	4, 6

Key for themes/topics: 1 – Physical Appearance, 2 – Mention of Family, 3 – Coach or Male Given Credit, 4 – Female Compared to Male Counterpart, 5 – Emotion, 6 – Belittling Language