Sportswomen in the Media – An Analysis of International Trends in Olympic and Everyday Coverage

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Introduction

Research on how the media represent sportswomen now has a long history. For at least 30 years, researchers have been studying the images and words that are produced by the mainstream sports media. The high level of interest in how sportswomen are represented is easily seen in the thousands of published research articles from around the world\(^1\). Unsurprisingly, this high level of interest is a response to feminist frustration with the overwhelming media marginalization of sportswomen, which persists across time, countries and media formats (Bruce, Hovden & Markula 2010; Horky & Nieland 2013; Kane 2011; Markula 2009; von der Lippe 2002).

Increasingly the focus of analysis is moving to online and social media, which offers potential for a greater diversity of voices, including those of women athletes and fans. As well, the feminist theories for making sense of media coverage are also diversifying to include third wave feminism, post-feminist and neoliberal feminist perspectives. Unfortunately, although the application of many theoretical and methodological approaches has allowed researchers to identify the default settings of mainstream mediasport, this research has had very little impact on shifting these settings or the discourses that inform them.

I have been interested in this topic for most of my career and recently tried to synthesize the existing body of research into a coherent overview of patterns of media coverage of sportswomen, which I have called the Rules of Representation, following on from an earlier summary created with Emma Wensing (Wensing & Bruce, 2003). My review focused on research published in English and revealed a wider range of narratives than is usually discussed by Western researchers, including three Rules (all visible in online contexts) that offer alternatives to the historical marginalization, trivialization, sexualization and feminization of sportswomen (Bruce 2016). As a result, in the early 21st century, feminist frustration sits alongside cautious optimism about the possibilities of new media for shifting public and media understandings of the place of females in sport.

Today I want to share with you the 15 Rules of Media Coverage I have distilled from the existing research (Bruce, 2016). Some Rules appear to be disappearing, others are very persistent, and some have only become visible with the rise of social media and internet interactivity. Although there are national differences, many of the Rules are found across North America, Australasia, South Africa the United Kingdom and Western Europe,
as well as parts of Asia and Eastern Europe (Bruce, Hovden & Markula, 2010; Horky & Nieland 2013; Jorgensen 2005; Markula 2009; Tolvhed 2010; von der Lippe 2002; Wu 2010). Where possible, I compare the international trends with results from research on Japanese sports media. With the 2016 Rio Olympics starting next month, I will focus my attention on Rules that we are most likely to see in mainstream media coverage of the Games.

Theoretically, my research emerges from the feminist cultural studies understanding that the meanings of femininity or masculinity are always in motion. This means that context makes a difference, whether that is historical time period, national context or culture. At the same time, some beliefs about femininity and masculinity have been around for a long time. They have formed what cultural studies scholars call “powerful, immensely strong … ‘lines of tendential force’” which means that they can be highly resistant to change (Hall, 1986, p. 54).

In cultural studies, we do not generally make claims about whether texts are accurate or inaccurate, truthful or biased. Instead, we take the theoretical position that media stories teach us how to think about aspects of identity, such as gender. The impact of media coverage is that it slowly transforms our ideas about what are “the most plausible frameworks” we can use to tell ourselves how the world works, and what constitutes reality (see Hall, 1984, p. 8). Therefore, in cultural studies research, we try to understand how cultural beliefs reveal themselves in the texts (stories, images, videos) produced by media workers and organisations. When we analyse media texts, we view them as “material traces” (McKee, 2003, p. 15) of plausible frameworks or lines of tangential force. As Alan McKee (2003) argues, “We can never see, nor recover, the actual practice of sense-making. All we have is the evidence that’s left of that practice – the text” (p. 15). As a result, our focus is the analysis of “how these texts tell their stories, how they represent the world, and how they make sense of it” (McKee, 2003, p. 17). But this does not mean that all meanings are equally acceptable or likely. As McKee puts it, “Ways of making sense of the world aren’t completely arbitrary; they don’t change from moment to moment. They’re not infinite; and they’re not completely individual” (2003, p. 18). Thus, we seek to find out what are the reasonable sense-making practices of cultures” (McKee, 2003, p. 19).

In today’s presentation, my focus is on the way that gender is culturally, rather than biologically, constructed and interpreted. We know that when an individual or a group (such as female athletes) are seen as ‘Them’ we are likely to think about and treat them differently (Hall, 1997), and this is often the case in sports media, where men are understood as the norm and sportswomen are seen as other.

To be understood by their audiences, media workers have had to “learn what are reasonable sense-making practices” in their culture “and think within them” (McKee, 2003, p. 45). Indeed, their success depends on being able to present information in ways that intersect with the existing frameworks of their readers, listeners or viewers (Desmarais & Bruce, 2008). And it is this intersection, between cultural discourses and how media workers interpret and represent women’s involvement in sport, that is my focus today.
The Importance of Cultural Context
In research on media representations of sportswomen, the majority of studies published in English have been conducted in the United States. As a result, the main ideas about media coverage have been strongly influenced by the preoccupations of US researchers, with two important outcomes.

The first outcome is that cultural differences have not always received the attention they deserve. For example, Orlansky (2007) noted that the “paucity” of research on Japanese women in sport in English “leads Western audiences to have a skewed view of women’s contribution to sports in Japan” (p. 72). Chinese scholar Jinxia Dong (2003) points out that North American and European feminist studies of sport “too often ignore ethnic diversity” and “lack local insight on the diversity of sportswomen’s lives in various parts of the globe” (p. 2). She argued that Chinese women in sport “have rarely been examined satisfactorily by western sports academics” (p. 2). Similarly, Ping Wu (2010) identifies the importance of paying attention to cultural and national differences, arguing that in China, “the relationship between elite sport and gender is very different from the Western model” (p. 211). Similarly, Kietlinksi (2011) argues that “The contribution that Asian women have made to the Olympic movement tends to be left out of English-language literature on the Olympics, and such an exclusion has negative consequences” that include perpetuating inaccurate stereotypes that the Asian sporting world is dominated by males, and reinforcing “a woefully incomplete image of Asian women as weak and docile” (p. 170).

A second outcome is that research has focused on gender differences in media coverage rather than gender similarities (Bruce, 2016). I recently argued that this focus is an unintended outcome of the early liberal feminist influence on research, which focused on equality with men within existing social structures (Bruce, 2016). Thus, researchers implicitly normalised coverage of men as the desired form of sports media coverage, and not only interpreted differences as evidence of sportswomen not being taken seriously as athletes, but failed to explore similarities in coverage in any depth.

15 Rules of Representation in Media Coverage of Sportswomen
In the next section, I discuss the 15 Rules of Representation identified in my review of the existing research (see Table 1), while highlighting Rules that commonly appear in Olympics coverage or the Japanese context. As a result, I will not discuss the Rules in order.
Table 1: Media Representation Rules for Sportswomen

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Rule</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Primarily defined by</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Lower broadcast production values</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender marking</td>
<td>Persistent</td>
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<td>3. Infantilization</td>
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<td>4. Non-sport-related aspects</td>
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<td>5. Comparisons to men’s sport</td>
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<td>6. Sportswomen don’t matter</td>
<td>Persistent</td>
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<td>7. Compulsory heterosexuality/Appropriate femininity</td>
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<td>8. Sexualization</td>
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<td>9. Ambivalence</td>
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<td>10. Athletes in action</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>Similarity</td>
<td></td>
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<td>11. Serious athletes</td>
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<td>12. Model citizens</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Us and them</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Our voices</td>
<td>Emerging</td>
<td>Difference &amp; similarity</td>
<td>Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Pretty and powerful</td>
<td>online</td>
<td></td>
<td>Both genders</td>
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We begin with Rule #6, *Sportswomen don’t matter*, which is the most persistent and concerning to feminist scholars. It identifies the overall invisibility of sportswomen in mainstream sports media, and represents symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1978). Cross-cultural research projects consistently reveal that female athletes gain approximately 10 percent of everyday newspaper coverage (Horky & Nieland, 2013; Jorgensen, 2002, 2005; Lumby, Caple & Greenwood, 2014). A recent 20-country comparison, that included Asia, Australasia, Europe, Africa and the Americas (Horky & Nieland, 2013) found that female athletes averaged 11% of coverage. Longitudinal US research on televised sport news found that women have averaged about 5% since 1989 (Cooky, Messner & Hextrum, 2013), which is similar to at least one Japanese study (Kumayasu, 2000, cited in Iida, 2010).

So what is the problem with this pattern of coverage? Geena Davis, in a New Zealand radio interview, suggested that female actresses struggled for lead roles and recognition because Hollywood “sort of operates under this assumption that women will watch men but men won’t watch women” (Ryan, 2010). Davis went on to argue that the problem with this belief was that “we are teaching girls to be happy about watching boys... [and] boys that they don’t have to watch stories about girls” (Ryan, 2010). Given that the media teaches us who and what is worthy of attention, it is clear that the everyday sports media is teaching girls and boys that it is stories about men that matter. British researcher Gill Lines (2000, 2002), for example, found that young people were influenced by the overwhelming focus of sports media on male sports: “Young people’s sports discourse...
revolves around men. They generally buy the bond between masculinity and sport. They virtually exclude sportswomen from their sports talk, legitimizing the sports field as essentially male” (Lines, 2002, p. 210).

One major exception to this marginalization is the *Olympic Games*. Studies around the world have shown that coverage of sportswomen increases significantly during this global, multi-sport event, as it does for tennis grand slams and some world championships (netball in New Zealand, handball in Norway and Denmark, basketball in the US) (Bruce, 2011; von der Lippe, 2002). Takako Iida’s Japanese research produced similar results to other countries, in that female coverage increased during the Olympics: sportswomen gained 44% of Olympic coverage in 2000, and 32% in 2004 (Iida, 2010). When Iida considered all the coverage produced during the Olympic period, the women’s percentage dropped to 22%, although this was still higher than normal.

Once sportswomen do gain media attention, other Rules come into play. Briefly, there are three Rules that appear to be less common today and were not reported in the Japanese research that I found. The first is Rule #1, *lower broadcast production values*, was most evident in studies of US women’s basketball. Using commentators unfamiliar with women’s sport, and providing less technology (cameras, replays, statistics) presented the women’s game as less important and less interesting than men’s basketball (Bruce, 1998; Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Duncan, Messner & Cooky, 2000; Hallmark & Armstrong, 1999Higgs & Weiller, 1994; Messner, Duncan & Jensen, 1993).

The second is Rule #2, which applies a *gender marker* only for the women’s event (women’s soccer versus soccer) (Bruce, 2003, 2015; Jones 2012; Oglesby, 1978). However, in some sports where female athletes are dominant such as netball (Tagg, 2008), or become the focus of national attention such as Cathy Freeman in the 2000 Olympics 400m final (Wensing & Bruce, 2003), it is the men’s events that are gender marked.

The third is Rule #5, in which sportswomen are *positively compared* to sportsmen (the female Shinji Kagawa) as a way of flattering them, but instead it presents men’s sport as the standard against which women’s sport should be judged (Poniatowski & Hardin, 2012). This practice would not matter if sportsmen were regularly and positively compared to sportswomen (the male Ryoko Tani) but this seldom happens.

Rule #3 is the common practice of *infantilizing* adult sportswomen by calling them girls or young ladies. This Rule appears to be disappearing in the English-speaking USA, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia (Jones, 2012; Tanner, 2011) but is still found in non-English-speaking countries such as Spain (Crolley & Teso, 2007) and Japan (Ho, 2015, 2014). Two recent Japanese studies (Ho, 2015, 2014) found evidence of infantilization in coverage of figure skating and soccer. For example, the Asahi newspaper nicknamed figure skater Asada Mao “Mao-chan” and identified her performances as “cute” : these terms are associated with immaturity, smallness, docility, pets and children rather than highlighting the athletic strength and skill needed to complete the challenging triple axel jump (Ho, 2015, p. 7; Ho, 2014). Thus, Ho (2015) argues that the use of “‘Mao-chan’ infantilizes Asada and invites “the Japanese people to play parent” to her (p. 8). A similar pattern was identified in Australian newspaper coverage of 27-year-old Cathy Freeman, the 2000 Olympic 400m gold medalist, who
was infantilized “as a ‘girl’, as ‘our Cathy’ or as the nation’s ‘daughter’” (Wensing & Bruce, 2003, p. 392).

Rule #4, non-sport-related aspects, emerged from studies that found a high level of attention to sportswomen’s lives outside sport – such as family, appearance and personal life – rather than to their sporting performances. This form of coverage appears to be reducing in mainstream news media in Japan (Yu, 2009) and internationally (Jones, 2012), although echoes can still be found (Billings, Halone & Denham, 2002). For example, Yu’s (2009) analysis found that English-language newspaper coverage of Asian female Olympic medal winners between 2001 to 2008 focused on the achievements, athletic strength and psychological characteristics of sportswomen, and paid little attention to “romance and marital status” (p. 299).

However, this Rule is still evident in media targeted at women, such as women’s magazines (Pirinen, 1997b) or morning television talk shows (Ho, 2014), along with infantilization (#3), compulsory heterosexuality/appropriate femininity (#7), and sexualization (#8). We can think of these Rules as representing ‘default settings’ that reflect taken-for-granted frameworks for making sense of women in sport. Although these Rules are not absolute nor guaranteed to continue forever, they have established themselves as powerful frameworks that have proven difficult to shift, despite extensive critique.

We see compulsory heterosexuality when media focus on sportswomen’s sexual or emotional relationships with men, and appropriate femininity in the emphasis on characteristics that are culturally associated with vulnerable femininity such as small size, physical or mental weakness (including crying) and concern for others (Bruce, 2016; Messner, Cooky & Hestrin, 2010), and an emphasis on gender-appropriate sports. This pattern was evident in Iida’s research on Olympic coverage of the 2000 Olympic Games, in that the top 10 female sports included sports stereotyped as female, such as “softball, synchronized swimming, artistic gymnastics, beach volleyball and rhythmic gymnastics” (p. 226). The Japanese research adds another dimension to this Rule, which is the emphasis on sportswomen fulfilling cultural expectations of heterosexual marriage and motherhood (Orlansky, 2007). For example, a Japanese analysis of newspaper descriptions of a 2000 Olympics and 19996 world champion judoka shows clear evidence of this rule. As Iida (2010) explained:

This research indicated that her athletic abilities were trivialized in the articles. The newspapers described her achievements as always being encouraged by her father and her husband. Moreover, the newspaper articles praised her not only for her skill in Judo but also as a housewife. Through these articles an image of a woman who has no objection to patriarchy was constructed. (pp. 226-227)

Orlansky suggests that media privileging of Japanese sportswomen’s “traditionally feminine roles of wife and mother” in their post-sport lives represents a “conservative gender discourse” (p. 80), and concludes that “an understanding that these athletes will likely go on to become good wives and mothers allows their sporting careers to be worthy of great praise and attention” (p. 81). At the same time, Orlanksy suggests that sportswomen’s choices have impacted traditional ideas such as “the notion that [female] athletes should retire early in order to raise families” and expanded cultural understandings of definitions of success beyond “the position of the submissive homemaker” (p. 81). Summarizing much of the Japanese research, Orlanksy explains that “fathers, husbands, and male coaches” are “seen as helping female athletes to international success and glory” and points out that this understanding
complicates the notion that female athletes may be going against the grain of gender norms in Japanese
society by being powerful and successful individuals, as they are ultimately still entangled in a highly
patriarchal system. Often times the male coaches receive equal if not greater praise than the female
athletes themselves. (2007, p. 79)

In a similar fashion, Merklejn proposes that the nostalgic coverage of Japan’s 1964 ‘Oriental Witches’ (Toy
no Majo) Olympic volleyball team represents them as “obedient to the father” (in the form of their male coach),
who is virtually the only male who appears in television coverage of their lives during and after the Games
(2013, p. 248). This pattern is similar in other Asian countries such as China, where Wu’s Olympic research
found that newspaper coverage emphasized female athletes’ emotional vulnerability and need for “firm
support” from male coaches and leaders who “were portrayed as father figures for the female athletes, who
appeared more like disconsolate babies than adult women” (2009, p. 81).

We see sexualization (#8) in coverage that focuses on the sexual appeal of sportswomen’s bodies rather than
their athletic skill (Australian Sports Commission, 2000; Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Pirinen, 1997a; von der
Lippe, 2002). The increasing trend, reported predominantly in the United States and Australia, of young, white,
slender, elite sportswomen posing in bikinis, naked or in sexual poses for magazines is often interpreted as
sexualization or “soft pornography” (Kane, LaVoi & Fink, 2013, p. 280; Daniels, 2012; Daniels & Wartenka,
2011). From the Chinese context, Wu (2010) reports that research on televised sports news in 2006 found that
“trivialisation and sexualisation of female athletes…are also overt and blatant in China” (p. 74). She reported
that 2004 Olympic coverage portrayed the petite bodies of female divers as “beautiful and sexy” and “objects
for the male gaze” (2009, p. 80).

One recent Japanese study (Ho, 2014) found that many of these Rules operate together. For example, Ho (2014)
explained that a popular Japanese morning television talk show began its the portrayal of two members of the
2011 women’s soccer team “by focusing on non-sport-related aspects, especially physical appearance and
personality, subjecting them to varying degrees of compulsory heterosexuality, appropriate femininity,
infantilization, and sexualization” (pp. 171-172). Although the players were represented differently – one “as
conforming to compulsory heterosexuality and appropriate femininity” and the other being “infantilized and
sexualized” – Ho (2014) concluded that both “comply with present definitions of femininity” (p. 172).

Many of these Rules construct femininity and physical strength as incompatible characteristics that need to be
managed through representation that emphasizes heterosexual femininity and simultaneously hides or negatively
represents lesbian athletes or “masculine-looking female” bodies (Pirinen, 1997b, p. 296; Knoppers &
McDonald, 2010, Wu, 2010). In contrast, the emerging pretty and powerful Rule (#15) may encourage us to
rethink sexualization because it challenges the belief that physical strength and power are incompatible with
ideals of feminine beauty.

The pretty and powerful Rule is located at a complex intersection of older and newer understandings of female
sporting embodiment. However, world-class female athletes (especially those whose bodies match dominant
cultural ideals of beauty) are increasingly seen as representing a body ideal (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). For
example, boys in a recent US study chose “sexualized athletes” over “sexualized models” as “the ideal standard for female beauty” (Daniels & Wartena, 2011, p. 576). Although this form of representation is not open to all sportswomen, it embraces sporting excellence and femininity as complementary, and the resulting images as empowering. Further, although the images are often produced by and for men, the women often have control over which ones will be used (Evans, 2004; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; Stoltz, 2013; Thorpe’s former, 2007). Interpreted through third wave feminism (see Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Cocca, 2014), this Rule recognizes that images and texts “can be both empowering and oppressive” (Beaver, 2014, p. 16; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Certainly the images and descriptions on some online sites fit clearly into sexualization. However, in other online representations, the complementary nature of strength and sexiness is much more evident. Because it is the context in which an image appears that matters, rather than whether it contains nudity or overt sexuality, images that could be interpreted by some researchers as sexualization may instead communicate “power, self-possession, and beauty, not sexual access” (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003, p. 80; Bruce, 2016).

From an Asian perspective, it is difficult to assess whether this Rule currently exists or not. However, Chinese research into the worship and admiration of Chinese sportswomen in the 1930s suggests that images of the athletes’ performances and their “hard, gleaming” sportswomen’s bodies which appeared in women’s magazines had an uncanny impact on their audiences, including Chinese women who embraced “the arrival of the Modern Girl” (Gao, 2013, p. 9).

In the rest of the presentation, I present five Rules that are most evident in Olympic media coverage. Four Rules focus on similarities in coverage of sportsmen and sportswomen, and area that has received less attention than differences. As a result, these Rules are seldom included in summaries of the main ways that sportswomen are represented. Much of the research that identifies and explores these current Rules comes from outside the United States and is focused on the Olympic Games.

The first is Rule #9, ambivalence. When sportswomen do gain media attention, the difficulties for male sports journalists in balancing discourses of femininity and sport (Scott-Chapman, 2012) reveal themselves in ambivalent coverage where images and text often tell contradictory stories (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Pirinen, 1997a; Poniatowski & Hardin, 2012). The coverage simultaneously focuses on physical skill, achievement and strength valued in sport discourses, and on attributes associated with infantilization, sexualization and compulsory femininity. As a result, the female athlete is represented in contradictory ways that continue to place her outside the ‘norms’ of sport. An example of this is found in Ho’s (2014) textual analysis of a morning talk show’s representation of the Japan’s 2011 World Cup champion women’s soccer team, known as Nadeshiko Japan. Ho argued that this form of media shifted between representations of the team “as glorified national athletes and as trivialized ‘feminine’ figures” (p. 164). Ho found that the talk show coverage was “ambivalent about representing the Nadeshiko members, simultaneously shifting between glorifying national pride and championship win, and trivializing their skills and success, by emphasizing their ‘femininity’” (p. 165).

The second is #10, athletes in action. This Rule is predominantly found in studies of sports photographs in
mainstream newspapers, although there remains a large gap in the overall number of images as a result of Rule 6, *sportswomen don’t matter*. Research from around the world reports that newspaper images mainly show athletes doing sport or in competitive sport settings (Alexander 1994; Bruce and Scott-Chapman 2010; Crolley and Teso 2007; Hartmann-Tews and Ruloffs 2010; Hardin, Chance, Dodd & Hardin, 2002; Hovden and Hindenes 2010; Klein 1988; Koh 2010; Lee 1992; Martin 2010; Pedersen 2002; Pemberton, Shields, Gilbert, Shen & Said, 2004; Redman, Webb, Liao & Markula, 2010; Scott-Chapman 2010; Slepičková 2010; Spencer 2010; Vincent, Imwold, Johnson & Massey, 2002; Wensing and MacNeil 2010; Wolter 2015). These results have primarily been reported in studies of international events in which nations compete against each other and in which the overall number of images of men and women are often similar (e.g., Iida, 2010), but this pattern has also been found in a community newspaper focused on the Japanese-American community (Willms, 2015). Another aspect of this Rule is the finding that newspapers often provide a higher percentage of images of sportswomen than stories. For example, in the 2004 Japanese Olympic coverage, sportswomen received 42% of photographs compared to their 32% of stories (Iida, 2010).

The *serious athletes* rule (#11), recognises that in all media formats, sportswomen are increasingly being “portrayed as legitimate and serious athletes” (McKay & Dallaire, 2009, p. 35; Bruce et al., 2010; Caple, 2013; Duncan, Messner & Willms, 2005; Kian, Mondello & Vincent, 2009; Markula, 2009b; Wolter, 2015). However, as I argue elsewhere, “it is not discourses of sport that change to accommodate sportswomen. Instead, sportswomen are represented within existing discourses of sport and masculinity in ways that make gender difference disappear” (Bruce, 2015, p. 7). As a result, *serious athlete* stories represent men and women in similar ways – as determined, courageous, physically competent sportspeople who are striving for success (Bruce, 2009). This Rule is particularly evident in global events such as the Olympics or world championships, except in the United States where compulsory femininity remained obvious (Spencer, 2010), perhaps because newspaper space limitations meant the media drew on discourses of compulsory heterosexuality/appropriate femininity (#7) as they selected between the many successful, medal-winning US sportswomen (Bruce, 2015).

Rule #12, *model citizens*, shares some commonalities with the *serious athlete* Rule in that discourses of femininity or sexualization disappear in the face of discourses of nationalism. Researchers outside the United States report that sportswomen who win on the international stage are frequently represented as successful national citizens rather than female athletes. In a summary of the results from an 18-country analysis of newspaper coverage of the 2004 Olympics, we concluded that “very few countries reported coverage that was biased towards ‘feminine appropriate’ sports, showed a tendency to use female athletes for their appearance, glamour and sex appeal, or mirrored the ‘femininity hypothesis’” (Hovden, Bruce & Markula, 2010, p. 298). Instead,

several other factors besides meanings of gender seem to determine the priority and content of the Olympic coverage. For example, reasons like high national medal expectancies, achievements and prioritising sports linked to national identity play an essential role in which athletes and sports are seen as newsworthy.” (Hovden et al., 2010, p. 299)

In addition, Olympic coverage tends to focus positively on athletes who win for the nation, including in Japan (Iida, 2010; Thompson, 2013; Yu, 2009). Iida (2010) reported that 74% of the 2004 Olympic photographs in
Japanese newspapers included only Japanese athletes (62%) or Japanese and foreign athletes together (12%). Yu’s (2009) analysis of Asian female Olympic athletes similarly reported that there “is no doubt that if the athletes and news sources are from the same countries, sport writers report positively about their athletes” (p. 300). In another Japanese study of coverage of the 2004 Olympics, 100% of the top-10 photographed female athletes and 90% of the males were medal winners. Thompson’s (2013) analysis of the 2012 Olympics in five Japanese newspapers found that all 13 sports in which Japan won medals were featured on the front page, while women’s and most men’s sports that did not win medals were ignored. Front-page coverage was overwhelmingly devoted to Japanese athletes, with no reference to nations who defeated Japanese athletes or teams. As with previous studies, the gender differences were much smaller than usual, with sportswomen receiving between 46% and 56% of front-page headlines (Thompson, 2013). In similar fashion, Merklejn (2013) argues that nostalgic television coverage of Japan’s ‘Oriental Witches’ between 1988 to 2008 hailed them as “national heroines…praised for their skills and moral qualities (endurance, hard work), not for their beauty” (p. 242) or “their sexualility or physical attractiveness” (p. 247). Chinese studies have produced similar results. For example, Dong (2003) explains that Chinese sportswomen “have been frequently and uncritically applauded by the media as national heroes and heroines” (p. 159; Gao, 2013; Wu, 2009). The effect of this Rule has been described in numerous ways in different countries which reported the subordination of discourses of femininity to discourses of nationalism. For example, Dong identified it as “the insignificance of gender in serving the national interest in China” where “success ensured … triumph over … femininity” (2003, p. 202). French colleagues found that “journalistic discourse tends to erase gender with its insistence on national success” (Quin, Wipf & Ohl, 2010, p. 112). I have argued that “in order for female success to be articulated to nationalism, the more common forms of female representation must be set aside in favour of descriptions that are more usually associated with male athletes” (Bruce 2009, p. 157). However, one limitation to this Rule is the finding that women’s 2004 Olympic coverage “is mostly concentrated around a few top female Olympians, while the coverage of male athletes and male sports in general gives attention to a much broader range of male Olympic athletes and sports events” (Hovden et al., 2010, p. 297; Olafsson, 2006).

However, here I must introduce Rule #13, Us and Them, which emerges from evidence that coverage presents home athletes (Us) differently to athletes from other nations (Them). In several countries – including Japan, Turkey, South Korea and New Zealand – researchers have revealed a pattern where home-nation athletes are represented as model citizens and serious athletes but sportswomen from other nations are sexualized or feminized (Bruce & Scott-Chapman 2010; Koca & Arslan 2010; Iida 2010). South Korea, for example, held up its own sportswomen as “national icons” but sexualized and marginalized some white sportswomen from Western nations (Koh, 2010, p. 252). Iida (2010) reported that “gender bias is not to be seen in the Olympic photographs of Japanese athletes, but the newspapers are making the gender representation cleverly by using foreign athlete photographs” (p. 238). In another study, the media used stereotypical comparisons to “huge, masculinized women in the Soviet team” in order to positively present the taller-than-average ‘Oriental Witches’ as “petite (hence, feminine)” (Merklejn, 2013, p. 242). It appears that the New York Times (US) treated Japanese figure skaters Ito Midori and Asada Mao as ‘Them’ by representing them “through gendered and racialized discourses”, in comparison to the Japanese media who treated them as ‘Us’ through an obsession with “signs of athleticism and nationalism” (Ho, 2015, p. 12).
Conclusion

I conclude with two questions for you, my Japanese colleagues.

The first relates to Rule #14, *our voices*. Evidence for this Rule comes primarily from research in online spaces, such as websites and social media sites established by individuals and organisations not directly related to traditional media outlets. I am very interested to know if this rule has emerged in Japan and, if so, what form you think it is taking. The space for Rule #14 has been created by rapid changes in the sports mediascape in the wake of Web 2.0 technologies that have turned athletes and sports fans into producers rather than solely consumers of media (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012; Hardin, 2011). Although online and social media sport sites continue to be dominated by men, access to the Internet has created spaces for alternative voices on women’s sport to appear and even gain mainstream media attention (Bruce & Hardin, 2014). For example, an analysis of the fanpagelist website on October 15, 2015 revealed that 26 sportswomen have more than 1 million Facebook fans. In a chapter on new feminist methods in sport media research, my colleague Dunja Antunovic and I point out that the Internet has created multiple spaces for dialogue among women around sports (Bruce & Antunovic, 2016). Women’s leagues ignored by mainstream media, fans of women’s sports, individual sportswomen and feminist scholars have created Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts and blog sites, often with the intent to promote and advocate for sportswomen. These sites allow women to express their gendered identities, network, and share their meanings about sport. Women who write these blogs, although not always explicitly feminist, often question the exclusion of sportswomen from mainstream coverage and attempt to remedy it by providing content on women’s sports. On these new media platforms, less visible sporting communities and individuals provide alternative representations of their sports, identities or cultures, such as roller derby and skateboarding (e.g., MacKay & Dallaire 2012; Pavlidis & Fullagar 2012). Further, some individual female athletes use social media sites to insert alternative discourses about intersectional identities (Chawansky, 2016). The presence of these new voices on new platforms offers the possibility of alternative meanings around gender and sport, but their impact on existing discursive understandings of sportswomen, and the level of their influence on mainstream media coverage remains unclear (Bruce & Antunovic, 2016).

My second question relates to my sense that these 15 Rules are only a starting point. We know that research on media representation of women’s sport reveals both shared international trends and some cultural differences, and that dominant forms of representation appear to be in flux, shifting as new frameworks for making sense of female embodiment emerge in the 21st century. Online and social media appears to be creating spaces for forms of representation that are seldom found in mainstream media coverage. However, because the Rules presented here are based on a sample of existing research published in English, it is likely that other Rules exist and that the dominance of certain rules (e.g., *model citizen* versus *sexualization*) differs in different cultural contexts. It is also possible that, despite more than 30 years of intensive focus on the sports media, researchers have not seen all there is to see. I encourage you to explore further, as we continue to try to understand what constitutes the current or historical “reasonable sense-making practices of cultures” (McKee, 2003, p. 19), and I would love to hear whether you see other patterns of coverage in the Japanese context.
Note

1 For example, a recent Google Scholar search using terms such as “media” and “female athlete” produced over 6,000 results (October 12, 2015). Similar search terms consistently produce more than 5,000 results.

2 This assumption also emerged during attempts to publish a recent edited collection of research about women in sport in New Zealand (Obel, Bruce & Thompson, 2008). Several publishers rejected it because the focus was assumed to be too narrow: one male claimed only half the students (presumably the females) would be interested in reading it, thus reinforcing the belief that males are not interested in the experiences of females.

3 As evidence for this argument, Jinxia Dong quotes 1970s world archery champion, Jing Dongxian, who said “I have not felt discrimination against women because I am not treated as a woman in my post” (2003, p. 202, italics added).

References


Sportswomen in the Media


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