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Female Athletes, Olympic, and Non-Olympic Online Sports Coverage in Australia: Raising the Bar or Performing below Par?

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Abstract: Sports media research often highlights the significant under-representation of female athletes. However, very little research in this area has focused on online sports media coverage. This study investigated the quantity and quality of media coverage received by Australian female athletes during the Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games in August 2016. The current study provides an analysis of three major Australian newspapers' online versions and offers a valuable comparison to Litchfield and Osborne's study on print versions of the same publications during Olympic years. This study investigates a simultaneous "raising of the bar" and "performing below par" of the Australian sports media in relation to a focus on female athletes during this period of time. Although there were a number of traditional narratives surrounding female representation in sports stories found, there were also some significant differences between online and print media related research in this area.

Keywords: Women, Australia, Sport

Introduction

Traditionally, the Australian sports media has been dominated by male sports commentators, male-focused sports, and male athletes (Litchfield and Osborne 2015; Lumby et al. 2009; Toohey 1997). A significant section of the sports media coverage in Australia focuses on three specific sports: cricket, rugby league, and Australia rules football. Rugby union, soccer, and animal sports (such as horse and greyhound racing) also regularly feature in the sports media. Usually a major sporting event is the catalyst for women's sports being featured more regularly in the sports media, albeit for a short-lived period. The Olympic Games, the Commonwealth Games, and the Australian Open Tennis Championships are examples of such major sporting events.

During these events, female athletes are often featured and awarded space in sports media coverage in Australia, particularly if their athletic performance promotes patriotism and nationalism by bringing success to the country (Wensing and Bruce 2003).² The Olympic Games in particular provides the rare opportunity for women's sports and female athletes to be featured in similar ways to men's sports and male athletes in sports media coverage. Various studies have investigated media coverage of female Olympic athletes, specifically in Australia (Jones 2004; Lumby et al. 2009; Litchfield and Osborne 2015). However, very few studies have investigated this gender representation in online media spaces, while simultaneously examining sports media coverage more generally in Australia.

The current study investigates the quantity and quality of media coverage received by female athletes during the Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games in August 2016.³ That is, the coverage women Olympic athletes received during this period, as well as the coverage received by female athletes in the sports media (not at the Olympic Games). The current study also investigates the online coverage of male and female athletes. Three online newspaper publications were analysed from

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² This is exemplified when female athletes win gold medals at the Olympic Games.

³ The 2016 Olympics Games in Rio de Janeiro will also be referred to as "the Games," the "Olympic Games," and the "Rio Games" within this article.

the opening ceremony through to the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games (5 August–21 August 2016), including the *Australian, Daily Telegraph*, and *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Australian Female Representation at the 2016 Olympic Games

There are two major reasons for analysing the quantity and quality of online media coverage focused on females athletes in Australia during the Olympic Games. Firstly, the potential for online media spaces and the representations of female athletes remains largely unexplored in an Australian sports media context. Secondly, the Rio Games in 2016 marked the first time in Olympic history where more female athletes than male athletes competed for Australia at the Games (see Australian Olympic Committee 2016; Table 1 below). Therefore, based on participation alone, it was assumed that the sports media could not ignore the large female cohort of the Australian Olympic team.

Around a week prior to the opening of the Games, the disqualification of the Russian women’s (eights) rowing team meant that Australia’s rowing team now qualified for the Games. This meant that out of 419 competing Australian athletes, 212 of these athletes were women (*ABC News* 2016). Ultimately, women athletes accounted for 50.6% of Australian athletes competing at the Games, which was an increase of over 5% from the London Games (see Table 1 for details of the last six Olympic Games and female representation).

Table 1: Australian Summer Olympic Teams—1996–2016

Games	Team Size (Amount of Participants)	No. of Men	No. of Women	% of Women
Rio 2016	419	207	212	50.60%
London 2012	410	224	186	45.40%
Beijing 2008	436	236	200	45.90%
Athens 2004	482	274	208	43.20%
Sydney 2000	632	349	283	44.80%
Atlanta 1996	425	255	170	40%

Source: AOC 2018; ABC News 2016

The women who represented Australia performed admirably at the Rio Olympic Games, winning five of the eight gold medals awarded to Australia. As such, during the time period of the Rio Olympics and based on performances, there was the potential for a plethora of media interest in female athletes’ achievements. This study aimed to determine the extent to which female athletes and their performances did indeed feature in the sports media in Australia in terms of nett coverage and the focus on images associated with each news article.

The Australian team at the Olympics Games in Rio in 2016 won eight gold medals. Compared to many other countries around the world, this achievement would be newsworthy and celebrated; however, such an achievement was not celebrated in Australia. In fact, many involved in the Australian Olympic team felt that eight gold medals was below what was expected of the team, including Australia’s Chef de Mission, Kitty Chiller (Barlow 2016). The Australian female athletes won their gold medals in a wide range of sports. These events included the women’s rugby 7s, the women’s 4x100m freestyle, the single sculls rowing (Kim Brennan), the modern pentathlon (Chloe Esposito), and the women’s trap shooting (Catherine Skinner). Australian female athletes arguably out-performed their male counterparts at the Games in relation to gold medal performances (specifically in the medal count).

Australian female athletes and teams have been involved in a number of standout performances in recent times. The Australian women’s football (soccer) team (the “Matildas”) reached the quarterfinals of the FIFA Women’s World Cup (2015) and, subsequently, qualified for the 2016 Rio Games. The Australian women’s netball team are the current world champions

and the Australian women's cricket team are the current International Cricket Council (ICC) Cricket World Cup title holders.⁴ In 2015, the first female jockey won the Melbourne Cup (the most prestigious horse race in Australia) and Australian women also currently hold the title for the singles, doubles, and triples World Bowls Championships. In 2017, Australia media broadcast the first national women's Australian Rules Football competition and in the summer of 2015/16, Australia held the first Women's Big Bash League (WBBL) T20 cricket competition. Therefore, the space of women's sport has made a number of significant leaps forward in recent times in Australia.

Literature Review

As noted above, a number of Australia's female athletes are performing at a high level internationally in a diverse range of sports. However, the amount of media coverage received by these athletes is generally not commensurate with the level of performance or their achievements. Kane (2013, 235) explains that "we should never underestimate the significance of sports in preserving male power and privilege as well as the media's central role in that regard. According to Kane and Maxwell (2011), several trends have been apparent in sports media research over the last three decades. One particular trend is that female athletes are significantly underrepresented in relation to the amount of media coverage received (in comparison to male athletes). This phenomenon is common. According to Fink (2014, 332) "female athletes are participating in record numbers, and delivering record performances: yet the media coverage and marketing of female athletes and women's sport does not reflect this progress." Similarly, Lebel and Danylchuk (2009, 158) suggest that "although the sport-media nexus in men's sport is thriving, women's sport is scarcely a cut above invisibility."

Such trends have been studied in relation to print and television and there have been few differences between these forms of media. These patterns have not changed significantly over the last two decades. According to Davis and Tuggle (2012) the difference in sports media representations between male and female athletes manifests in several ways. These include:

- (1) total column inches and running times, (2) persons quoted, (3) placement of articles and stories, (4) presence and seize/length, (5) placement of an accompanying photograph or videotaped highlight, (6) the range of sports depicted in photos and tapes, and (7) the size and content of newspaper headlines and magazine article titles. (Davis and Tuggle 2012, 54)

Over the last two decades, Cooky and Messner (Cooky et al. 2013, 2015) have investigated the culture of gender representation in televised sports media spaces. In their ongoing and groundbreaking longitudinal research on the coverage of female and male athletes on sports news and highlights on three network affiliates (*KABC*, *KCBS*, and *KNBC*) and *ESPN's SportsCenter* program, they found that coverage of female athletes has actually declined in recent decades. This decline is illustrated by the following results: There was 5% of media coverage dedicated to female athletes in 1989; 5.1% in 1993; 8.7% in 1999; 6.3% in 2004; and 1.6% in 2009 (Cooky et al. 2013, 210). Cooky et al. (2013) explained that there were pieces of high quality and respectful pieces of sports reporting devoted to women athletes. However, such pieces were rare.

In the latest stage of this research by Cooky et al. (2015), the 2014 data showed that 3.2% of news stories on all the network affiliate sources and 2% of overall airtime on *ESPN's SportsCenter* were devoted to female athletes. In fact, Cooky et al. (2015) suggested that their study clearly exposed a number of specific patterns, which included almost exclusively all-male sport content and the sports news being delivered by almost exclusively male commentators. They refer to this culture as a "'mediated man cave'—a place set up by men to celebrate men's

⁴ This information is correct as of September 28, 2016.

sensational athletic accomplishments... [and] women are not welcome in the mediated man cave of televised sports coverage” (Cooky et al. 2015, 278–79).

Weber and Carini (2012) investigated the covers of *Sports Illustrated* for over a decade to assess how female athletes are portrayed. Between 2000–2011, women appeared on only 35 (or 4.9%) *Sports Illustrated* covers (Weber and Carini 2012, 199). Compared to a study carried out on *Sports Illustrated* covers between 1954 and 1965, the current study found that the covers featured significantly fewer female athletes. In fact, between 1954–1965, women athletes featured on the covers 12.6% of the time (Weber and Carini 2012, 199). Additionally, in the current study, of the 35 covers including a female athlete, “only 18 (or 2.5% overall) featured a female as a primary or sole image” (Weber and Carini 2012, 200). The most commonly represented sports that females participated in (that featured on the covers) included basketball and tennis. Finally, Weber and Carini (2012, 200) noted there were several examples of the sexual objectification of women athletes on the covers, including sexualized images of Anna Kournikova (tennis), Jennie Finch (softball), and Lindsey Vonn (skier).

One major sporting event that has attracted substantial research interest in the area of gender and media coverage has been the Olympic Games. Bruce (2012, 131) refers to the seemingly more “equal” media coverage of female athletes as the “Olympic Games effect.” This occurs due to the global media being on scene at the Olympics Games every time they are staged. The following section explores some of this research on the Olympic Games that specifically focuses on gender representation and sports media coverage.

Olympic-based Research

Several scholars have focused their Olympic and media research on specific Olympic sports and on specific countries and regions. At the 2012 Olympic Games, Eagleman (2015) focused on the newspaper portrayals of male and female gymnasts, while Hellborg and Hedenborg (2015) investigated the gendered media representations of equestrian sports. Hedenborg (2013) has also analysed the Swedish media surrounding the 2012 Games, and Petca, Bivoluaru, and Graf (2013) investigated the gender stereotypes in Olympic Games media in Brazil, Germany, and the US, and Selami (2010) studied the 2008 Olympic Games photographs in the Turkish sports media in relation to gender.

Longitudinal research on Olympic Games print newspaper coverage in Australia by Litchfield and Osborne (2015) has found that despite women accounting for over 44% of all athletes competing at the Olympic Games (International Olympic Committee 2014), they are only represented about 14% of the time in newspaper coverage during Olympic periods (and 4% in non-Olympic years during the same time periods). Their research looked at data from 2008–2012 and during the 2008 and 2012 (Olympic) years’ data collection period, there were a total of 60 articles devoted to women’s sports or female athletes. However, 59 of these focused on female participants at the Olympic Games. Therefore, only one article during the specified dates in 2008 and 2012 in all three newspapers focused on female athletes or women’s sports outside of the Olympics (Litchfield and Osborne 2015). They found that in some newspapers in 2012, there were more articles on Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt than there were on all female athletes (Litchfield and Osborne 2015).

O’Neill and Mulready (2015) carried out a UK national press study looking at media coverage of female athletes over two reporting periods, six months prior to and six months after the 2012 Olympic Games to measure coverage differences. Seven newspapers were used in the data collection period. The amount of media coverage of female sports over the given periods was between 3–5% and there were no notable differences in female coverage either before or after the Olympic Games (O’Neill and Mulready 2015). According to O’Neill and Mulready (2015, 660), “this lack of coverage effectively renders women’s sport as barely existent, which must impact on the public perception, situating top sportswomen as outside the norm, views that in 2013 should be confined to the past.”

Billings and Young's (2015) study analysed 118 hours of sports news broadcasts from *ESPN's SportsCenter* and *Fox Sports Live* in the United States of America. Their analysis showed that both programs feature women's sports and female athletes less than 1% of the time in regular broadcasting. This included 1% of time devoted to women on *ESPN* and 0.6% of time devoted to women on *Fox Sports* (Billings and Young 2015). The data collection period covered the 2014 Winter Olympic Games (within the larger collection period), and "women's sports still received less than 2% of coverage, despite winning half of the medals for Team USA" (Billings and Young 2015, 13). The authors suggest that despite *ESPN* and *Fox Sports* having different approaches to broadcasting sports, "the same sports are being offered in near-identical measure within both sports news programs" (Billings and Young 2015, 14). In other words, at the very core of their content, there is minimal diversity in what is being presented between the two broadcasters.

At the previous summer Olympics in London in 2012, Billings et al. (2014) found that the gap between male and female athletes is in fact narrowing in terms of the amount of coverage, at least through some television broadcasts. In their research analysing the *NBC's* Olympic primetime coverage of the 2012 Games, Billings et al. (2014, 44) found that female athletes received 54.8% of primetime coverage compared to male athletes who received 45.2%. Additionally, female athletes were more likely to be discussed in primetime coverage compared to male athletes—"fourteen of the top-twenty most mentioned athletes" at this event were female (44). According to Billings et al., "In an age where most televised sports are still a 'boys club,' the Olympics are a relative anomaly, featuring a plethora of women athletes competing in virtually all of the same sports as men" (38). In this instance, the Olympic Games provide a space for women athletes (and the sports they participate in) to be discussed, analysed, and celebrated.

On the most part, however, coverage of female athletes tends to be lacking compared to male athletes. Outside of the realm of the Olympic Games, Fink (2014, 333) explains that "across a variety of sport contexts, the media portrayal of female athletes tends to differ in its tone, production, and focus, all of which result in a more negative depiction of female athletes and women's sports." In fact, Fink suggests that there are four main explanations for the type of media coverage female athletes often receive. These reasons include "hegemonic masculinity"—a maintenance of male power and privilege in society; "sexism"—which usually includes highlighting something other than a sportswoman's athleticism, "heterosexism/homophobia" and an "influence of marketing/promotion" (337–38). While the space of gendered sports reporting in traditional media is widely researched and known, the same cannot be said for online sports media spaces. Although still in its infancy, research has occurred on online sports media spaces over the last decade. The following section provides a summary of a small slice of this research.

Studies in Online Spaces

"New media spaces such as those afforded by social networks and Web 2.0 interactivity offer new ways of thinking about representations of sportswomen" (Bruce 2015, 384). Hardin (2009, 5) suggests that social media and the internet have,

eroded the institutional barriers traditionally blamed for putting women on the sidelines. Now, anyone (male or female) can become a journalist with a step as simple as starting a blog. Thanks to social networking, fans of women's sports can find one another, join forces, and promote their favourite athletes and teams. With new media, then, it could be argued that many the barriers to fair, equitable and positive attention to women's sports have come down.

Additionally, Fink (2014, 335) believes that it is possible that "the proliferation of online spaces could challenge the ideology of hegemonic masculinity embedded in sport by offering not only more coverage to female athletes, but different discourse as well." However, according to Coche

(2012), the “little research that has been published shows that even online, there is a gender gap, albeit smaller than in traditional media” (76; also see Sagas et al. 2000; Cunningham 2003; Kian et al. 2009; Cooper and Cooper 2009). According to Eagleman, Burch, and Vooris (2014), much of the research examining the sports media relationship with online spaces has focused on websites and sports blogs. Eagleman et al. (2014) have focused their research on the potential for online media spaces in relation to gender, nationality, and sport at the 2012 Olympic Games. In particular, their study examined online media coverage of the Games in six countries.

In similar research, Burch, Eagleman, and Pedersen (2012) explored websites from the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in relation to gender coverage. Their study showed that there was more equitable coverage of female athletes in online spaces (compared to traditional forms of media) (Burch et al. 2012). Coche (2012) also examined gendered sports coverage in online spaces. Her research focused on the Australian Open (tennis) coverage on the ESPN website (Coche 2012). The Australian Open is a sports tournament that features the same amount of female and male competitors; however, Coche (2012) discovered that there were differences in the sports media attention awarded to male and female athletes. In fact, Coche (2012) collected 2155 articles in the digital space and 72% focused on men’s tennis, 20% on women’s tennis, and 7% included stories that focused on both genders or the sports of tennis generally (79). Therefore, there was a large disparity in the gendered focus of articles for one specific tennis event.

In Australia, Jones (2004) was one of the first researchers to look at gender representation at the Olympics in online spaces. Jones has published on online media and gender in Australia for well over a decade. Her study focused on *ABC News Online* bulletins of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. Jones (2004) investigated the amount of coverage male and female athletes received and the types of female sports covered by online media (i.e., traditional male or female sports) in a predominately quantitative framework, using a chi-square analysis and H testing. Her research found that women competing in team sports received little recognition in the sports media (Jones 2004). However, male and female athletes received approximately the same amount of words in the media pieces and female athletes received more lead stories than male athletes (Jones 2004, 136).

Shortly after her first study, Jones (2006) investigated the online images of female athletes at the 2000 and 2004 Olympic Games. In particular, Jones (2006, 116) investigated images accompanying news stories on *ABC News Online*, looking specifically at “active” and “passive” representations of female athletes. According to Jones, in 2000, images of male athletes outnumbered that of female athletes. In 2004, “female athletes outnumbered males in news online pictures. Sportswomen were depicted in 53 percent of the 150 pictures accompanying sports stories” (118). Additionally, sportswomen were displayed in more action shots than passive roles (Jones 2006). While such figures may seem surprising, the *ABC* in Australia has been a long-standing supporter of women’s sports in Australia. In fact, up until 2016, national women’s competitions such as soccer and basketball have been regularly broadcast on *ABC* television. However, as Jones (2006) explains, one-fifth of the images of women athletes were devoted to the knee injury of one athlete, Jana Pittman (17 images). Therefore, without Pittman (and her injury), these figures would be somewhat different. Despite this, Jones’ study does allude to the potential of online spaces in changing the traditional ways that women athletes are represented in media spaces.

In further work in 2013, Jones investigated four national online sports websites, including *ABC* in Australia, *BBC* in the United Kingdom, *CBC* in the United States, and *TVNZ* in New Zealand in relation to the reporting of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Analysing three bulletins a day, Jones (2013) found that there was a disparity in male and female representations, whereby the news pieces (including content and photographs) on these online sports sites focused predominately on male athletes. This study showed that 59% of stories were devoted to male athletes and 41% to female athletes. Around 62% of photographs were devoted to male athletes and 38% to female athletes, 64% of lead stories devoted to male athletes and 36% to female

athletes, and 68% of lead photographs devoted to male athletes and 32% to female athletes (Jones 2013, 251). Additionally, Jones explains that there was a greater focus on female athletes' person and professional relationships compared to male athletes (2013, 251). In fact, Jones (2013, 259) further explains that:

In several instances, the broadcasters framed female athletes as emotionally vulnerable; questioned their physical and mental capacity to compete at elite level[s] in sports considered masculine; intimated that they needed third party guidance from a coach, a psychiatrist or a family member in order to overcome nerves and achieve success; and questioned women's commitment and athletic consonance when they failed to live up to media-hyped expectations.

According to Jones (2013, 258), "the clear message from this study of the extent and nature of online sports coverage of four national public broadcasters is that men and their sports were *the* story of Beijing." While these statistics and themes are not dissimilar to traditional representations of women athletes in the sports media, she found less disparity between men and women than in previous studies. Therefore, this study (along with her others—Jones 2004, 2006) shows that there is potential for online sports reporting to represent women athletes (at least quantitatively) in numbers that they are rarely represented in traditional sports media.

The online sports media space remains largely inconsistent in relation to equal coverage of male and female athletes and sports. While there are some studies suggesting significant movements away from traditional media coverage in terms of the quality and quantity of coverage for female athletes (Jones 2006), there are others which show a continuation of the traditional gendered sports media coverage (Coche 2012).

Theoretical Framework—Critical Feminist Theory

Regardless of the media platform, investigating women in sports media should be analysed using a critical perspective. The use of theory provides a space for both the quantitative differences between male and female news stories, along with the qualitative differences, such as the differences in language and images associated with male and female athletes. Traditionally, there have been a number of gender imbalances of power in all roles and positions in sports and the sports media, including the representation of female and male athletes in sports media contexts. The use of theory helps to identify and critique these imbalances.

The current study, using a critical feminist framework, examines online coverage of female athletes in both Olympic and non-Olympic sports coverage during the 2016 Olympic Games period. A critical lens is important to examine the issue of gender representation in a traditionally male-dominated space. According to Kane and Maxwell (2011, 203), "scholars who study sport from a critical theoretical lens examine whether sport organizations and structures privilege some groups over others." There are a number of institutions and practices in society where women are traditionally devalued and marginalized in a systematic manner and the sports media is one such institution.⁵ The media, and specifically sports media, are powerful in shaping cultural beliefs in society, and therefore play a large part in this marginalization and subjugation.

This marginalisation is often played out through the absence of equal media coverage of women's and men's sports, such a culture continues to celebrate those who have always been celebrated in the sports media. These images provide pertinent insight into how media frames both male and female athletes. Bruce (2016, 367) explains that a diverse range of countries have reported "few gender differences in sports photographs." Bruce labels photographic representations of athletes as "Athletes in Action" (367). While Bruce discusses "Athletes in Action" as a current theme used in sports media reporting, she dissects such themes using third-

⁵ Sports participation relating to biology is also another example of this.

wave feminism. As such, Bruce's research will also be utilized in the analysis of the gendered media representation of images found in the online newspaper articles in this study.

Methodological Approach

During the 2016 Rio Olympic Games (August 5–21, 2016), a media analysis (Altheide 1996) of online newspapers was carried out. Three specific newspapers were chosen for the study as they represent some of the principal newspapers in both hardcopy and online versions in Australia and provide both a state and national perspective. The *Australian* newspaper represents a national perspective and both the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sydney Morning Herald* represent a state perspective (New South Wales). Additionally, using these publications provided a replication of a previous (larger) study by the author/s in the context of hardcopy newspapers, used in Litchfield and Osborne's (2015) study, thereby enhancing this article's validity. The sport's section for each of these publications was used to collect data. While Litchfield and Osborne's (2015) study looked at the print version of the publications between 2008 and 2012, the current study seeks to explore the difference in findings some four years later and in the online format of these three media sources.

Data collection occurred at the same time every day. At 2 p.m. AEST, a snapshot of all of the featured headlines on the webpages was captured. This time period allowed all of the Olympic news stories to be published for the day as the Olympic coverage generally concluded at around an hour earlier each day. This data collection contained all sports stories, not just those featuring the Olympic Games. Each of these news stories were categorized and coded based on the focus of the article. Information such as the sport being focused on, the athlete being focused on, the gender of the athlete, whether (or not) the focus was on an Olympic event, if the news piece featured an image, and how that image represented male or female athletes and the gender of the sports journalist who authored each news piece, were just some of the details recorded.

In total, 1814 news pieces were analysed during the data collection period. Data was analysed by categorising information into themes and subthemes that were identified using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006, 82) suggest that a theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set." In the current study two specific themes were uncovered: 1) The sports media are "raising the bar" in gendered sports media representation (including the total number of reports on women athletes compared to male athletes) in coverage relating to the Olympic Games; and at the same time, 2) the sports media are "performing below par" in gendered sports media coverage (with a particular focus on regular [or non-Olympic] sports media coverage). In particular, these two themes are explored in relation to the number of articles published, alongside a focus on which female Olympic sports were focused on, and a focus on the images associated with each news article. In particular, the images were analysed to determine if the athlete was photographed in an active (in a sporting context including the sporting field, at the medal ceremony, etc.) or passive position (outside of a sporting context—i.e., in a social setting, with family, etc.). These themes are explored in further detail below.

Results

This study's results indicate that there remains a real problem with sports media spaces representing women athletes equitably to male athletes and relative to participation in Australia, unless the focus of the media is on a major sporting event, such as the Olympic Games. This section outlines the dichotomy between the sports media focusing on female athletes competing at the Olympic Games compared to a focus on female athletes generally (not performing at the Olympic Games during the same time period).

The Big Picture

While the data for gender representation for Olympic and non-Olympic-focused articles can be easily dissected, the data that explains the overall story can also provide a useful narrative. A total of 1814 sports news articles were amassed during the collection period of the 2016 Rio Olympic Games. Of these 1814 articles, a total of 644 of these articles focused on the Olympic Games. The additional 1170 articles focused on sports in Australia (not related to the Games). A total of 1253 (or 69%) focused on male athletes and 284 (or 15.7%) focused on female athletes, 173 (9.6%) articles focused on general sports issues without a focus on gender, and 104 (5.7%) focused on animal-related sports (such as horse and greyhound racing). While such results are extremely typical of what one might come to expect during a major sporting event, the distinction between articles focussing on the Olympic Games and articles not focusing on the Olympic Games provides a basis for unpacking this data further.

Raising the Bar

Overall, a “raising the bar” in relation to this study meant that it was evident that there was a shift in the amount of traditional trivial gendered media coverage compared to various other Olympic media studies, i.e., a focus on the quantity of articles. Of the 1814 sports news pieces analysed in the current study, over one-third focused on the Olympic Games (644). The focus on the Olympic Games ranged from featured news pieces on athletes, teams, and sports, through to the results of specific events. Most often, the focus of these news pieces were Australian athletes and usually there was an emphasis on either winning an Olympic medal or performing below the expected level of performance (See Craddock 2016 and *Sydney Morning Herald* 2016a, 2016b for examples of this).

Due to the increased numbers of female participants representing Australia (compared to previous Olympic teams), it was expected that there should be an increase in the media focus on female athletes, at least by virtue of the equal participation numbers (for men and women). Of the 644 articles analysed that focused on the Olympic Games, 165 (or 25.5%) focused on general events and issues or gender-neutral topics within the Olympic Games. Such issues included performance-enhancing drug use, medal counts, and controversies at the Games or any event/issue where there was not a single focus on male or female athletes or events. Of the remaining 479 articles that focused on the Olympic Games’ athletes, 241 (or 37.5%) focused on male athletes, sports, and events, and 238 (37%) focused on female athletes, sport, and events. Therefore, the split between genders was essentially half on male athletes and half on female athletes. In fact, two out of three publications featured women athletes more often than male athletes during the Olympic coverage (See Table 2).

Table 2: Olympic-focused News Pieces

Publication	Male Focus	Female Focus	Gender- neutral Focus	Totals
<i>The Australian</i>	53	55	56	164
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	114	116	68	298
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	74	67	41	182
TOTAL	241 (37.5%)	238 (37%)	165 (25.5%)	644

This finding is somewhat surprising based on recent research in this area that has focused on traditional media outlets. In Litchfield and Osborne’s (2015) study, using the same publications in print format, they found that female athletes were only represented about 14% of the time in Australian newspaper coverage during Olympic periods. Their research looked at data collected during the 2008 and 2012 (Olympic) years. Compared to their findings, the current study shows a

significant increase in female-focused sports reporting.⁶ It is difficult to not associate such a large increase with the “unrestrained” online platform of these newspapers. While print media is constrained by the amount of space it has to produce sports stories, the medium of online newspapers has seemingly infinite space in which sports stories can be produced.

The types of female Olympic sports focused on by these three online newspapers also provide a somewhat captivating story. Table 3 illustrates the types of sports most focused on by the online newspapers. Traditional Olympic sports such as swimming, cycling, and athletics feature prominently in the largest amount of articles dedicated to a sport. However, the sport of rugby sevens (2016 was the first time the sevens format of rugby union was played at the Olympic Games), featured most prominently in the number of sports media articles. In fact, 14.3% of total coverage that focused on female Olympic athletes, featured rugby sevens. Needless to say, that the Australian women’s rugby sevens team performed well at the Olympic Games. Additionally, the sport of rugby in Australia originates in New South Wales which is the location of two of the newspaper sources used in data collection. Sports such as judo, fencing, golf, BMX, and synchronized swimming featured less frequently in the media coverage.

Table 3: Female Olympic Sports Focused On

Olympic Sport	Number of Articles	Percentage
Athletics	27	11.4%
Basketball	11	4.6%
Beach Volleyball	5	2.2%
BMX	1	0.4%
Canoe Slalom	3	1.3%
Cycling	20	8.5%
Diving	7	3%
Equestrian	4	1.6%
Fencing	1	0.4%
Golf	1	0.4%
Gymnastics	4	1.6%
Hockey	8	3.4%
Judo	1	0.4%
Kayak	3	1.3%
Rowing	12	5%
Rugby 7s	34	14.3%
Sailing	6	2.5%
Shooting	4	1.6%
Soccer	18	7.5%
Swimming	32	13.4%
Synchronised Swimming	2	0.8%
Tennis	11	4.6%
Triathlon	3	1.3%
Water polo	5	2.2%
Women’s sports generally*	15	6.3%
TOTAL	238	100%

*These articles did not focus on one specific sport

⁶ However, this increase in the amount of articles that focus on female athletes does not necessarily mean that the content of such articles were not sexist or infantilizing in nature. While the researcher did not notice any such representations of female athletes, such an analysis was beyond the scope of the study and data collected.

Such a focus on female athletes and events at the Olympic Games through the Australian online sports media is significant. This significance lies in the somewhat equal representation of female athletes (compared to male athletes) relative to participation numbers. In fact, it is suggested here that these overall figures of gendered representation at the Games represent a “raising of the bar” in terms of gendered media coverage of sports. Whether this is due to the “online” platform or a shift from traditional quantitative representations of female athletes is unknown. To help answer such a question, it would be pertinent to investigate the sports media pieces during the same time period in the same publications that did not focus on the Olympic Games as well as the use of images in articles focusing on male and female athletes.

Performing below Par

There are at least two ways that the sports media analysed in this study “performed below par” in terms of equal and fair gendered sports coverage. These two examples include the lack of coverage in non-Olympic focused media of female athletes (compared to male athletes), and the types of images associated with each sports media piece. These two examples are discussed below.

In contrast to the significant amount of sports media coverage received by female Olympic athletes, non-Olympic female athletes received very little coverage during this same time period. Of the 1814 sports media pieces analysed in this study, 1170 articles were not related to Olympics. Of these 1170 articles, 1012 (86.4%) articles focused on male sports, male athletes, and male teams. A further 106 (9.1%) articles focused on animal-related sports, such as horse racing and greyhound racing, and 46 articles (3.9%) focused on female sports, female athletes, and female sporting teams.⁷ Obviously, such a finding provides a sobering indictment of the overall representation of male and female athletes generally. In relation to each of the three online newspapers, the breakdown of this data can be found in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Non-Olympic–focused Articles

Publication	Male Focus	Female Focus	Animal Sports
<i>The Australian</i>	332 (93%)*	5 (1.4%)	20 (5.6%)
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	301 (77.5%)	29 (7.5%)	58 (15%)
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	379 (90.5%)	12 (2.8%)	28 (6.7%)
TOTAL	1012 (86.4%)	46 (3.9%)	106 (9.1%)

* Including number of articles and also the percentage

This data shows that there was over twice the amount of sports news pieces devoted to animal sports compared to female sports. It was also 22 times more likely that a male-focused sports news piece was published on these online newspapers compared to female-focused pieces. Additionally, over the period of data collection (17 days), a total of 46 articles equated to approximately 2.7 articles focussing on female athletes per day. In terms of there being three publications in the current study, this amounts to less than one sports story per day per publication on female athletes overall.

Publications such as the *Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* featured less women-focused sports news articles compared to the *Daily Telegraph*. In fact, the *Daily Telegraph* reserved one small section of their online space to focus solely on female athletes.⁸ While the *Daily Telegraph* is clearly making a concerted effort to ensure more female news pieces are published in their online space, the bulk of these focused on the Olympic Games during this time

⁷ A further eight articles focused on sports generally, without a focus on male or female athletes.

⁸ This section, entitled the “Swoop,” featured articles on female athletes written predominately by female sports journalists and ex-female athletes (see dailytelegraph.com.au/sport/swoop).

period. Nevertheless, there are significantly more articles devoted to women athletes in the *Daily Telegraph* compared to the other two publications.

In relation to the breakdown on male-focused sports that dominated the sports media during this period, rugby league and Australian Rules Football featured heavily. In fact, five major male-dominated sports in Australia accounted for 951 (out of 1012) of these articles. The National Rugby League competition in Australia (the NRL) accounted for 395 articles (or 34%)⁹; the Australian Football League (AFL) competition accounted for 209 articles (or 18%); cricket accounted for 126 articles (or 11%); rugby union accounted for 122 articles (or 10.5%); and soccer accounted for a further 99 articles (or 8.5%). All of these sports in Australia feature on a variety of sports media platforms, including televised live matches and through various sports media reporting. Therefore, it is not unsurprising that these male-dominated sports feature so prominently.

Sports Images

Another angle of analysis explored in this research was the differences in focus of sports images that accompanied sports media articles. While there were very few significant differences, there were a number of general themes that applied to the sports images in this study. Both female and male athletes were more likely to feature in an active pose rather than a passive pose (i.e., an image not related to sport) in images. However, female athletes were more likely to feature in a passive pose compared to male athletes (see Table 5).¹⁰

Table 5: Image Focus

Focus of Image	Total Images	Percentage
Male in active pose	1144	88.3%
Male in passive pose	152	11.7%
Female in active pose	225	75%
Female in passive pose	75	25%

Within the overall data collection, 88.3% of articles feature males in an active pose, that is, images of male athletes competing in sport. Comparatively, female athletes were featured in an active pose 75% of the time they featured in an image. Male athletes were less likely than female athletes to be presented in a passive pose. Images focused on male athletes in a passive pose 11.7% of the time and female athletes 25% of the time. While these differences are by no means vast, they certainly support the research carried out by Jones (2006), whereby female athletes were more likely to feature in an active-focused sports image, rather than a passive role. However, why there are less active images and more passive images of female athletes compared to male athletes requires further consideration and research.

Discussion

The non-Olympic findings of the current study intimately align with previous research in this area and could be defined as the sports media in Australia “performing below par” in terms of female representation in online spaces. In fact, compared to previous work carried out that analysed the same newspapers during the same major sporting event (the 2008 and 2012 Olympic Games), very little has changed (Litchfield and Osborne 2015). Litchfield and Osborne’s (2015) study showed that in the print versions of the *Australian*, *Daily Telegraph*, and

⁹ It is not a surprise that the NRL dominated the coverage in the sports media. This is due to the NRL competition being based in the state of New South Wales (NSW), and two of the newspapers being NSW based.

¹⁰ All images that focused on male or female athletes are included in the table (i.e., a number of “general sport” news articles featured images of male or female athletes and these are also included in Table 5).

Sydney Morning Herald during their reporting period, 4% of non-Olympic-related sports news articles focused on female athletes and female sports. Some four years later, these three newspapers have not increased their focus on non-Olympic female-related sports stories, despite the online platform of the newspaper being investigated. Therefore, in this instance, the online platform of these three newspapers provided no difference in the gendered reporting over a four-year period when compared to the print media format of the same publications. Such results are similar to the lack of progress found in the work of Cooky et al. (2013; 2015), whereby there have been no significant increases in female representation in sports media stories over time, regardless of the media platform.

However, there is a positive narrative for female athletes and media coverage in Australia. For media articles that focused on Olympic athletes, a different narrative exists. Online newspapers focused significantly more on women athletes (competing at the Games) than they have in the past. Australian women athletes won more gold medals than their male counterparts and there were (albeit slightly) more female athletes than male athletes competing for Australia. Additionally, the sports focused on prominently in this study include, on the most part, sports in which women athletes won gold medals. These sports included rugby sevens, swimming (4x100m freestyle), athletics (modern pentathlon), and rowing (single sculls). Incidentally, the fifth female gold medallist, who won her medal in trap shooting, did not feature prominently in the sports media used in this study. In fact, shooting articles were only featured three times in these newspapers during the data collection. Considering the lack of prominence of shooting as a sport in Australia (outside of the Olympic Games), this finding may not come as a surprise. What is somewhat significant, however, is that the nationalistic nature of celebrations for gold medal wins (often widely celebrated in the sports media) did not take precedence in the coverage of the shooting gold medal. In this instance, the lack of media coverage could be more firmly related to the sport than the gender of the athlete.

Despite Australian women athletes being more successful (in terms of gold medal wins) than their male counterparts at the Games, the “raising of the bar” nature of the Olympic-focused sports media coverage represents a shift in the Australian sports media (at least in an online format).¹¹ Billings et al. (2014) have noted this shift in another media form, television spaces, at the 2012 Olympic Games. The *NBC*’s primetime coverage of these Games spent more time discussing and analysing female athletes at the Games compared to male athletes (Billings et al. 2014). However, Billings et al. (2014) further explain that the increase in coverage of female athletes was due to the successful sporting performances of the Team USA women athletes (53). According to Billings et al. (2014), the Team USA women athletes won 63% of all USA gold medals (48). While Billings et al.’s (2014) study focused on television, comparisons made to the current study are difficult to ignore.

The online format of the newspapers in the current study also provides a pertinent focus. Online sports media coverage has the potential to produce a wide variety and diverse range of sports stories, especially when compared to print media versions, where there is a limited amount of space. Olympic-focused articles featuring female athletes and female sports (only) provided a glimpse of how this potential can become a reality. Relative to the numbers of Australian Olympic athletes participating, there was an equal representation of male and female athletes in media coverage. In fact, relative to success and gold medal-winning performances, it could be argued that Australian female athletes should have received more media coverage than they did. However, while this study shows that progress has been made (in the space of Olympic coverage), progress is also incremental overall.

Active images of athletes, referred to as “Athletes in action” by Bruce (2016), dominated media articles collected in the current study. Bruce (2016) explains that newspaper images from around the world usually “emphasized both female and male athletes in action or competitive settings” and that these patterns were “reported most frequently in studies of international

¹¹ Under no circumstances does the author suggest that this is also the case in other forms of media.

competitions that pit nations against each other” (367). While this is apparent in the current study, there were subtle differences in how male and female athletes featured in photographs. Although both male (88.3%) and female (75%) were portrayed in predominately active roles, there still remained a greater percentage of female athletes (compared to male) who were represented in “passive” roles. While minor, such representations are reminders that male athletes are more likely to be represented as athletes. Additionally, these findings could also indicate a “carry-over” of traditional ideas about women’s place in competitive sport. Once again, in the current study, these messages are subtle and do provide a significant improvement on previous work carried out by Jones (2006), whereby female athletes were represented in active poses only 60% of the time (118).

Limitations

Similar to all studies conducted in the sports media space, this study has a number of limitations. First and foremost, the major limitation of this study is that only three newspapers were analysed during the data collection. While these newspapers were chosen for a variety of reasons and provided a sound data collection pool, the analysis of additional sources would have provided the study with a greater range of data. The time of the data collection each day may also have played a part in the data that was found. It may be possible that different types of stories were on the online newspaper sites early in the morning or later in the afternoon (outside the data collection time each day). Finally, all data analysis is open to researcher bias and subjectivity.

Concluding Comments

An online newspaper analysis provides a logical extension to previous research carried out in print media spaces. Such a project investigates the potential for online news sports spaces to provide an increase in the quantity of news pieces dedicated to female athletes and female sports. Additionally, based on the seemingly infinite space on this platform, online media spaces should provide diverse representations of athletes that are often lacking in traditional forms of sports media. Therefore, online sports media offers the potential to represent female athletes more regularly and thoroughly, compared to the traditional limited space of print media.

This study showed that there is a simultaneous increase of female Olympic-focused sports media articles in these three online newspapers (raising of the bar), alongside a stagnant culture for the female-focused sports news articles not related to the Olympics (performing below par). Therefore, the online newspaper space, although still controlled by traditional media outlets, has provided a step toward the potential for producing more female-focused sports stories (at least during the Olympic Games). It is difficult to not associate such a step being influenced by social media settings and the promotion of women athletes and women’s sports. However, further research is required in the space of online newspapers to further unpack the culture of gendered sports reporting. This is particularly pertinent for online newspapers due to the control of traditional media in this space. Additionally, a comparison between the online newspaper media space and new interactive media spaces (such as social media) would provide an additional informative analysis of gendered sports reporting.

While the Olympic Games provide a unique case study in sports media-related research, the culture of sports media and gender representation that does not focus on the Olympic Games may provide a more accurate depiction of how much coverage women athletes and women’s sports regularly receive. Therefore, while there is much to celebrate in terms of the quantity of female Olympic-focused sports stories, this study also provides a sobering reminder that female sports and female athletes still significantly lag behind male sports and male athletes in terms of regular sports coverage, at least in the space of some online newspapers in Australia. Such a message reinforces the memorandum to the wider community that firmly states that female sports are not worthy of media attention in the same ways that male sports are, unless they are competing at a major sporting event.

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