

Review paper

MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE ATHLETES AT THE MOST “GENDER-EQUAL” OLYMPIC GAMES¹

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Abstract: The Tokyo 2021 Olympics are declared the first gender-equal games because almost 49% of the nearly 11,000 athletes in Tokyo were women, which is why they are very important for the analysis from the gender perspective. This paper aims to determine how much and in what way female athletes were represented in the media. The research is based on the hypothesis that female athletes are underrepresented compared to male athletes and that most media content about female athletes contains gender stereotypes. Quantitative and qualitative content analysis were applied. The corpus of research consists of a total of 730 articles published on the Serbian digital media "Blic Online". The authors conclude that only 30 percent of media space is dedicated to female athletes. The research also shows that 40 percent of articles about female athletes contain gender stereotypes or are not related to sports and professional results of female athletes. Despite the progress achieved in the Olympic Games' gender policy, the media image does not reflect it.

Keywords: *Olympic Games, media, representation, gender, female sport*

INTRODUCTION

Since women were first allowed to compete in the Olympic Games in Paris in 1900, there has been a gradual shift toward greater gender equality in sport. This was particularly noticeable at the 2012 London Olympics, the first Games in which women competed in every listed sports event, accounting for 44.2 percent of the athletes. For the first time since the modern Olympic Games began 125 years ago, gender parity is on the verge of being achieved. According to the International Olympic Committee, almost 49 percent of nearly 11,000 athletes in Tokyo were women. This is an increase from 45.6 percent at the Rio de Janeiro Games in 2016 (Minsberg, 2021). However, even though we witness increased participation and success in sport by both women and girls, sports are still perceived as androcentric. "Although traditional gender roles have been forcefully questioned in contemporary society, and despite the fact that women have emerged successfully in public (including athletic) settings, it seems that many discursive spaces of the sports world are highly and obstinately conservative" (Ponterotto, 2014, p. 106). Belief is still widespread that "sports are exclusively by, about, and for men" (Messner & Cooky, 2010, p. 23). Numerous studies indicate that the media not only

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reflect but also construct and sustain this belief, acting as both a megaphone and an echo of those in power. "The media serve this purpose in many ways: through selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing of issues, filtering of information, emphasis and tone, and by keeping debate within the bounds of acceptable premises" (Herman & Chomsky, 2010, p. 198).

The media are not neutral transmitters of the message and do not have the ability to convey reality in its entirety. Therefore, the media resort to simplification, choosing the most important aspects that make up a certain event and transmit them to the audience, which, in accordance with their previous knowledge and beliefs, decodes and understands the message. This process of selecting important aspects and creating the media image of a certain event does not take place in a vacuum, but under the influence of strong ideological and economic forces. The cost-effectiveness of a particular way of reporting is also an influencing factor when creating a media narrative. In this way, not only is a message about a specific event transmitted, but also about the participants involved. Therefore, the media do not present, but represent the subjects and events – they do not mediate, but construct reality.

This is indicated by the constructivist theory of representation. According to Stuart Hall, this theory recognizes the social character of language, that is, the fact that things do not mean, but meaning is constructed using representative systems, concepts and signs. This process is constituted on the basis of "language codes" and "culture codes", and affects the transmission of messages and their interpretation. Thus, according to Hall's approach, representation is above all construction, while meaning is relative and unstable, open and subject to re-interpretations (Barker, 2004). This process is also obvious in the media, and most of all in the modern mass media, through a complex technology that circulates meanings between different cultures in scope and speed never seen before in history (Hall, 1997). Therefore, constructivist approach is applicable to the understanding of the media, which are based precisely on the policies of representation.

The media provide reduced extracts of reality by multiplying oversimplified images, repeating them frequently, and placing them in socio-political frameworks. These are simply parts of documented reality, whose comprehension is influenced by media-created context. They are built, processed, layered, and presented in such a way that the public does not doubt their authenticity and comprehensiveness. They are intended to provide succinct solutions to unasked questions. The process of representation is tendentious and ideologically saturated, and in media practice, it is often burdened with prejudices and stereotypes. The conventional distribution of power throughout history has influenced the present connection between power and gender, which manifests itself through a variety of social behaviors, including the repetition of deeply established patriarchal stereotypes in the media. Stereotyping, according to McQueen (2000), is the media's continual reinforcement of certain preconceptions about particular groups of people. It involves selecting a readily understandable set of qualities or features that are considered to belong to a group and then creating a representative feature of the entire group from them. These reduced conceptions of human appearance, character, and beliefs attain "official status" via years of repetition in the media and allusions in ordinary discourse.

Gender arises in public discourse as a direct result of the process of representation that occurs in mass communication media as well as new media. Gender is crucial to analyze since gender systems create an unequal redistribution of power, i.e. differences and inequalities between different gender identities, which are reflected in constructed and imposed responsibilities, access, and control over different types of capital, and decision-making opportunities, both in private and public spheres. In a culture dominated by patriarchy, media representations are used to build and sustain masculine dominance. "The term gender stereotypes describes generally accepted, most often incorrect attitudes related to the male or female gender. Reconstruction of gender roles in such a context implies the process of deconstruction of the ruling structure of patriarchal culture, which marked women as inferior in the role of objects of stereotypes" (Višnjić, 2016, p. 35).

By analyzing how female athletes are represented in the media, the authors actually examine the frames of their representation. "The process by which media coverage imposes certain socially and culturally constructed reality, through the selection of information, photos, quotes, thus moving away real types from the system of representation, is called framing in the media studies" (Vujović et al., 2017, p. 1121). Framing is the process of emphasizing certain aspects of reality while minimizing or eliminating others, resulting in a constructed framework for understanding a certain issue. Framing has its roots in sociology and psychology, namely the attribution theory of Austrian gestalt psychologist Fritz Heider. Attribution theory is concerned

with the manner in which a social observer uses information to arrive at causal explanations for specific events. It investigates what information is gathered and how it is used to make a causal judgment (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

In communication theory, frame is the central organizational idea of media content, which provides context and suggests a problem, through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration (Tankard et al., 1991). According to Reese, "frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (Reese, 2001, p. 11). There are two ways of interpreting frames - through the cognitive and cultural prism. Cognitively organized frames invite us to think about social phenomena in a certain way, often influencing fundamental psychological biases. On the other hand, cultural frames do not stop at just organizing one narrative, but invite us to establish cultural understanding and thus interpret it further, independent of immediate information (Reese, 2001). The concept of media framing is especially significant since it represents a more complicated and sophisticated concept than mere media bias. Arguments for and against, desirable and undesired, negative and positive, are all provided via framing. Additional, more complex emotional reactions, as well as the cognitive dimension - beliefs and behaviors - are enabled by framing. Furthermore, framing acknowledges the ability of a media text to describe a situation or an issue, as well as to establish a framework for debate (Tankard, 2001).

"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" (Smith & Bissell, 2014, p. 50). "When the consumers of media content once adopt this system of representation, they find it very difficult to change, because they constantly reapply it when processing any new information from a specific topic pre-framed by the media" (Vujović et al., 2017, p. 1121). This suggests that how female athletes are portrayed in the media will persuade and influence how consumers perceive those athletes. For example, females are generally framed in a way that highlights their femininity by using traditionally female-related epithets and comments on their body, sexuality, and emotionality. As a result, viewers may identify female athletes for these qualities rather than their athletic capabilities.

Diane Ponterotto's study on the press's representation of female athleticism reveals the presence of a discursive frame that tends to trivialize the body of female athletes. This frame is the result of two basic discourse strategies she identifies: a thematic strategy that eroticizes the female body and a metaphorical strategy that conceptualizes the female athlete as child-like. "In addition to responding to male subjectivities, codifying masculine ideals and confirming men's sense of their identity as men, they also encode an ideology of femininity, which in turn becomes hegemonic" (Ponterotto, 2014, p. 106). She claims that this type of representation is motivated by sexist stereotyping related to male hegemony's ideological interests.

Michael Messner agrees and states that organized sports have come to serve as a primary institutional means for bolstering a challenged and faltering ideology of male superiority. He explains that increasing female athleticism reflects a genuine desire by women for equality, control over their bodies, and self-definition, and thus poses a challenge to the ideological basis of male domination. As a result, "the socially constructed meanings surrounding physiological differences between the sexes, the present 'male' structure of organized sports, and the media framing of the female athlete all threaten to subvert any counter-hegemonic potential posed by female athletes. In short, the female athlete and her body has become a contested ideological terrain" (Messner, 1998, p. 197). "As a result of the co-dependent relationship between the mass media and sport, which has developed over time, the media have now become one of the key benefactors, and key beneficiaries, of institutionalized sport and, as such, have become a forceful site for constructing gender discourse and fashioning hegemony" (Toohey & Veal, 2007, p. 206).

By examining the literature on the topic of the imaging used to depict female athletes in the media, Sherry et al. (2016) conclude that a range of mechanisms contributes to the media constructions of women's sport, including the low volume of media attention, narrative focus, prominence of placement or scheduling, linguistic choices and visual representations of women's sport. They underline that their research has proven that the media continue to adopt an approach that maintains sexual difference through devaluing women's sports participation via a number of mechanisms operationalized through visual representations. "It has shown that, internationally, female athletes continue to receive a fraction of the photographic coverage of their male counterparts; that there remains a preference for the year-round coverage of women engaged in traditional,

gender-appropriate sport, a preference that is interrupted only by the occurrence of a sporting mega-event such as the Olympic Games; and that female athletes are regularly depicted in passive poses, that do little to inspire younger female athletes” (Sherry et al., 2016, p. 307).

In “Playing with the Boys: Why Separate is Not Equal in Sports”, Eileen McDonagh and Laura Pappano state that sports are organized on a sex-segregated basis in a manner that largely renders invisible coercive sex-segregated practices. They contend that this segregation in sport is based on three faulty assumptions, which they label the “Three I’s”: “(1) inferiority of women compared to men, (2) injury prevention for women in competition with men, and (3) the immorality of women competing directly with men” (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008, p. 7). They argue that constructed differences in sports are problematic because they generate and reinforce traditional gender roles and have a negative impact on the perceptions of women's capabilities. This disparity in coverage creates deeply embedded, taken-for-granted assumptions that serve to confine women far beyond sport, resulting in a slew of economic, social, and political constraints that exacerbate the patriarchal power structure remaining so firmly entrenched in our culture (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008).

According to Jelena Višnjić, by defining and deconstructing media representation policies, the paradigmatic notion of women in one community is clarified. By revealing hidden meanings, the 'symbolic capital' imprinted in women's identities and bodies as spaces suitable for political, economic, and cultural inscriptions of power is deconfigured. "Deconstructing the media narrative is always a diagnosis of one society and epoch" (Višnjić, 2016, p. 175). The authors of this research strive to discover the extent to which women athletes are portrayed in the media, as well as how the media represents them, analyzing the reporting on the 2021 Olympic Games in the digital media "Blic Online".

METHOD

As the Tokyo 2021 Olympics are declared the first gender-equal games, they are extremely relevant for gender analysis. The study sought to ascertain how much and in what way female athletes are portrayed in the media in the context of the Olympic Games. The research focused on the articles about the Olympic Games published on the web portal "Blic Online" between July 23, 2021, and August 8, 2021. The authors of this paper analyzed "Blic Online" since it is a news portal with the most visits in Serbia, with approximately 915,000 readers daily, according to Gemius Rating (Domains - gemiusRating, n.d.). The analyses included all articles published in the section Tokyo 2021, a total of 730 narrative texts. Therefore, the research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How many narrative texts depict female athletes in the Tokyo 2021 section of digital media "Blic Online"?

RQ2: Are female athletes stereotypically framed in the Tokyo 2021 section of the digital media "Blic Online", and if so, how?

As a result of the foregoing, the objectives of the research were:

O1: To identify the total number of narrative texts, the number of articles relating to male athletes, female athletes, and mixed texts in the section Tokyo 2021;

O2: to identify and classify gender stereotypes in the articles relating to female athletes in the section Tokyo 2021.

Bearing in mind the results of previous research examining the same or similar topic, the hypotheses from which the researchers started were the following:

H1: News portal “Blic Online” had more articles about the Olympic Games in 2021 relating to male athletes than female athletes.

H2: The majority of articles in the digital media "Blic Online" about the Olympic Games in 2021 relating to female athletes are stereotypical.

The research has been conducted using the method of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. According to Macnamara (2005), quantitative content analysis collects data on media content such as topics or issues, scope of mention, keyword-defined "messages" in context, media circulation (audience reach), and frequency. The qualitative content analysis analyzes the relationship between text and its probable or possible meaning. In that way, qualitative content analysis recognizes that media texts are polysemic - open to many different interpretations by diverse readers. It pays attention to the audience, media, and contextual factors - not only to the text. Thus, qualitative analysis traces possible interpretations and the social conditionality of the analyzed phenomenon.

The qualitative part of the research was based on the methodology used in the paper "Women and the Olympic Games: Media Reporting" (Vujović et al., 2017). The study found that women in sports are stereotyped by being represented through media frames: (1) Female athletes are being shown in irrelevant texts, which do not refer to their sports activities; (2) Female athletes are being represented as feminine, beautiful or/and sexual objects; (3) Female athletes are being represented as someone's mother, wife, and girlfriend; and (4) Female athletes are being represented as infantile, emotional, and irritable. In the study, stereotypical articles depicting female athletes were classified into these categories. It is important to note, however, that some texts contained more than one type of stereotype. During the categorization, the most emphasized stereotype was taken into account, in accordance with the principle of the stereotype highlighted in the headline.

The research data were gathered using a code sheet. An example is shown below (Illustration 1):

Illustration 1. Code sheet

Article ID	
Article headline	
Publication date	
Subject/s of the article	
Female	
Male	
Both female and male	
Gender stereotypes (only articles with a female athlete as a subject)	
Feminine/beautiful/sexual objects	
Infantile/emotional/irritable	
Mother/wife/girlfriend	
Irrelevant to sports	
Non stereotypical	
Non applicable	
Description of identified gender stereotype (only articles with a female athlete as a subject)	
Non applicable	

RESULTS

The total number of articles analyzed is 730. The total number of articles relating to female athletes is 219, accounting for 30% of the sample, while there are 384 articles relating to male athletes, accounting for 52.6%, as illustrated in Table 1. In addition, 127 articles, or 17.39% of the sample, represent both female and male athletes.

Table 1. *Articles representing female athletes, male athletes, and mixed articles representing both in "Blic Online"*

Subject	%
Female	30.13
Male	52.46
Mixed	17.39
Total	100

These quantitative findings support the initial hypothesis that the web media "Blic Online" published more articles relating to male athletes than to female athletes in concern of the Olympic Games in 2021. Furthermore, more than half of all analyzed content focuses solely on male athletes.

Research showed that 66.36% of articles depicting women in sports are not stereotypical and 5.45% of stories regarding female athletes are published on topics unrelated to sports. As illustrated in Table 2, gender stereotypes in characterizing female athletes were found in 41.82% of published articles, according to a qualitative study.

Table 2. *Gender stereotypes about female athletes in "Blic Online"*

Representation	N	%
Feminine/beautiful/sexual objects	39	17.72
Infantile/emotional/irritable	38	17.27
Mother/wife/girlfriend	3	1.36
Irrelevant to sports	12	5.45
Non stereotypical	128	58.18
Total	220	100

These findings do not support the initial hypothesis that the majority of articles in the web media "Blic Online" about the Olympic Games in 2021 relating to female athletes are stereotypical. However, the percentage of stereotypical content is significant and it is important to point out their specifics.

DISCUSSION

Analysis shows that female athletes have been labeled with a variety of stereotypical terms. One of the most prevalent techniques of stereotyping female athletes is to portray them as infantile, emotional, or irritable. In this manner, female athletes are represented in 17.27% of articles related to the Olympic Games. The mental state of female athletes was emphasized when they were portrayed. Their emotional reactions, such as crying, were highlighted, whether caused by happiness or by defeat. It is also important to emphasize that female athletes are often being addressed by their first name, or with "young girl", "young lady", by which female athlete is infantilized.

In 17.72% of articles, female athletes are presented through a focus on their appearance. They are depicted as feminine, beautiful, attractive, or as sexual objects. "Princesses" and "goddesses in bikinis" are some of the terms used to describe them. They are described in terms of male attention, emphasizing how men sigh for female athletes and are enthralled by their curves. Their physical appearance is criticized, particularly the size of their breasts and the clothing they wore. Some of the examples follow: "She is the owner of the best buttocks in sports, and now she sells naked pictures on an adult website! /video/" (Blic, 2021); "The most attractive Brazilian in sports had a marathon lovemaking at the Olympics the night before the competition, she was disqualified, and now she is back and looks like this! /video/" (Blic, 2021a); "Wiped out the competition:

In the discipline the most beautiful in the world, we already have the winner of the Olympic Games! /video/" (Blic, 2021b); "Well, she will ignite the Olympics: Brazilian skateboarder performs amazing tricks, and due to her enchanting curves, men sigh worldwide" (Blic, 2021c), etc.

When it comes to female athletes, the female body is a topic per se, virtually a phenomenon. A woman athlete's body is imbued with the connotations of the dominant patriarchal worldview. The physique is a topic, whether the muscularity of a female athlete's body is interpreted as appealing or as insufficiently feminine. The body is a topic, whether a female athlete is large or small. Whether a female athlete is wearing make-up or not, the body is once again the object of discussion. By gender-framing a female athlete, a woman appears to be punished for entering the traditionally male realm, and she is reminded through stereotype and discrimination that she is first and foremost a woman.

In 1.36% of the content, female athletes are presented as someone's mother, wife, or girlfriend, thus focusing on the private sphere instead of their professional results. For example, the title "The most beautiful Serbian female basketball player is fighting for a medal, and few of them know that she is enjoying her relationship with a water polo player! Here's what brought them together! /photo/" (Blic, 2021d), plainly implies that her relationship with her partner is more significant than her athletic achievement. As is her looks, given that female athlete is described as beautiful in the title, and called "attractive brunette" in the article. Also, when reporting on female athletes' Olympic triumphs, the importance of their male partners' contributions is also often stressed: "Little is known about Jovana Preković, but something has been discovered! This famous Serb is the boyfriend of our Olympic gold medalist and he contributed to her enormous success /photo/" (Blic, 2021e).

According to Stojiljković et al. (2020), the media "do not take interest in women in sports, and when they do, they do not do it in the right way" (p. 492). The majority of studies indicate that female athletes are not only marginalized in the media coverage of the Olympic Games, but also that stereotypes used to depict women deemphasized their athletic abilities and/or performance (Billings & Angelini, 2007; Vujović et al. 2017; Killoran, 2017; Smith & Bissell, 2014). This research also confirms such a trend. "Attractiveness, emotionality, femininity, and heterosexuality are a few traditional markers of gender representation" (Smith & Bissell, 2014, p. 50). Commentators in the media find subtle ways to describe female athletes more by their gender and less by their status as athletes (Smith & Bissell, 2014). They are portrayed in such a way that they evoke the image of a woman first and that of an athlete second. Typically, media coverage of female athletes focuses on their appearance, emotions, and relationships. Reporters have often taken many liberties in discussing a female athlete's height, weight, dress size, hairstyle, or outfit; Descriptions like this help separate women from men (Smith & Bissell, 2014), who are praised for their athletic prowess, physical skills, strength, and masculinity.

The findings of this study support claim of Vujović et al. (2017) that the media creates a gender hierarchy in sports through narrative and visual messages in which "strong" men dominate over "weak" women and men's sports are valued more than women's. "This could be explained by the pervasive patriarchal ideology, which persists in the 21st century. Man is made for the public sphere, which includes sports, and woman for the private domain" (Vujović et al., 2017, p. 1137).

CONCLUSION

As a major agent of social life, the media cannot be seen as value-neutral. At their root, they operate inside social, political, economic, and ideological frameworks that impose constraints on the meanings they produce and disseminate. The media position particular issues, ideas, persons, and identities in the consciousness of the public, or exclude them from it. As a result, the media construct a specific logic of interpretation, offer meanings, and value frameworks. Starting from Stuart Hall's thesis that representation is primarily a construction, and the framing strategy, according to which the audience interprets the reality based on indoctrinated patterns, the authors discuss the issue of media representation of female athletes.

The research on the Olympic Games media coverage provides significant insight into the degree of gender equality at the global level because it is possible to identify the society's current perception of masculinity and femininity by looking at media representations of male and female athletes. The study found that, despite the fact that the 2021 Olympic Games were declared the most gender-equal, the media representation of female athletes does not reflect this. Quantitative analysis showed that even though an approximately equal number of men and women competed in the Olympics, female competitors received less than a third of the media

coverage. Furthermore, more than 40% of the content about female athletes contains stereotypes or portrays a female athlete in a narrative that has nothing to do with sports. Female athletes are represented by epithets that have traditionally been assigned to women. Expressions emphasizing femininity, describing or evaluating appearance, and referring to emotionality and mental state are all common. Female athletes are frequently portrayed in relation to men, who are presented as central, reference figures. Female athletes are presented as mothers, wives, girlfriends, but also as sexual objects. The analysis of the media content gives the impression that the fact that sportswomen were Olympic athletes was secondary, as well as their results; what mattered the most was that they were women. This type of reporting continues a trend in the media coverage noted at the Olympics in the past.

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