

Swifter, Higher, Stronger? Online Media Representations of Gender during the 2008 Olympic Games

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Introduction

Coverage of women's sports during the Olympic Games is about as good as it gets. On the world's largest and most important sports stage, media attention to women's sports jumps to levels well above the mainstream's usual fare that prioritizes men's sports and relegates female athletes and their sports to the sidelines.² The sports media are now well recognized for the substantial role they play in shaping opinion, reinforcing the status quo, framing attitudes and reproducing images and messages that legitimate the dominant ideology of a society.³ In newspapers and magazines, on television and radio, the association between sport and masculinity is so ideologically entrenched and 'taken for granted that few people challenge the fact that media coverage is heavily weighted in favour of men.'⁴ Yet comparatively little is known about how online media frame sports events and their participants. This study investigates the extent to which coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games on the online sites of three public broadcasters in Australia, Great Britain and Canada reproduces the 'ideologies of gender that privilege men and devalue the activities of women.'⁵

Literature review

Studies of the print and broadcast sports media's coverage have examined how they use frames, denoted by keywords and phrases, to actively construct sports news.⁶ The power of 'presence and absence' in framing⁷ can influence audience understanding since 'one meaning is conveyed by what gets covered, but another equally powerful meaning is conveyed by

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² Dianne Jones, 'Half the story? Olympic women on ABC *News Online*,' *Media International Australia* February, no. 110 (2004).

³ Margaret Carlisle Duncan, 'Gender warriors in sport: women and the media,' in *Handbook of sports and media*, ed. Arthur A. Raney and Jennings Bryant (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006). Elaine M. Blinde, Susan L. Greendorfer, and Rebecca J. Shanker, 'Differential media coverage of men's and women's intercollegiate basketball: reflection of gender ideology,' *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 15, 2 (1991).

⁴ Toni Bruce, 'Women, sport and the media: a complex terrain,' in *Outstanding research about women and sport in New Zealand* (eds C. Obel, T. Bruce and S. Thompson), (Hamilton: Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research, 2008), p.56.

⁵ T. Bruce, 'Shifting the boundaries: sportswomen in the media,' in *Communication on the edge: shifting boundaries and identities* (University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand: ANZCA, 2011), p.1.

⁶ M J Kane, 'Media coverage of the post Title IX female athlete - a feminist analysis of sport, gender and power,' *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* 3, 1 (1996).

⁷ Robert Entman, 'Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm,' *Journal of Communication* 43, 4 (1993).

what does not receive media attention'.⁸ As a result, in sports coverage, 'frames help portray who is in authority and who is marginalized'.⁹

More than 30 years of research supports the view that women have been the subject of both overt and covert discrimination in the sports media. Within and outside the British World, the "everyday' sporting activities of female athletes are trivialised and ignored by mediasport',¹⁰ as women's sport is grossly underrepresented in the number of stories, the column centimetres or minutes of airtime devoted to female athletes' achievements, the placement of stories, the number, size and placement of photographs, and the range of sports depicted. Male athletes receive 80 per cent or more of total coverage.¹¹

Despite spikes in women's sports coverage during global events such as the Olympic Games,¹² within the discourse of mediated sports, a common feature is an insistence on sexual difference. Journalists, sportscasters and commentators culturally construct differences between females and males and address their audiences:

...as though these gender differences are natural and real. Since the masculine is the default position in our society, the feminine is seen as *the Other*. This is the logical extension of the oppositional binary...¹³

The media have historically used several techniques 'to represent women in line with cultural ideas about femininity.'¹⁴ These include but are not restricted to: downplaying sport, compulsory heterosexuality, appropriate femininity, infantilization, gender marking and success/failure bias.

⁸ Suzanne Huffman, C.A. Tuggle, and Dana Scott Rosengard, 'How campus media cover sports: The gender-equity issue, one generation later,' *Mass Communication and Society* 7, 4 (2004), p.477.

⁹ Andrew C. Billings, James R. Angelini, and Susan Tyler Eastman, 'Diverging discourses: gender differences in televised golf announcing,' *Mass Communication and Society* 87, 2 (2005), p.157.

¹⁰ Bruce, 'Women, sport and the media: a complex terrain,' p.57. Bruce defines mediasport as any media coverage that appears in the mainstream mass media.

¹¹ See, for example: Susan Fountaine and Judy McGregor, 'The loneliness of the long distance gender researcher: are journalists right about the coverage of women's sport?,' *Australian Journalism Review* 21, 3 (1999). Christeen George, Andrew Hartley, and Jenny Paris, 'The representation of female athletes in textual and visual media,' *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 6, 2 (2001). [Women's Sports Foundation UK, 'An investigation into coverage of women's sport on the BBC sport website,' Women's Sports Foundation, http://www.ews-online.org/index.php?do=100213006&1a=2&kat=316.](http://www.ews-online.org/index.php?do=100213006&1a=2&kat=316)

¹² Jones, 'Half the story? Olympic women on ABC *News Online*.'; Dianne Jones, 'The representation of female athletes in online images of successive Olympic Games,' *Pacific Journalism Review* 12, 1 (2006). Dianne Jones, 'Women's sports coverage: online images of the 2008 Olympic Games,' *Australian Journalism Review* 32, 2 (2010). Christopher King, 'Media portrayals of male and female athletes: a text and picture analysis of British national newspaper coverage of the Olympic Games since 1948,' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 42, 2 (2007).

¹³ Duncan, 'Gender warriors in sport: women and the media,' p.238.

¹⁴ Bruce, 'Women, sport and the media: a complex terrain,' p.60.

Downplaying sport occurs when the media focus on women's appearance in ways that devalue their sporting accomplishments or abilities.¹⁵ Conventionally pretty or sexually attractive sportswomen are particular favourites of the sports media.¹⁶ Coverage of tennis has been highly representative in this context. By 2003, Maria Sharapova had largely replaced Anna Kournikova as the sports media's 'featured young sex symbol'. Articles and commentary rarely seem to report on Sharapova 'without also commenting on her appearance...[indicating] a continuation of the sexualization themes from past studies.'¹⁷ For example, Britain's *Daily Mirror* called Sharapova's Wimbledon tournament match against Jelena Dokic the 'Battle of the Babes'.¹⁸

Since women began competing in the modern Olympics, media coverage of them has ranged from 'initial disinterest, to derision to desire'.¹⁹ Newspaper articles about female athletes at the 1996 Olympics commented on appearance, with the 'good looks', 'cuteness' or 'beauty' of female athletes mentioned four times more often than the general good looks of male athletes.²⁰ In contrast, there were fewer references to females' appearance than to males' physical attributes in the ABC's coverage of the 2000 Olympic Games.²¹

Compulsory heterosexuality results when the media define female athletes by their relationships and sexual orientations. Highlighting 'women as sex objects or in heterosexually-prescribed roles',²² such as wives, mothers or girlfriends (of boys and men), signifies feminine credentials²³ and provides 'sexual markers'.²⁴ Marital status was revealed for 35 per cent of female and 20 per cent of male athletes profiled in articles about the 1996 Olympics. Parental status was mentioned more frequently for men, but women were much more likely to be characterized as struggling to balance careers and families.²⁵

¹⁵ J Bridge, 'Media mirror: Sports pages still a bastion of maleness,' *Quill* 82, 5 (1994).

¹⁶ John Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture: A Social and Historical Analysis of Popular Sports in Britain* (Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986).

¹⁷ Margaret Carlisle Duncan and M Messner, 'Gender in televised sports: news and highlights shows, 1989-2004,' (2005).

¹⁸ Alina Bernstein and Yair Galily, 'Games and sets: Women, media and sport in Israel,' *NASHIM: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 15 (2008).

¹⁹ Womensport Australia, 'Media coverage,' Womensport Australia, www.ausport.gov.au/wspa/wsmedia.htm.

²⁰ K N Kinnick, 'Gender bias in newspaper profiles of 1996 Olympic athletes: a content analysis of five major dailies,' *Women's Studies in Communication* 21, 2 (1998).

²¹ Dianne Jones, 'Half the story? Olympic women on ABC News Online' (M.A. [Honours], University of Wollongong, 2003).

²² Bruce, 'Women, sport and the media: a complex terrain,' p.60.

²³ Deborah Stevenson, 'Women, sport and globalization: Competing discourses of sexuality and nation,' *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 26, 2 (2002).

²⁴ Helene A. Shugart, 'She shoots, she scores: mediated constructions of contemporary female athletes in coverage of the 1999 US women's soccer team,' *Western Journal of Communication* 67, 1 (2003), p.8.

²⁵ Kinnick, 'Gender bias in newspaper profiles of 1996 Olympic athletes: a content analysis of five major dailies.'

Appropriate femininity 'emphasises stereotypically female characteristics such as emotional or physical weakness, dependence [on others, especially men], tears and concern for others.'²⁶ The media often describe women athletes in ways that stress emotional weakness, such as 'dissolving into tears', but when men confront stressful situations, they are applauded for their toughness.²⁷ The Dutch sports media have presented women as 'emotional and as dependent on men (coaches and fathers) for their success, while men were often portrayed as stoic and independent.'²⁸

Ambivalence – description containing mixed or contradictory messages – is also a common form of representation of sportswomen. It occurs when 'positive descriptions and images [are] juxtaposed with those that trivialise women's successes'.²⁹ Stories on the ABC in 2000 lauded female athletes for winning and then accused them of losing control and concentration when they 'burst into tears' or 'shed a few tears'.³⁰ In confronting stressful situations, sportswomen were described in a way that stressed emotional weakness.

Infantilization leads to adult females being called 'girls' while adult males are most often called 'men'³¹ and rarely referred to as 'boys'.³² This is important because maturity infers social status and '[o]ne of the lingering stereotypes associated with women is their childishness'.³³ Females athletes are also marginalized through one-way or asymmetrical gender marking. It identifies men's events as 'the' events (the universal or the norm) and those played by females as 'women's' events, inferring they are inferior.³⁴ For example, television coverage of basketball games has called men's games the 'national championship' but women's games were labelled as the 'women's national championship'.³⁵

Media explanations for success or failure can contain bias when they highlight women's failures and men's achievements. Studies show television commentators have more often attributed men's failures to a lack of athletic skill, but when women failed, more often

²⁶ Bruce, 'Women, sport and the media: a complex terrain,' p.60.

²⁷ M G Phillips, 'An illusory image: A report on the coverage and portrayal of women's sport in Australia 1996,' (Canberra: Australian Sports Commission, 1997).

²⁸ Annelies Knoppers and Agnes Elling, 'We do not engage in promotional journalism,' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 39, 1 (2004), p.48.

²⁹ Bruce, 'Women, sport and the media: a complex terrain,' p.60.

³⁰ Jones, 'Half the story? Olympic women on ABC News Online,' pp.215-16.

³¹ Bruce, 'Women, sport and the media: a complex terrain.'

³² Nathalie Koivula, 'Gender stereotyping in televised media sport coverage,' Plenum Publishing Corporation in association with The Gale Group and LookSmart, http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m2294/1999_Oct/59426460/print.jhtm.

³³ Duncan, 'Gender warriors in sport: women and the media,' p.241.

³⁴ Bruce, 'Women, sport and the media: a complex terrain.'

³⁵ Margaret Carlisle Duncan, Michael Messner, and Linda Williams, 'Coverage of women's sports in four daily newspapers,' Amateur Athletics Foundation of Los Angeles, [http://www.aafla.com/9arr/ResearchReports/ResearchReport1 .htm](http://www.aafla.com/9arr/ResearchReports/ResearchReport1.htm).

it was attributed to a lack of commitment.³⁶ Male Olympians have been described as more courageous than females,³⁷ and clearly placed above women through comparisons to Jesus Christ and Superman.³⁸ ABC stories about hockey during the 2000 Olympic Games credited male direction for female athletes' success. As well as framing Australia's women hockey players as emotionally dependent on their coach, 'the Hockeyroos' lord and master Ric Charlesworth', the ABC attributed the Hockeyroos' gold medal success in Sydney more to their coach than to the athletes.³⁹

Research questions

As the above literature shows, the media often portray female athletes as feminized and sexualized 'others' who are less than their powerful male counterparts. When the sports media trivialize women's sporting achievements, they frame female athleticism as less important than male athleticism. In light of these findings, the primary question guiding this study is: What characterizes the nature of gendered sports coverage on the online sports sites of three national public broadcasters? Based on the categories of coverage differences identified in previous studies, the following questions guided data collection and analysis:

1. Did stories comment on one gender's appearance, relationships and emotions more than the other's?
2. Did stories about each gender contain instances of infantilization or gender marking?
3. Did stories mention the successes and failures of both genders?

Method

The three websites www.abc.net.au/olympics,⁴⁰ www.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympics/default.stm⁴¹ and www.cbc.ca/olympics⁴² were the

³⁶ Susan Tyler Eastman and A C Billings, 'Sportscasting and sports reporting,' *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*.

³⁷ A C Billings and James R. Angelini, 'Packaging the games for viewer consumption: gender, ethnicity, and nationality in NBC's coverage of the 2004 summer Olympics,' *Communication Quarterly* 55 (2007).

³⁸ Eastman and Billings, 'Sportscasting and sports reporting'.

³⁹ Jones, 'Half the story? Olympic women on ABC *News Online*,' p.219.

⁴⁰ The ABC, 80 years old in 2012, is Australia's only national public broadcaster. It is funded by the Federal government (the source of more than 80 per cent of its income), overseen by and responsible to Federal parliament, and has been described as Australia's foremost institution of information and culture. On average, 2.6 million Australians visit ABC Online for news and information, according to its annual report. In 2008, the ABC continued its unbroken tradition of Olympic Games coverage begun in 1936.

⁴¹ Britain's public service broadcaster was established in the 1920s. An estimated 40 per cent of the UK's population accesses the BBC Sport site each week. In 2008, the dedicated Olympics Games site recorded 8.5 million weekly unique users.

⁴² The website of Canada's national public broadcaster averages 4.8 million unique visitors per month. Traffic on its Olympics site in 2008 was up by 56 per cent compared with the 2004 Games. The CBC's annual report attributes an increase of \$39million in total advertising revenue in 2008/09 to the Beijing Games.

sampling units for this study. Fifty four online bulletins published by each broadcaster during the 2008 Olympic Games, from August 7 to 24, 2008, were examined by content analysis in order to identify differences in the coverage of female and male Olympians. Olympic sports stories were those stories whose topics or themes were sports contests, achievements, or issues affecting individual athletes or teams. The study excluded the opening and closing ceremonies. Bulletins, consisting of the top 10 stories on each site's home/splash page, were downloaded three times per day and hard copies were printed to ensure that coders would be cross-coding faithful and identical data.

Content analysis, commonly used to discover and describe the characteristics of the content of the mass media's messages in an objective, systematic and quantitative way⁴³ and 'determined as an effective way to examine media... [coverage] of minority or historically oppressed groups',⁴⁴ was used to address the research questions. A coding sheet was constructed to evaluate each online story's text. The number of times each of the following themes appeared was counted: appearance, relationships, emotions, infantilization, gender marking and success/failure references.⁴⁵

The author and a research assistant each coded separately a sub-sample of 23 per cent of stories. After Reinard,⁴⁶ inter-coder reliability for each variable was computed using Scott's pi. The variables and the proportion of agreement were: appearance, relationships, emotions, and success/failure references .79; infantilization and gender marking .93. Frequencies and chi-square analysis were used to analyse and compare the thematic data by gender. A significance level of 0.05 was selected to determine statistical significance. Finally, the research assistant coded all Olympic sports stories from August 7 to August 24, 2008 inclusive. The sample yielded 1337 stories.

Results

Coverage, in terms of the number of stories about women and men, is not the focus of this paper, but the historic trend of greater media attention to women's sports during the

⁴³ B. Berelson, *Content analysis in communication research* (New York: Free Press, 1952). L R Frey et al., *Interpreting communication research* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1992).

⁴⁴ Marie Hardin et al., 'The framing of sexual difference in SI for Kids editorial photos,' *Mass Communication and Society* 5, 3 (2002), p.348.

⁴⁵ Any word or adjacent groups of words, phrase, sentence or paragraph concerning the same theme was counted as one appearance of that theme, and sorted separately for women and men. Examples of descriptors relating to appearance, relationships, emotions and success/failure are available from the author. Infantilization includes the use of descriptors such as such as 'girl', 'boy', 'princess', 'prince', 'young lady' and 'kid'.

⁴⁶ John C. Reinard, *Introduction to Communication Research*, 2nd edn (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1997).

Olympic Games was apparent on the three sites in 2008.⁴⁷ Female athletes received 42 per cent of all stories. The majority of stories were reserved for male athletes and their sports and the impact of this result is considered in the discussion section.

In terms of the occurrence of the following themes, according to gender:

- a) There were more references to men's appearance (583) than to women's (415);
- b) Women's relationships were referred to twice as often as men's (90 references versus 42);
- c) The majority of references to emotions concerned male athletes (371 compared with 274 for females);
- d) Of the 54 infantilizing references, 32 described males and 22 described females;
- e) Men's sports were gender marked more times than women's sports (974 times versus 934);
- f) References to success were most often about men (458 compared with 331 about women);
- g) Men's failures were reported more frequently than women's (147 times versus 92).⁴⁸

These results are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Coverage differences by gender on the ABC, BBC and CBC

Reference	Female		Male		Total	
	n	%	N	%	n	%
Appearance	415	42	583	58	998	100
Relationship	90	68	42	32	132	100
Emotions	274	42	371	58	645	100
Infantilization	22	41	32	59	54	100
Gender marking	934	49	974	51	1908	100
Success	331	42	458	58	789	100
Failure	92	38	147	62	239	100

⁴⁷ See: Jones, 'Women's sports coverage: online images of the 2008 Olympic Games.'

⁴⁸ Chi-square analysis shows a significant difference by gender in favour of: (a) men as the subjects of references to appearance on the three websites ($X^2_{.05}(1) = 28.28, p < .001$); (b) women as the subjects of references to relationships ($X^2_{.05}(1) = 17.46, p < .001$); (c) men as the subjects of references to emotions ($X^2_{.05}(1) = 14.59, p < .001$); (f) men as the subjects of references to success ($X^2_{.05}(1) = 20.44, p < .001$); and (g) men as the subjects of references to failure ($X^2_{.05}(1) = 12.66, p < .001$). However, there was no significant difference by gender in: (d) the number of infantilizing references ($X^2_{.05}(1) = 1.85, p = 0.17$); or (e) the number of gender markers ($X^2_{.05}(1) = 0.84, p = 0.36$).

Discussion

Overall, the content analysis revealed considerable differences in the treatment of female and male athletes by the three online sites and the perpetuation of certain stereotypes.

Downplaying sport – appearance

The significant difference in favour of men in the number of appearance references (see Table 1) could be due to the greater number of stories about men compared with women. When the data was broken down to show the number of stories by gender containing appearance references, nothing separated women and men: 55 per cent of stories about each gender mentioned athletes' physiological attributes.

Historically, the sports media have viewed female athletes' good looks as relevant in coverage of their athletic performances,⁴⁹ but this trend was not apparent on any site. As I found in online coverage in 2000,⁵⁰ reports about both genders on the ABC, BBC and CBC generally contained factual information about injuries or physical characteristics pertinent to the athlete's discipline. Exceptions included the ABC's preoccupation with triathlete Emma Snowsill's physique. Although outside the sampling period for this study, a profile piece on Snowsill set the tone for Beijing. Describing the 27-year-old as 'standing at only 161cm and weighing in at a slender 48kg', the ABC reported 'it is hard to imagine that Emma Snowsill will be competing in one of the most gruelling and challenging events at the Olympic Games.'⁵¹ The story framed her as an anomaly in a 'masculine' sport⁵² and simultaneously stressed Snowsill's femininity by describing her 'diminutive' stature. Coverage of Snowsill's race in Beijing continued this theme, identifying her as 'pint-sized' and 'the 1.61m 'Snowy''.⁵³

Studies have shown how female athletes are seen as powerful, skilful and courageous, but are also characterized as vulnerable ('little' or 'waif-like'),⁵⁴ cute, dependent and anxious. In 2008, only females were subjected to these conflicting, contradictory and demeaning messages about their physical abilities and accomplishments as serious sportswomen.⁵⁵ A follow-up story about Snowsill on the ABC also focused on the personal tragedy that

⁴⁹ Bernstein and Galily, 'Games and sets: Women, media and sport in Israel.'

⁵⁰ Jones, 'Half the story? Olympic women on ABC *News Online*.'

⁵¹ ABC, 'Emma Snowsill: diminutive but full of heart', July 23, 2008.

⁵² Metheny (1965) developed a classification system for sports according to their gender appropriateness. Male-appropriate sports emphasize physical strength or power and stamina. They include individual and team, autonomous and contact sports. Female-appropriate sports emphasize aesthetics and beauty and discourage physicality.

⁵³ ABC, 'Snowsill storms to triathlon gold', August 18, 2008.

⁵⁴ Janine Mikosza, 'Inching forward: newspaper coverage and portrayal of women's sport in Australia,' (O'Connor: Womensport Australia, 1997), p.8.

⁵⁵ M J Kane and Susan L Greendorfer, 'The media's role in accommodating and resisting stereotyped images of women in sport,' in *Women, media and sport: challenging gender values* (ed. P J Creedon), (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994).

motivated her: '[She] was just 19 when her boyfriend and fellow triathlete Luke Harrop was killed in a hit-and-run while bike training on Queensland's Gold Coast.'⁵⁶

Compulsory heterosexuality – relationships and sexual orientation

The ABC's coverage of Emma Snowsill indicates that the sports media still see females' relationships (familial, romantic and other relationships to males) as relevant in descriptions of their sporting performances. Despite the smaller number of stories about sportswomen, on all sites there were more references to their relationships, to the extent that on the CBC women's relationships were more than twice as likely to be mentioned as men's.

The CBC noted tennis player Lindsay Davenport's parental status in stories about her scratching from the singles. Stories mentioned 'the birth of her son, Jagger', an event with no connection to the knee injury that caused her withdrawal.⁵⁷ The CBC called pitcher Lauren Bay Regula 'one of the world's top hurlers and sister of Boston Red Sox outfielder Jason Bay', as though her standing in softball was linked to her brother's career in baseball.⁵⁸ The BBC went for human interest in its coverage of Australian swimmer Stephanie Rice. The story about her win in the 400m individual medley devoted 60 out of 275 words to Rice's personal life, highlighting a former boyfriend and her profile on a social networking site:

Before heading out to Beijing, Rice was making headlines away from the pool in Australia.

Just before the Olympics she broke up with fellow Aussie swimmer Eamon Sullivan, who is competing in the 50m freestyle, and was previously asked by Swimming Australia to block public access to her personal facebook page which had pictures of her in a policewoman's uniform.⁵⁹

Rice competes in a sport where the male traits of physical strength and explosive power are on show. The BBC's contextually irrelevant references to her feminine credentials (her former boyfriend), 'reassure audiences of [Rice's] gender priorities'⁶⁰ and centre her traditional femininity on her heterosexuality. Shugart says such references, that remind audiences that female athletes are specifically heterosexual women, render them consistent with, rather than threatening to, existing concepts of gender.⁶¹

⁵⁶ ABC, 'Snowsill turns tragedy into triumph', August 18, 2008.

⁵⁷ CBC, 'Lindsay Davenport pulls out of Beijing Olympics', August 8, 2008.

⁵⁸ CBC, 'Canada hammers Chinese Taipei in softball', August 12, 2008.

⁵⁹ BBC, 'Rice sees off Hoff for shock gold', August 10 and August 11, 2008. The story ran three times in all.

⁶⁰ Stevenson, 'Women, sport and globalization: Competing discourses of sexuality and nation,' p.212.

⁶¹ Shugart, 'She shoots, she scores: mediated constructions of contemporary female athletes in coverage of the 1999 US women's soccer team,' p.8.

This strategy was also in evidence in coverage of Czech shooter Katerina Emmons. Emmons won the first gold medal awarded in Beijing. Close-up photographs accompanied stories about her on the BBC and CBC (Emmons is also a conventionally attractive woman) and every story identified her as a wife. The ABC said, ‘Emmons, who met and married United States shooter Matt Emmons... equalled a world record.’⁶² The BBC called her the ‘24-year-old Czech wife of American shooter Matt Emmons’,⁶³ and on the CBC she was ‘Emmons, who is married to American shooter Matt Emmons’.⁶⁴

There were no parallel references to his successful wife when Matt Emmons won a silver medal a week later. The ABC merely reported, ‘American Matthew Emmons took the silver medal’⁶⁵ and on the BBC, Emmons was the ‘defending champion Matthew Emmons’.⁶⁶ When relationships were mentioned in stories about male athletes, they accentuated men’s mental strength in the face of personal loss. For example, stories about Canadian equestrian Ian Millar’s silver medal referred to his wife’s death. ‘I had an angel riding with me,’ he said. Millar, who was aiming for London in 2012, was also characterized as a successful father whose children were ‘both accomplished riders with aspirations of competing in the Summer Games’.⁶⁷

Appropriate femininity – emotions

The higher number of references to men’s emotions could be due to the higher story count for male athletes. When the data was broken down to reveal the number of stories by gender that contained references to athletes’ emotions, the pattern held with 55 per cent of male stories mentioning men’s emotions compared with 48 per cent of female stories. This contrasts with the ABC’s 2000 Olympics coverage where females’ emotions were 1.7 times more likely to be mentioned than males’ and emotional vulnerability was emphasized as a critical part of females’ performances.⁶⁸

The denial of power to women through gendered commentary⁶⁹ was apparent on the BBC where track cycling gold medallist Victoria Pendleton was described as ‘in a class of her own’ before the story’s focus shifted to Pendleton’s psychological state and her dependence on the team psychiatrist who had ‘lifted her spirits after she failed to win a

⁶² ABC, ‘Emmons wins first gold of Olympics’, August 9, 2008.

⁶³ BBC, ‘Czech Emmons claims opening gold’, August 9, 2008.

⁶⁴ CBC, ‘Czech shooter wins 1st gold medal of Games’, August 9, 2008.

⁶⁵ ABC, ‘Potent claims shooting bronze’, August 15, 2008.

⁶⁶ BBC, ‘Ayvazian claims gold for Ukraine’, August 15, 2008.

⁶⁷ CBC, ‘Late-blooming Ian Millar just hitting his stride?’, August 19, 2008. The story was run in successive bulletins.

⁶⁸ Jones, ‘Half the story? Olympic women on ABC *News Online*,’ p.216.

⁶⁹ Gina Daddario and B.J. Wigley, ‘Gender marking and racial stereotyping at the 2004 Athens Games,’ *Journal of Sports Media* 2, 1 (2007).

medal at Athens 2004'.⁷⁰ Crying was a common theme for sportswomen. Emotional descriptors focused on athletes who 'fled in tears',⁷¹ 'fled weeping',⁷² were 'tearful',⁷³ 'broke down in tears'⁷⁴ and 'burst into tears and had to be consoled'.⁷⁵

Men's character flaws, although reported more frequently, were described in less graphic terms and were less likely to be characterized as faults. By implication men who were 'distraught',⁷⁶ 'devastated', 'aghast'⁷⁷ or 'furious'⁷⁸ responded to disappointment with more stoicism than women who lost control and cried. When a man did cry, he had reason because his 'plucky [team's] dream of snaring its first ever [sic] Olympic gold in any sport' was 'shattered'.⁷⁹

Infantilization

Of the relatively few infantilizing references, most were contained in direct quotes from coaches or fellow athletes who identified men as 'young kids',⁸⁰ 'this kid',⁸¹ 'young man'⁸² and 'the boys'⁸³ and women as 'girls'.⁸⁴ On the ABC, journalists described women as 'girls'⁸⁵ but they never called men 'boys'. The findings suggest that such terms which devalue sportswomen's status and their performances⁸⁶ are slowly disappearing from the lexicon of sports journalists, if not from the wider community.

Gender marking

⁷⁰ BBC, 'Briton Pendleton wins sprint gold', August 20, 2008.

⁷¹ BBC, 'Czech Emmons claims opening gold', August 9, 2008.

⁷² ABC, 'Emmons wins first gold of Olympics', August 9, 2008.

⁷³ BBC, 'Tearful Manaudou ponders future', August 12, 2008; BBC, 'Jones eases to breaststroke gold', August 12, 2008.

⁷⁴ BBC, 'Brits miss out on archery bronze', August 11, 2008.

⁷⁵ ABC, 'Aussie gymnasts qualify for women's team final', August 11, 2008.

⁷⁶ BBC, 'DeGale sparkles on way to final', August 22, 2008.

⁷⁷ BBC, 'Iran's Saei takes taekwondo gold', August 22, 2008.

⁷⁸ BBC, 'Barnes loses light-fly semi-final', August 22, 2008.

⁷⁹ ABC, 'France downs Iceland to win men's handball gold', August 24, 2008.

⁸⁰ CBC, 'Canada battles China in Olympic baseball opener', August 13, 2008.

⁸¹ CBC, 'US boxers bowing to rest of the world', August 16, 2008.

⁸² CBC, 'Rogge says Bolt should 'show more respect'', August 21, 2008.

⁸³ BBC, 'Pinsent's golden hope for rowers', August 8, 2008; ABC, 'Boomers not ruling out Rocky-like miracle', August 20, 2008.

⁸⁴ BBC, 'Athletics boss rues missed medals', August 24, 2008; ABC, 'Chinese quinella denies Schipper gold', August 14, 2008; ABC, 'Saville not happy with walk performance', August 21, 2008. While headlines on the ABC and CBC were not categorised or counted in this study, two headlines on the ABC contained the condescending descriptors (Duncan, Messner, and Williams, 'Coverage of women's sports in four daily newspapers'), 'Aussie girls' (ABC, 'Aussie girls take shock relay gold', August 14, 2008) and 'golden girls' (ABC, 'Golden girls smash medley relay record', August 17, 2008).

⁸⁵ ABC, 'Four-goal burst helps Hockeyroos win a thriller', August 11, 2008; ABC, 'Double gold for Australia in 470 sailing', August 18, 2008; ABC, 'Argentina heaps further hockey misery on Germany', August 22, 2008; ABC, 'Hockeyroos defeated by Dutch double', August 16, 2008.

⁸⁶ E.H. Wensing and T. Bruce, 'Bending the rules: Media representations of gender during an international sporting event,' *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 38, 4 (2003).

Overall, male sports were gender marked more often than female sports. Again the result could be due to the higher number of stories about men's sports, so the data was broken down to show the mean number of markers by gender per story. Stories about women's sports contests contained an average of 1.7 gender marking references. Stories about men's sports contests had an average of 1.3 markers each. The media's tendency towards asymmetrical gender marking of sport emphasizes it as the natural domain of male rather than female athletes.⁸⁷ Across the three sites, the greater frequency of labelling of women's contests suggests they are inferior to the contests of 'their male counterparts who play the version of the sport that 'really counts''.⁸⁸

Successes and failures

Winners and losers are the fodder of sports journalism. That there were many more reports of male athletes' wins and losses than females' results could be linked to the opportunities available to women. In 2008, they were still shut out of competing on equal terms with men, with 45 per cent of Olympic events open to women.⁸⁹ Since more stories were published about men, there were more opportunities to mention men's successes and failures. A comparison of the ratio of references to success to those of failure by gender shows success references for women outnumbered failure references by 3.6 to 1. The finding is similar for male athletes with their successes more than three times as likely to be mentioned as their failures.

However, bias occurs when men's failures are attributed to a lack of athletic skill, but women's failures are put down to a lack of commitment, a lack of courage or poor judgment,⁹⁰ and this was evident on the ABC. A report on swimmer Libby Trickett's success was tempered by criticism of a previous failure and disappointment:

Australia's Libby Trickett has atoned for her lax performance last night, qualifying fastest for the final of the women's 100m butterfly....⁹¹

When Trickett won the final the next day, the ABC rehashed her lack of success (and commitment) in Athens in 2004:

⁸⁷ Duncan, Messner, and Williams, 'Coverage of women's sports in four daily newspapers'.

⁸⁸ George, Hartley, and Paris, 'The representation of female athletes in textual and visual media,' 99.

⁸⁹ International Olympic Committee, 'Women in the Olympic movement,'

http://www.olympic.org/Documents/Reference_documents/Factsheets/Women_in_Olympic_Movement.pdf

⁹⁰ Billings and Angelini, 'Packaging the games for viewer consumption: gender, ethnicity, and nationality in NBC's coverage of the 2004 summer Olympics.'

⁹¹ ABC, 'Trickett, Schipper power into 100m fly final', August 10, 2008.

Trickett who was a favourite at the Athens Games but failed to produce her best when it counted most, said she just wanted to do her best.⁹²

Athletes who fell short of media-hyped expectations were the targets of media criticism.⁹³ World champion runner Paula Radcliffe's preparation for Beijing was hampered by an injury and she finished 23rd in the marathon. The BBC called her 'gutsy'⁹⁴ but led the bulletin with a picture of an emotional Radcliffe being comforted by a team mate. As in 2004, when the BBC framed Radcliffe's disastrous Olympic campaign in ambivalent terms,⁹⁵ in 2008 it criticized her 'lack of preparation' but praised her 'valiant effort', while simultaneously publishing still images that framed Radcliffe as a vulnerable woman unable to keep her composure in the face of disappointment.

Male athletes' losses were also rehashed but, unlike women, men were lauded for their courage and determination to put the bad times behind them. This finding is similar to Billings and Angelini's study that found male Olympians were described as more courageous than females.⁹⁶ When the Canadian men's eight won its first race in Beijing, the CBC reported it was 'seeking redemption after a crushing fifth-place finish at the Athens Games.'⁹⁷ When the men won the gold medal six days later, the CBC story confirmed they had 'finished the job they started four years ago' and since 'their disaster in Athens, the crew has toiled under the single-minded focus of winning in Beijing.'⁹⁸ In common with Eastman and Billings' study,⁹⁹ men were never compared with women, but the ABC's description of gold medallist Katie Hoff as 'the female Phelps'¹⁰⁰ compared her to fellow swimmer Michael Phelps as though he, as a male, was the model athlete.

Conclusion

The several thematic differences in the coverage of female and male athletes discussed here are just some of the sexist practices observed in the three broadcasters' online Olympics

⁹² ABC, 'Trickett takes gold in 100m fly', August 11, 2008.

⁹³ Daddario and Wigley, 'Gender marking and racial stereotyping at the 2004 Athens Games.'

⁹⁴ BBC, 'Gutsy Radcliffe finishes marathon', August 17, 2008.

⁹⁵ Dianne Jones, 'Picture this: A cross-national study of the portrayal of female athletes in images of the 2004 Olympic Games,' in *International Sports Studies Conference, Victoria University, Melbourne* (Melbourne 2006).

⁹⁶ Billings and Angelini, 'Packaging the games for viewer consumption: gender, ethnicity, and nationality in NBC's coverage of the 2004 summer Olympics.'

⁹⁷ CBC, 'Men's 8 takes 1st step to podium', August 11, 2008.

⁹⁸ CBC, 'Gold-medal redemption for Canadian men's eight', August 17, 2008.

⁹⁹ Eastman and Billings, 'Sportscasting and sports reporting'.

¹⁰⁰ ABC, 'Pelligrini wins 200m free in WR time', August 13, 2008.

coverage in 2008.¹⁰¹ Even though men were just as likely as women to have their physical characteristics mentioned in stories, female athletes were singled out when their stature appeared to be at odds with the sports media's perception of the physical qualities required in 'male' sports. The gratuitous attention devoted to women's marital and family roles, romantic and other relationships with males contrasted with the absence of comparable coverage of men. Women were stereotypically characterized as mentally and emotionally weaker than men, and more often framed as teary-eyed, or nervous competitors who needed third party guidance to succeed. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to be characterized as emotionally stoical. Sports in which women competed were more often gender marked than those contested by men. Although both genders' successes were highlighted more than their failures, women were criticized for making mistakes or falling short of media-hyped expectations while men who reversed poor results were said to have achieved redemption. Only female athletes were compared with male athletes as though the male standard was universal.

These practices echo the techniques observed in previous studies where the discourse of mediated sport culturally constructs sexual differences between women and men and addresses sports audiences as though such differences are natural and real. The underpinnings of these coverage differences appear to 'lie in the underlying ideology that historically links sport with masculinity and males.'¹⁰² This ideology is reinforced by both subtle and overt means, including: comparisons of women's achievements with those of men's (as the aspirational norm); the use of terms which reduce the status of female athletes (that is, 'girls'); inferences that women's bodies are not well suited for the strength or endurance of 'male' sports; and overrepresentation of sportswomen as females first and their relationships as consistent with traditional, heterosexual 'gender role expectations' – girlfriend, wife, mother – which are 'social constructions'.¹⁰³

This study of the nature of coverage of female and male athletes on the ABC, BBC and CBC provides a valuable international perspective on the gendered framing of female athletes by the online sports media. It shows that national public broadcasters, like their commercial counterparts, have some way to go in learning how to report on what female athletes can do. Until the sports media can acknowledge women's athletic prowess, without slipping into the contextually irrelevant terrain of how they look or what goes on in their

¹⁰¹ For example, for a discussion of the photographic portrayal of female athletes, see Jones, 'Women's sports coverage: online images of the 2008 Olympic Games.'

¹⁰² Blinde, Greendorfer, and Shanker, 'Differential media coverage of men's and women's intercollegiate basketball: reflection of gender ideology,' p.109.

¹⁰³ Blinde, Greendorfer, and Shanker, 'Differential media coverage of men's and women's intercollegiate basketball: reflection of gender ideology,' p.110.

private lives, they will continue to reproduce and reinforce the ideological messages that legitimate sport as a male domain.