



Exploring gender bias in sports reporting through media literacy: a theoretical review

Explorando el sesgo de género en la cobertura deportiva a través de la alfabetización mediática: una revisión teórica

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Abstract

Introduction: Sports media influences public understanding of gender norms and reinforces stereotypes through selective representation of male and female athletes.

Objective: This study aims to synthesize theoretical perspectives on how media literacy can address gender bias in sports journalism.

Methodology: A systematic literature review was conducted using five major academic databases from 2019–2025. Thematic synthesis was applied to categorize studies using Framing Theory and Feminist Media Theory. Selection criteria focused on peer-reviewed, English-language works addressing gender bias and media literacy in sports contexts.

Discussion: Findings reveal consistent underrepresentation and misrepresentation of female athletes. Framing strategies and patriarchal media structures contribute to symbolic marginalization. Media literacy emerges as a key educational tool to foster critical awareness and support inclusive portrayals.

Conclusion: Addressing gender bias in sports media requires integrated media literacy approaches, institutional reforms, and feminist frameworks. As digital media evolves, media literacy holds potential to promote equitable narratives and challenge structural discrimination in sports coverage.

Keywords

Gender bias, sports media, media literacy, feminist theory.

Resumen

Introducción: Los medios deportivos influyen en la percepción pública de los roles de género y refuerzan estereotipos mediante representaciones selectivas de atletas masculinos y femeninos.

Objetivo: Este estudio busca sintetizar enfoques teóricos sobre cómo la alfabetización mediática puede abordar el sesgo de género en el periodismo deportivo.

Metodología: Se realizó una revisión sistemática de literatura utilizando cinco bases de datos académicas entre 2019 y 2025. Se aplicó una síntesis temática con base en la Teoría del Encuadre y la Teoría Feminista de los Medios. Se incluyeron estudios revisados por pares, en inglés, centrados en el sesgo de género y la alfabetización mediática en el deporte.

Discusión: Los resultados evidencian una subrepresentación constante de las atletas mujeres. Las estrategias de encuadre y las estructuras mediáticas patriarcales contribuyen a su marginación simbólica. La alfabetización mediática aparece como una herramienta clave para fomentar conciencia crítica y promover representaciones inclusivas.

Conclusión: Abordar el sesgo de género en los medios deportivos requiere alfabetización mediática integrada, reformas institucionales y enfoques feministas. A medida que evolucionan los medios digitales, la alfabetización mediática puede impulsar narrativas equitativas y desafiar la discriminación estructural en la cobertura deportiva.

Palabras clave

Sesgo de género, medios deportivos, alfabetización mediática, teoría feminista.

Introduction

Sports media is significant globally and beyond a vital source, providing platforms in which people view athletes and sports. Sports media is both a mirror to technological, moral and social values and interests, and it is a creator, perpetuator of stereotypes in terms of how certain categories of athletes are perceived in the society, too (Adá-Lameiras & Rodríguez-Castro, 2022; Vai et al., 2025). As others scholars have noted, the stories and frames in sports media substantially shape what sports mean in culture (and by association, public attitudes to, and institutional support for men vs. women athletes) (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Garcia & Proffitt, 2022). As such, the way sports are depicted in the media has a great impact on how society views gender roles and sports, for sports are often seen through a lens of masculinity.

Enabled's Gender bias in the media remains in evidence across the three trends in underreporting, stereotype and inequality in reporting of male and female athletes. Recent research shows that coverage of women's sports is still disproportionately low, reflecting trends that emerged decades ago (Smith & McCarthy, 2022; Q. Xu et al., 2021). An updated examination shows there has been little change if not decline, in overall coverage of women's sports (compared with men's) in the amount and quality of media coverage given to them (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Yenilmez, 2021). This under representation takes the form not simply of fewer stories told, but also of a framing which consistently trivialises women's achievements and tends to emphasize their appearance, or personal life, over their athletic achievements (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Yenilmez, 2021). Narratives of female athletes are often silenced or dwarfed by those of their male counterparts, thereby perpetuating the culture of women as invisible athletes (McGannon et al., 2025).

The bias in sports journalism has implications for society and culture beyond mere media, contributing to damaging norms of gender as well as perpetuating disparities in sports financing and access (Pérez et al., 2024). This gendered discourse creates a societal perspective where male athletes are considered the ultimate image of sporting excellence and female athletes are effectively marginalized, thus inequality in terms of sponsorship and media portrayal expressively deter participation of female in sports (Pavlidis et al., 2022; Yenilmez, 2021). Research carried out in different cultural contexts, like in Turkey, has underscored the multiple challenges women in the media encounter and how they are not given enough media recognition and backing (Parry et al., 2023; Yenilmez, 2021). In addition, differential treatment in sports media coverage, is indicative of higher social patterns of institutionalized discrimination where women athletes face scrutiny that is rarely imposed on their male counterparts (Asghar et al., 2024; Hotman et al., 2025).

Media literacy refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media content in a variety of forms. It involves critical thinking skills that empower individuals to question media narratives, recognize biases, and understand the underlying messages conveyed through different media channels (Arik & Arik, 2021; Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021). As an educational and civic tool, media literacy enables people to actively interpret media representations rather than passively consume them. In the context of sports journalism, media literacy equips audiences to discern gendered framing and challenge stereotypical portrayals of athletes, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable media landscape (de Azevedo, 2019).

Media literacy becomes a critical way of countering and questioning these glossed-over narratives present in sports journalism. We can empower citizens with the tools needed to critically consume media and in turn produce a more critical public able to detect and break down biases present in sports media (Galli et al., 2021; Mallia et al., 2020). In an era of digital media consumption, the importance of media literacy is even more to be recognized and since media has the power to educate, informing media literacy would enable both the consumers and producers to challenge and re-interpret gender representations (Parvathy, 2020; Taylor, 2022). Educational interventions based on media literacy acquire a relevant role and have demonstrated to produce valuable results in strengthening critical thinking and in helping to allow young audiences to be more attentive to what media offer them (Parvathy, 2020; Taylor, 2023).

The theoretical base of gender bias in sports media is framed on theories such as Framing Theory and Feminist Media Theory. Framing Theory provides insight into how the way information is presented

shapes audience responses, including the significance of storytelling as a means of reinforcing or questioning stereotypes (Antunovic, 2023; Sharifzadeh & Brison, 2024). Feminist Media Theory reveal invisible power imbalances that structure media production and representation, calling for recourse to the imagination to reimagine how the world's women athletes are presented (Cleland et al., 2022; Yenilmez, 2021). These theoretical perspectives provide invaluable insight as we continue to struggle against the media prejudice in sports as we analyze and re-frame the language of the current stories constructed around women athletes in the now.

To report on women in sport is difficult and should be done in the context of history. A form of misogyny that translates into sports is seen in the stories books of sport, which have influenced cultural beliefs about women in sport to create an unequal playing field on and off the court (Pavlidis et al., 2022). Gender bias in sports journalism is thus not merely about representation, but a fundamental feature of a wider social structure that restricts the access and opportunities of women athletes.

Any rewriting of these stories must address more than the structural nature of bias in sport media, it should also consider how to positively represent minorities (Khatun et al., 2024). Efforts to encourage more balanced media representations can be pursued through promoting reporting on female athletes and demand for diverse voices in sports media (Cooky et al., 2021; İnce-Yenilmez, 2021). In this changing media landscape a joint effort for media literacy and gender balance representation can be successful in telling new cultural stories that shape the ways gender is viewed in sports, ensuring that both genders are more adequately represented within more inclusive representations of all athletes.

The intersection of media literacy and gender bias in sports reporting is an area that requires comprehensive theoretical attention. As noted by a review of existing literature, there is a large gap in the existing framework that allows for analyzing these factors. Although media bias in sports has been studied from different standpoints, none of the reviewed studies have conducted theoretical means of analyzing both media literacy and gender bias in sports reporting (Isard & Melton, 2022; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). According to (Cooky et al., 2021) the lack of a coherent theoretical framework does prevent the development of an understanding of how media literacy strategies can be used to address gender bias in sports media narratives.

Therefore, a future study should focus on a more systematic theoretical approach that will unite the essence of masculinity and gender bias. The proposed framework would help both scholars and practitioners to understand the relation between media representations and gender disparities in sports. By merging existing approaches, it would be able to show how media literacy is used as a tool for deconstructing biased narratives (Esford, 2021; Isard & Melton, 2022). Thus, based on the information reviewed, the theory may consist of elements of feminist media studies, critical discourse analysis, and even media effects theory to include both historic and institutional notions of gender bias. Given the increasingly digital nature of media, there is a clear need to address its current narrative in public opinion toward female athletes, as expressed by (Küster Boluda et al., 2024).

One of the main aims of this article is to review and make sense of the most important approaches, concepts, and theories of the analyses of how gender bias operates in sports media by applying the perspective of media literacy. By building upon the work of recent studies, this study aims to make an important contribution to scholarly conversations as well as journalism education, furthering our understanding of the role of media literacy in creating gender equity (Cooky et al., 2021; Ramon & Rojas-Torrijos, 2022). To accomplish these aims, the study plans to help advocacy work on behalf of greater representations in sports media through a focus on advancing marginalized voice in sports reports. Such contributions have the potential to influence the way that future stories are told which can assist in breaking down stereotypes and result in a more accurate representation of a broad range of media athletes (Geurin, 2023).

Method

The literature search was conducted using academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, Taylor & Francis Online, SAGE Journals, and Google Scholar to ensure a wide coverage of interdisciplinary and international sources. Only English-language publications were considered, with a time filter applied to



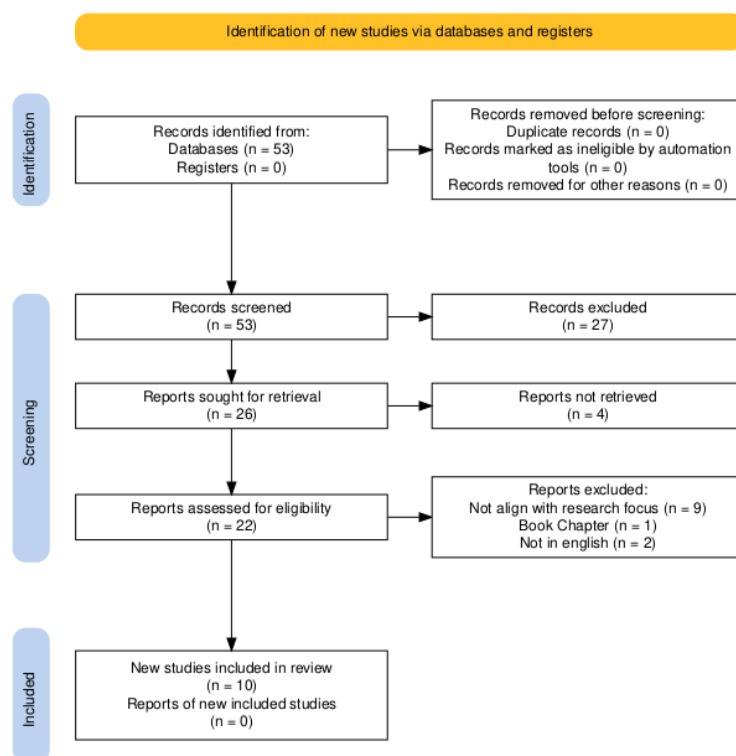
prioritize studies published within the last five years (2018–2025) to ensure relevance and contemporaneity.

Search results were initially screened by title and abstract. Full-text articles were then assessed based on relevance to the topic, theoretical depth, and contribution to understanding either gender bias in sports media or media literacy frameworks. Studies focused purely on technical sports reporting or unrelated media topics were excluded.

A thematic synthesis was applied to analyze the selected literature. Each source was coded according to major themes such as:

- Representation of female athletes in media,
- Framing and discourse in sports journalism,
- Media literacy education and frameworks,
- Intersectionality in media portrayals,
- The role of critical pedagogy and public engagement in addressing media bias.

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram Illustrating the Study Selection Process for the Systematic Review



A total of 53 records were identified through database searches, with no additional records from registers. Following the removal of duplicates and ineligible records by automation tools, all 53 records were screened. Of these, 27 records were excluded based on title and abstract screening.

From the remaining 26 records, 4 could not be retrieved, leaving 22 full-text articles assessed for eligibility. Among these, 12 articles were excluded for the following reasons: 9 did not align with the research focus, 1 was a book chapter, and 2 were not written in English.

Ultimately, 10 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the systematic review. No additional studies were identified through other sources.

Table 1. Keyword Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

Component	Details
Keyword Search Terms	Gender bias in sports media
	Media literacy and gender representation
	Sports journalism and stereotypes
	Feminist media theory and sports
	Framing theory in sports reporting
	Critical media literacy and sports coverage
Inclusion Criteria	Published between 2019 and 2025
	Peer-reviewed or academic sources
	Focused on theoretical frameworks or critical analyses
	Addresses gender, sports reporting, or media literacy
Exclusion Criteria	Written in English
	Studies focused solely on athletic performance or sports science
	Articles without a theoretical or media analysis focus
	Opinion pieces lacking academic rigor
	Non-English language publications

To critically analyze the selected literature, this study applies two complementary theoretical lenses—Framing Theory and Feminist Media Theory—through an interpretive synthesis approach. Framing Theory is applied to analyze how media stories construct specific content themes about gender and sports in media reports. This includes studying what issues get focused, disregarded, or accepted as the norm, often in the playback of stories involving men and women as athletes. Attention is given to the types of frames used, such as conflict, human interest, or episodic versus thematic, and to the language choices that contribute to the construction of media bias and representation.

Simultaneously, Feminist Media Theory offers a lens to analyze power dynamics in media texts and journalistic practices. This perspective enables the reader to gain a better comprehension of how paternalistic ideologies and sex-role-stereotyping are perpetuated or subverted by sports journalism. In its analysis of patterns of symbolic exclusion and the gendered rhetoric of demonization, vituperation, and persecution, the theory points to the larger social and cultural processes at work.

Taken together, these theoretical framings provide a rich, multi-dimensional analysis that not only illuminates the process through which gender bias is reproduced in sports media, but also that emphasizes the critical contribution media literacy can make in arming individuals to recognize, challenge and disrupt bias. Media literacy is thus framed as a progressive pedagogic device that encourages reflexive thinking and contributes to fairer and more inclusive coverage in sports journalism. As this study involves a review of previously published literature, no ethical approval was required. However, all sources are appropriately cited, and academic integrity is strictly upheld.

To deepen understanding of the literature, two concurrent theoretical perspectives—Framing Theory and Feminist Media Theory—are used to critically analyze the body of research, by using an interpretive synthesis strategy. Framing Theory is thus used to evaluate how media narratives construct certain meanings pertaining to gender roles in sport reports. This can range from what work gets played up, overlooked, or normalized, particularly in terms of depicting male versus female athletes. Frames are discussed with respect to the types of frames employed (conflict, human interest, episodic versus thematic), as well as language factors that contribute to the conflation of media bias and representation.

At the same time, Feminist Media Theory offers a critical tool kit for posing questions of power relations implicit in media texts and practices of journalistic production. This view enables us to examine more thoroughly how patriarchal ideologies and gender narratives are perpetuated or disrupted in sports journalism. Through the lens of their symbolic marginalization and use of gendered discourse, the theory underscores the more general socio-cultural forces at work.

Combined, these theoretical constructs contribute to a complex analysis of the mechanisms by which gender bias continues to be reproduced in sports media, and the importance of media literacy in enabling individuals to recognize, challenge, and resist such biases. Accordingly, media literacy is identified here as an empowering curricular tool that encourages critical consciousness and fairer and more inclusive media depictions in sports journalism. Since it is a review of the literature there was no ethical approval needed for this study. There is only one but all sources are well referenced and all the rules of college papers aren't broken.

Results

Summary of Selected Literature

The growing literature examining gender in sports media during the past five years has found continued and pervasive inequities in men's and women's portrayals. Cooky et al. conducted a longitudinal analysis revealing that despite decades of activism, women's sports are still the most underrepresented within televised sports coverage. The "symbolic annihilation" of female athletes is part of an institutional bias that long marginalized, and continues to minimize, women's accomplishments in sports (Cooky et al., 2021).

Adding to the above, Petty and Pope discovered that even when major events such as the FIFA Women's World Cup received much more intense media focus, the content continued to be lacking in sobriety and analysis often provided to tournaments involving men. This kind of tokenism, whereby women's sport is only promoted during big global events, further to this, reinforces women's sport is insignificant (Petty & Pope, 2019).

He et al. explored the reasons for this inequity by focusing on the impact of old-fashioned gender stereotypes on the participation of young girls in contact sports. They show that, in modern gender stereotypes, participation rates of course are affected but media visibility is as well; which sustains exclusion (He et al., 2024). Ihle contributed to this approach by using the news-factors theory to account for why men's sport are still far from equating to the news values on German television and precisig gendered production (dq practice) (Ihle, 2022).

This pattern is reflected in the digital world as well. Sainz-de-Baranda et al. examined Twitter coverage and described the continued gender inequalities in amount as well as framing of posts. Despite the democratizing power of social media, female athletes frequently receive less engagement or are objectified (Sainz-De-baranda et al., 2020). This is in agreement with Rasmussen et al. which looks at the ways in which advertising (especially from major brands like Nike) marginalises women in sport by either representing or sexualising them too much boldly dominated (Rasmussen et al., 2021).

Razack and Joseph made an important contribution through their intersectional analysis of the media representation of Naomi Osaka. Their work unpacks how race, gender, and nationality intersect to complicate the experiences of women of color in sports media, deepening the conversation by understanding their overlapping systems of oppression. (Razack & Joseph, 2021)

More recent studies that examine the existence and evolution of media biases include the work by (Sainz-De-Baranda et al., 2023). Among their conclusions: There has been some change but structural changes in editorial policies and audience strategies are needed for true representation. For example, Macedo and Saxena studied online soccer communities, finding that gendered communication norms persist in online interactions, potentially discouraging womens' participation in discourse-rich spaces (Macedo & Saxena, 2024).

Finally, Harrison et al. added a technical element by showing that gender bias is also part of AI-based media systems. Their study of sports-related text and image generation highlights how, unless actively addressed, the way machine learning models reflect societal bias (S. Harrison et al., 2023).

Overall, these ten studies collectively demonstrate that, while there has been some progress, the roots of gender inequity in sports media remain deep-rooted. The problem isn't confined to old media, but also spans digital media, advertising, and even AI. Any solution to such problems needs to be a multi-pronged approach, a combination of policy change, education about audience, better media practice and questioning the technology.

Table 2. Summary of Selected Literature

No.	Reference	Title	Journal / Source	Year	Topics
1	Cooky et al. (2021)	One and Done: The Long Eclipse of Women's Televised Sports, 1989–2019	Communication & Sport	2021	Gender Representation, Television Coverage
2	Petty & Pope (2019)	A New Age for Media Coverage of Women's Sport? An Analysis of English Media Coverage of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup	Sociology	2019	Media Coverage, Women's Football



3	He et al. (2024)	Girls play basketball too? A study of the mechanisms of traditional social gender consciousness on female participation in contact leisure sports	Frontiers in Psychology	2024	Gender Bias, Sports Participation
4	Ihle (2022)	How gender affects the newsworthiness of sports news on German TV	International Review for the Sociology of Sport	2022	Media Bias, Newsworthiness
5	Sainz-de-Baranda et al. (2020)	Gender Differences in Sports News Coverage on Twitter	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	2020	Social Media, Gender Differences
6	Rasmussen et al. (2021)	Gender Marginalization in Sports Participation through Advertising: The Case of Nike	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	2021	Gender Representation, Advertising
7	Razack & Joseph (2020)	Misogynoir in women's sport media: race, nation, and diaspora in the representation of Naomi Osaka	Media, Culture & Society	2020	Intersectionality, Media Representation
8	Sun & Wang (2023)	Gender Disparities in Sports Media Coverage: Phenomenon, Analysis, and Transformation	Frontiers in Sport Research	2023	Media Disparity, Gender Analysis
9	Macedo & Saxena (2024)	Gender Differences in Online Communication: A Case Study of Soccer	arXiv	2024	Gender Communication, Online Media
10	Harrison, Gualdoni & Boleda (2023)	Run Like a Girl! Sports-Related Gender Bias in Language and Vision	arXiv	2023	AI, Language Bias, Visual Gender Representation

Framing Strategies in Sports Reporting

An analysis of the framing devices employed in sports coverage uncovers the specific ways in which masculinities and femininities are constructed in the media. 12 Several framing strategies-types of framing (i.e., conflict frame, human-interest frame, thematic vs. episodic framing, and language and visuals-as...etermine visual and textual representations of athletes by gender. Male sporting events are well covered using conflict frames that emphasize competition, discord and rivalry, their narratives reinforcing traditional notions of masculinity in sport. Instead, women athletes are all too often contained within human-interest frames that border on the sentimental, emphasising their demographic traits rather than their professional achievements (Spencer & Limperos, 2018) Esford, 2021). This difference in presentation affects how the audience views and understands the roles of men and women in sports.

A comparative analysis between male and female athletes show that male athletes are much more likely to be presented episodically, with times specific examples of their accomplishments, while female athletes are found more often in thematic frames that place their successes into the context of social problems about gender equity. For example, male sports reportage is often constructed with an emphasis on direct competition and statistics, and this thematic of aggressive meritocracy (Mavridis et al., 2024;. Likewise, female athletes are frequently positioned in broader societal narratives surrounding (the struggle for) gender equality in sports, which can undermine their individual accomplishments and victories (Boukes, 2022).

When we look at language choices, adjectives and descriptive language used is fairly divergent between male and female athletes by the media. It was found that male athletes are more likely to be referred to with language that is associated with strength, competition, and professionalism, while female athletes are more likely to be referred to using language related to her appearance or her role in her families (Esford, 2021; Xu, 2018). Women athletes are often described as “graceful” or “pretty” or “inspiring” individual who may be competitors, but who also serve as figures that must play nice with societal standards of beauty. This sort of prejudice language supports stereotypes about genders and stereotypes about how we should think or feel about women athletes.

The visual complements to sports reporting are also very much an influence on how we tell stories of gender. Male athletes are often represented in powerful and strong poses with a sexy/competitive promise, whereas female athletes may be represented in subordinated and in-aestheticized images (Mavridis et al., 2024; Esford, 2021). It affects how the public views the capabilities and skills of male and female athletes and only adds to the culture of sexism present in sports journalism. Research suggests that there is a lack of visual focus on female athleticism relative to images that centre femininity or sexualized images of women, contributing to the silencing of women's athletic identity (Boukes, 2021; Xu, 2018).

Grasping the intentions behind these framing tactics becomes critical in teaching people about bias in sports media. As media literacy programming continues to move forward, it could be incorporated into



school programs to develop critical thinking about sports texts. Through training audiences to identify and disentangle these frames, programs seeking to raise awareness of gender inequality in sports and to contribute toward reproducing a larger and more equitable set of representations. For example, projects on theme analysis focus on how some consumers can be encouraged to ask why particular frames predominate visibility in sports news (Mattis, 2025).

Finally, there is a push for a re-calibration of media frames, so that when based on gender merits can encompass a broader spectrum of themes, which are not tied to the dichotomy of being one of; driven, physically capable and competition orientated, while also not being a reluctance to continue conflict frames around female athletes (Dar et al., 2021). If the media starts placing its emphasis on the athlete (greatness) as opposed to the athlete's gender, then we begin to chip away barriers that have long pushed female athletes to the margins, and we set the stage for a more equitable sports media world.

One benefit of the transformation of the media with the emergence of the social media platforms is that 'a million flowers started to bloom' in terms of new narratives. Episodic and thematic framing in traditional sports journalism should retool for the inclusion of all athletes' experiences (Harrison & Boehmer, 2019). Studies show that when women's sports narratives receive strong, diversified exposure, popular interest and involvement increase, producing an enhanced culture of support for female athletes (Petrota, 2023; Son & Fielding, 2024). This suggests that spectators seem to appreciate thorough stories and emphasizes the need for media to promote women sports through equilibrated framing techniques.

The move that will help normalise women in sports and acts as a potential catalyst for greater social change. Although the aim to raise awareness of gender biases is an important goal in and of itself, by deconstructing the gender biases embedded in sports media framing, the impetus is the possibility for challenging the standard cultural templates of gender and sports, which in turn challenges the structures of sports media, and the potential to argue for gender equity in sports participation, funding and representation—aimed at all athletes, not just limited to those for whom gender has the significant negative meaning. As scholars work to deconstruct these stories, an interdisciplinary model, taking into account media literacy, gender studies, and the sociology of sports, will be essential in defining future research and instruction agendas" (Aldrete & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2023).

Feminist Media Theory: Interrogating Structural Gender Bias

Feminist Media Theory offers a useful lens through which to understand and examine how the symbolic marginalisation of women athletes is constantly reproduced within media discourses. Even though women are now much more engaged in sports, they are hardly ever represented in sports-related content. Research has suggested that under 10% of televised sports news content is devoted to female athletes, hinting toward a continued invisibility of women in sport within dominant conversations, media included (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020).

The media frequently embeds patriarchal values that present male athletes as the norm and female athletes as the exception. This master narrative perpetuates gendered power hierarchies that value masculinity - defined as power, aggression, domination, and the like and associated with physical prowess - over femininity - which values grace or beauty and other prescribed attributes and aesthetics - as it systematically devalues female athletes (Bruce, 2016). Feminist Media Theory examines serious forms of gender discrimination concealed in sports press, making clear how draws on patriarchal attitude persist in media presentation. Symbolic marginalization is key to this analysis: female athletes are frequently much less visible and celebrated than their male counterparts. Sports reporting (or lack thereof) not only perpetuates a distorted view of women's sports in the public space but also reinforces an understanding that if anything is worthy of attention in the sporting landscape, it is men (Johnson et al., 2024).

Furthermore, another way how traditional notions of gender are accentuated through sports media is by framing female athletes as representing certain values that are linked to femininity such as grace and a nurturing spirit, and not as fierce competitors. These stereotypical representations are reinforced by inappropriate language that undermines the athletes' athletic ability and emphasizes their looks or private lives. There is some evidence that this language is used to promote "soft" gender traits, thereby framing the female athlete in a narrow construction in the sports narrative, maintaining traditional gendered norms and representations that embody the women as only worthwhile for their looks not their



abilities on the field (Johnson et al., 2024). Another common process is stereotyping. When they get coverage at all, female athletes are commonly objectified, a focus on how they look, with whom they sleep, how they feel, rather than how they perform. This further validates orthodox gender stereotypes and obscures their social identity in their workplace as professional athletes (Santonico et al., 2023). And when women's athletes are hailed by the media, the tone tends to be "gender-bland," devoid of the adoration or heroism associated with men's athletes (Cooky et al., 2021).

Power relations appear to be evident in the decision-making and reporting practice of sports journalism. A storm of male sports reporters means editorial decisions skew coverage for tales from the (beloved) locker room, while stories that make us proud of men in touch with their testosterone are hard to find. For example, one study demonstrates that female sports reporters are often harassed in a manner that accentuates their unauthorized penetration into a male domain and workforce (Johnson et al., 2024). This harassment impacts not just the experience of individual journalists but also the propensity for reporting that in turn shapes institutional priorities to support a male-oriented narrative at the expense of female perspective and representation. These trends are also influenced by structural power imbalances in newsroom operations. Studies have demonstrated that men dominate top decision-making roles and position of power in sport reporting and that this has an effect on which news stories are selected to be published and the frame through which the news is presented (Ihle, 2022). And so male-dominated views, the view according to which what's interesting and what's "newsworthy" is male, are what drives and determines coverage in "news" until there would be such a thing as true parity, with women's sports being covered because women play sports.

Further, a frame analysis on the dominant frames used in sports news reveals a trend that while some male athletes are framed in terms of conflict and against their performance/contribution, female athletes are primarily featured in terms of the human-interest criteria, focusing on their human drama and personal emotions. This disparity reveals a systemic gender bias that relegates female athletes as also-rans on the sports stage. Compounding this complexity is the influence of intersectionality. Media representation And, of course, the reality of athletes who hold intersecting and indeed sometimes oppositional identities (like, you know, women of color) tend to get even more distorted or erased in sports media. For example, the media representation of Naomi Osaka in Western and Asian contexts reveals the intersectional ways in which race, gender, and the nation are implicated as power relations in which her agency is discredited (Razack & Joseph, 2021).

New frontiers of gender bias Brand new digital platforms and AI-driven tools have created new frontiers for gender bias to emerge in. Algorithms trained on prejudiced datasets exacerbate exclusion through overrepresenting or incidentally boosting male-based content unfairly, reproducing inequalities even within so-called impartial technologies (V. S. Harrison & Boehmer, 2020). Furthermore, sports organizations have been accused of reinforcing gender stereotypes by supporting media relations which seek to disproportionately advantage male-centric sports and stigmatize sports based on gender and 'femininity' (Johnson et al., 2024). There is a shared responsibility by the media to call out this impunity and inaction, which perpetuates the inequality between genders, as spectators are, again and again, exposed to narratives about men which obscure the fact that women athletes also exist. By consistently favoring male-dominated sports stories, the public sees or hears less about women's victories and contributions and it lends to the shaping of attitudes in the culture toward female athletes.

A few headway have been discovered in spite of these difficulties. In most cases, digital media and social networks have given rise to female athletes and feminist sports journalists questioning, circumventing and directly challenging dominant narratives, developing communities of their own and demanding for more inclusive coverage (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018). But the thing is, these attempts frequently come up against structural resistance, and they are sometimes co-opted into tokenistic gestures that never actually change the fundamental way that an institution operates. This structural bias in sports reporting is also reflected in the absence of women from the relevant decision making inside media organizations: the stories about women's athletic talent become streamlined and one-faceted. This form of exclusion perpetuates a pattern of under- and mis-representation, wherein so-called gatekeepers are not properly considering or valuing alternate viewpoints that might contest the mainstream. Support for greater inclusivity in sports journalism rests on the belief that diversity could change the stories we see (Johnson et al., 2024). Without the sound of various voices and backgrounds, the media fails to present the complete picture of women's sports and the athletes who compete in them.



Faced with these challenges, feminist media advocacy demands transformative sports journalism that prioritizes justice and inclusivity. Advocacy for structural changes in media companies — diverse hiring practices, more coverage of women's sports — could provide the jolt for a change in how our sporting narratives are created and presented. It would be more than just a rethinking of how we frame women's sports, but also a breakdown of the sexism and misogyny still rampant throughout sports journalism. The focus of the paper is gender equitable reporting in sport aimed to lead to more accurate reports of all athletes' experiences and success throughout the Olympic Games and beyond.

Ultimately, Feminist Media Theory exposes how gender discrimination in sports media is not a result of interest, but rather a result of significant power dynamics and cultural norms. More effort should be made to support critical media literacy, in parallel with architectural as well as cultural reforms in the fields of journalistic practice, news leadership, and algorithmic design. Their biasness needs to be challenged in the media industry and packaged for consumers - to become more critical in realising gender influences sports narratives. Successful advocacy for gender equity in sports media rests on re-aligning media practices with principles of inclusiveness, the disruption of stereotypes and the advocates for a richer articulation of what athletic excellence looks like across all genders.

Media Literacy as a Transformative Tool

Media literacy has proven to be an important tool to combat gender bias in sports journalism by empowering audiences with critical thinking skills that can be used to recognize, analyze, and challenge stereotypical representations or portrayals. Since media story-telling is a significant method in shaping popular conceptions of the gender norms, media literacy allows one to interrogate the manner in which these narratives construct and cultivate unfair portrayals in sport media (Kane, 1989). By cultivating circulation- or outlet-specific education and outreach programs, media literacy efforts can offer audiences tools and resources through which to interpret the framing, language and images used in male vs. female athlete coverage—shedding light upon media portrayals as well as the subsequent societal mobilization (and/or lack thereof) based on those portrayals (Skewes et al., 2018).

Indeed, such a critical approach to media literacy, particularly one that is informed by feminist perspectives, can lead to an increased awareness of the structural role of media in the dissemination and perpetuation of societal norms and values. Initiatives specifically targeting gender representation proved successful in mediating participants' capacity to detect and challenge stereotypical narratives, as fostered by a more (medialiteracy-wise) diverse and gender-aware readership. For example, Goorevich et al. (2025) with such initiatives to media literacy that have girls and boys critically discuss gender stereotypes in the mass media, be it across media formats, challenging gender bias in sports coverage. That kind of education creates a population more likely to demand fair media representation.

A key step in this endeavour is the creation of the Gender Essentialist Beliefs towards Girls in Sport scale (GEGS), which aims to measure and combat essentialism in sport-based contexts (Goorevich et al., 2025). Thus, the GEGS can be a useful tool for educators, coaches and program developers to reflect on their own biases about girls' participation in physical activity. In sports and education, the tool offers a resource to create interventions aiming to enable or support the emergence of even more enabling environments for girls, challenging hegemonic norms and fostering girls' multi-dimensional growth.

There is also an increasing attention being paid by community based media literacy initiatives to the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in sport. These programs, often aimed at a youth demographic, also contribute to raising consciousness that people need to think critically about the way in which women athletes are being reflected, or reflected from, the media. The participants should also consider more carefully how the lack of women's participation through the sports editors is affecting society, how they are profiled in the sports media and to use workshops and outreach to advocate more origination of accurate and fair images of women in this sports culture. Bottom-up campaigns like those that demand that viewers support fair media by making sponsors aware of how they feel are the kind of campaigns that can change attitudes.

The effectiveness of media literacy may be seen from the experience of programmes targeting young people. In a study by (Sandoval et al., 2020), students significantly improved their understanding of how to spot bias and critically talk about: gender bias and the media, thanks to participating in a sports journalism- focused media literacy curriculum. These findings suggest that programs of this nature have

promising potential to foster critical consciousness and agency of participants to resist forms of gender inequality in the media and in the everyday spaces of their sporting lives.

“Collaboration between educators, journalists and sports media organizations is essential to broadening media literacy,” he said. Embedding media literacy in journalism education and training can promote more inclusive production practices. As proposed by (Portela-Pino et al., 2020) Increased gender diversity within the sports media industry has the potential to change the storytellers and the stories that are told and give voice to those that are not. Expanding on this can lead to more systemic change in terms of how female athletes are viewed and valued.

Discussion

Increasingly, in recent years, the literature points to an ongoing, systemic gender bias in sports news coverage. Even after decades of advancement, coverage of women's sports is still severely underrepresented in mainstream and digital media. Scholars such as (Cooky et al., 2021) call this an example of “symbolic annihilation,” meaning that women and their sports will continue to be marginalized when the diminution of woman's sports leaves a void in women's sports coverage, and it supports the societal view that women's athletic achievements are less significant than those of men. When the athletes are more visible, as when the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup was played, coverage is shallow; focusing on shallow stories that minimize the professionalism involved (Petty & Pope, 2019). This emphasizes the idea that women's sports are not noteworthy in their own right, only of temporary interest or attention.

Framing Theory as Anderson & Meyer provides a helpful window through which to begin to understand this bias construction and maintenance. Research demonstrates that men's sports tends to be hinged on conflict-based and accomplishment narratives strength, competition, and meritocracy (Ivarsson, 2022; Kuan et al., 2021). In contrast, more often than not, women athletes are depicted through human interest frames, which concentrate on the personal aspect of the story, the emotions, and/or the look rather than the athletic ability of the person involved (Esford, 2021; Spencer & Limperos, 2020). These contrary models of framing subtly train audiences as viewers of gender roles in sports to position men as competitors and women as inspirational figures. This framing is not just an erasure of women, it gives a false impression about what women can do, have done, and continue to do for the public.

This is further established in language. Such terms are evidence of sex-based stereotyping because male athletes are described with power, toughness, and work ethic; female athletes are described based on appearance, form, or relationship with someone (S. Xu, 2018). Through such usage, however, these linguistic patterns include implicit prejudices, which in turn adds to the cultural devaluation of women in sport. The visual representation in media is also a significant factor: women are predominantly represented in a passive, sexualised, or appealing image, whereas men are represented into assertive, action-oriented poses (Mavridis et al., 2024). These images position femininity as antithetical to athleticism and reinforce misogynist codes in visual narrative design.

Feminist Media Theory further articulates this critique by situating gender bias in relation to larger forms of patriarchal domination and symbolic authority. It uncovers how sports media isn't just clinging to a male-dominated structure and representation, but also it's maintaining that structure and representation institutionally (Cefai, 2024; Fotaki & Pullen, 2024). Cooky & Antunovic write that women represent less than 10 percent of televised sport contents, which implies a structural undervaluation (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020). At the same time, female sport journalists are frequently confronted with harassment or exclusion in male-dominated editorial offices (Johnson et al., 2024), so their influence on editorial decisions and their potential to cover sport in a gender balanced way is limited. In this regard, Feminist Media Theory illuminates the weight of power structures and gatekeepers in determining whose stories are told, in what narratives, and by whose authorship.

Intersectional readings also show that these gender dynamics are complicated by race, nationality, and class. Razack and Joseph further describe that reporting of women of color by the media is often refracted through the lens of racialized and gendered bias that undermines their capacity of agency and/or casts them in certain racialized and gendered roles (Razack & Joseph, 2021). This compounded erasure continues to sideline already minority perspectives in sports media. The intersectional framework of Feminist Media Theory will continue to illuminate how equity in sports reporting must consider not

just 'woman' as a monolithic category, but all of the identity axes that influence normative practices as well as representation and treatment in the media.

The digital sphere, once thought to be a democratized space that could avoid the common logics of representation, evidenced similar patterns. Research from Sainz-De-Baranda et al. also indicate that on platforms like Twitter, female athletes are also less socially engaged with or more of the object of men in those platforms (Sainz-De-Baranda et al., 2020; Sainz-De-Baranda et al., 2023). Additionally, AI trained on biased data is now inadvertently replicating, and in some cases magnifying, gender bias in automated sports coverage (V. S. Harrison & Boehmer, 2020). This implies that gender imbalances in the media are not limited to traditional media, but have transferred to new tech-based forms of communication. Solutions thus must extend beyond editorial remedies to ethical governance of media technologies.

In this context, media literacy becomes a vital arsenal for challenging and reframing hegemonic narratives. Sports Media Literacy Through education that develops critical thinking and the ability to focus on analysis, media literacy empowers audiences to identify and explore bias in sports reports. If designed, however, based on such feminist pedagogy, program may also ensure that users, especially young ones, become more aware of how gender stereotypes are encoded in language, visuals, and in the framing of media content (Goorevich et al., 2025; Skewes et al., 2018). This kind of training can lead to a generation of media consumers and producers who are prepared to insist on more equitable portrayals and partake in cultural change.

As an instance of pragmatic implementation, we have the Gender Essentialist Beliefs toward Girls in Sport Scale (GEGS) which offers a tool to teachers and coaches to examine and counteract biases that impact on girls involvement in sport (Goorevich et al., 2025). This is the kind of initiative that show media literacy can move beyond the classroom and shape the actual situations where sports narratives are consumed, and, in many cases, lived. Community workshops and youth engagement campaigns have also been found to foster critical reflection and support for more equitable representations of female athletes, in particular by holding sponsors and media accountable for their practices.

The effectiveness of these interventions is supported by evidence. For instance, students who graduated from media literacy programs in sports journalism showed improved capacity to detect bias and critically engage contents (Sandoval et al., 2020). Journalism schools, media, and feminist advocacy groups can have a major role in helping to institutionalize these gains, and the networks that produced these gains need to be maintained. By disrupting this dynamic, integrating media literacy into professional training and editorial standards would, over time, fundamentally change the way stories are sourced, framed and shared. Scholars have also emphasized that it is highly necessary lifting gender diversity in the newsrooms as regards rebalancing the representation topic, and also breaking the exclusion cycle (Portela-Pino et al., 2020).

Conclusions

This conceptual analysis has analyzed the problem of gender bias in sports coverage from a Framing Theory and Feminist Media Theory perspective and highlights 'media literacy' as a major factor challenging biased reporting narratives. The literature provides ample evidence that women's sports are underrepresented and misrepresented in the mainstream media as well as in the new media. Sports-women are often rendered in stereotypical framings and language which focus on their looks, emotions, or home-life rather than their athletic prowess. These representations help to perpetuate stereotypes about gender and further wield symbolic power in the sports arena over women. In Feminist Media Theory, this encoding is shown to be rooted in the structural inequity present in media organisations, such as male-driven editorial policy and the under-representation of women in positions of power. Intersectional viewpoints, however also demonstrate how race, class, and nationality serve to exacerbate the invisibility and misrepresentation of female athletes, and in particular, women of color. Media literacy presents itself as a discursive tool able to challenge these biases. Because media literacy empowers audience with the tools to critically evaluate media content, expectant awareness of how constructed gendered narratives are maintained is cultivated. Education campaigns and community-based programs have shown promising results in motivating viewers to recognize and reject stereotypical images,



demand equitable images, and re-imagine how athletes of both sexes are depicted. In the long run, the solution to gender bias in sports reporting must be multi-faceted: educational, editorial, institutional. As media literacy is increasingly integrated, this may change public perceptions, expose media structures that exclude and enable more equitable access to, and representation of, sport.

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