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She’s a Lady; He’s an Athlete; They Have Overcome

Portrayals of Gender and Disability in the 2018 Paralympic Winter Games

KAREN WEILLER-ABELS, TRACY EVERBACH,
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This qualitative content analysis of the National Broadcasting Company’s (NBC’s) coverage of the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Paralympic Games sought to examine how the broadcasters framed athletes’ gender and disability. The researchers employed feminist approaches, intersectionality, and hegemonic masculinity to examine the frames used in alpine skiing coverage from the Paralympic Games. Results showed that women athletes received less airtime than the men, that women athletes were placed into traditional gender-role frames, and that women were portrayed in a sexualized manner. The researchers also found that athletes’ disabilities were framed by sports media in a medicalized way, as something they should “overcome,” and that Paralympic athletes with disabilities were portrayed as “less than” able-bodied athletes. The researchers discovered that coverage of the Paralympic Games has not changed in the past decade, continuing to oppress women athletes with disabilities by stereotyping and marginalizing them and stigmatizing both male and female athletes with disabilities by framing them as aspiring to be able-bodied.

Keywords: Paralympic Games, athletes, disability, gender, sports media, framing

“Women with disabilities face double discrimination—discrimination based on gender and discrimination based on disability. . . . The limited available statistics suggest that economically, socially, and psychologically, women with disabilities fare considerably worse than either women who are nondisabled or men who are disabled.”

(Women and Disability Awareness Project, 1989)

Sports media are quite powerful in influencing societal attitudes toward women athletes as well as shaping the relationship between women and sport (Villalon & Weiller-Abels, 2018). Historically and currently, women athletes and teams have received a limited amount of total sports-media coverage as compared to the massive amount of coverage given to men (Cooky et al., 2013; Higgs & Weiller, 1994; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Tuggle, 1997). Although contemporary media attention to high-profile women athletes exists (e.g., Megan Rapinoe, Serena Williams), mass media coverage and social status of women athletes overall have failed to equal the coverage and status of men in sports (K. K. Davis & Tuggle, 2012).

When covering sporting events for individuals with disabilities, sports journalists historically have portrayed athletes—especially women athletes—as outsiders and subjected them to a “double oppression” (Deegan & Brooks, 1985; Fine & Asch, 1988; Hargreaves, 2000; Wendell, 1989). Disability scholars (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Lindemann, 2010; McRuer & Mollow, 2012) suggest that society demeans those whose bodies are considered disabled and glorifies those whose bodies are considered “normal” (Butler & Bissell, 2015, p. 229). In many instances, coverage of disabled athletes centers on a medicalized conception of disability and refers to athletes as needing to “overcome” or “triumph” over their disability in pursuit of an “able-bodied ideal” (Beacom et al., 2016; Thomas & Smith, 2003).

Women athletes are still viewed, albeit in some cases more subtly, as invaders in a sports world considered to be a “boy’s club” and are recognized more often for specific sports that are considered “feminine” (Adams & Tuggle, 2004). Sports journalism in general continues to be undertaken and presented in a gendered manner. Competitions in which women wear minimal, tight-fitting clothing have received undue attention by a variety of media outlets (Coche & Tuggle, 2016; Hardin & Greer, 2009), therefore maintaining the hierarchical status quo by reinforcing what is “acceptable” or “expected” in women’s sports (Stewart, 2018).

The Olympic Games, at various times, have been exceptions to this rule, as in recent years women athletes have received more airtime than men (Billings et al., 2014, 2018; Coche & Tuggle, 2016, 2017; MacArthur et al., 2016). Although Coche and Tuggle (2017) found that women received more airtime than men in the 2016 Rio Summer Olympic Games, the focus was primarily on sports considered to be socially acceptable, such as gymnastics. Billings, Angelini, and MacArthur (2018) note that NBC network coverage of the Olympic Games has evolved over the past two decades to present women first and foremost and to highlight athletes by their success and

nationality more than their sex: “It is clear that when medals are at stake within major international sport, viewers focus less on the biological sex of the athlete competing, placing more focus on the colors one wears: red, white, and blue” (p. 163).

In considering representation in the Paralympic Games, it is vital to consider that bodies with disabilities also are gendered bodies (Flintoff et al., 2008), and this intersection can create instances of double discrimination (Fawcett, 2000; Moradi, 2017). While the number of women competitors in the Paralympic Games increased to 1,669 in 2016, from 1,523 in 2012, women make up less than one fourth of the total Paralympic Games’ competitors (Bell, 2019; Women’s Sports Foundation, 2018). During the 2018 Paralympic Games, four major websites (ESPN, NBCOlympics, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today*) published only 34 articles about Paralympians—a majority of which were about men athletes (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2018, p. 5).

The Paralympic Games occur only two weeks after the Olympic Games; however, a paucity of research has examined gender differences in the media coverage. Only in recent years have concerns been raised about how disabled athletes are represented in media (Beacom et al., 2016). Historically, it was thought that every intention was made to erase disability from coverage (Buysse & Borchering, 2010; DePauw, 1997); however, a recent shift toward “hypervisibility” has been recognized (Pullen et al., 2019). In an era of ever-increasing coverage of mega sport events and access to athletes, appropriate representation is paramount, as media representations are reflected in the views of society (Beacom et al., 2016). Moreover, few have considered the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990; Hill Collins, 2019) of gender and disability in these media representations and its impact on journalism coverage.

This study examines media coverage of disabled athletes participating in the Paralympic Games. Researchers analyzed NBC network’s coverage of the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Paralympic Games in South Korea. Specifically, this study focused on analyzing the intersection of disability and gender in the games, broadcast from March 9 to March 18, 2018.

Literature Review

Disabled individuals historically have been misrepresented in news media, usually in a negative and stereotyped way. Often, disability is portrayed in a medicalized manner focusing on the deficit over the lived experiences that disability plays in an individual’s life (Ellis, 2009). This focus creates a narrative of success for athletes *overcoming* their disability, as many do not correlate disability with success. Yet this serves to further otherize individ-

uals and perpetuates a stigma (Pullen et al., 2019). This continued display of negative stereotypes is absorbed by society and continued in common thinking—even for disabled individuals. In interviews with wheelchair basketball players about how they felt about television commercials featuring people with disabilities, Hardin (2003) found that people with disabilities internalized the “able-bodied ideal.” Despite the athleticism present and the legitimacy of disabled sport, a continued focus—even preoccupation—on the athlete’s disability rather than the sports competition continues to pervade media coverage (Hilvoorde & Landeweerd, 2008; Tanner et al., 2011).

It also is a long-established fact that women athletes receive much less televised and print sports-media coverage than men athletes receive, and the coverage is often framed in a gendered manner (Cooky et al., 2013; Higgs & Weiller, 1994; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Tuggle, 1997). Cooky et al. (2013), for instance, found that present-day television news media coverage of women’s sports constituted less airtime than in the 1990s. This lack of coverage served to devalue and silence women athletes and sent a message that men’s sports are superior—in essence, sports are for men. The authors pointed out that women athletes are sexualized and trivialized in sports-media coverage. In a longitudinal study of 25 years of coverage of women’s sports, Musto et al. (2017) pointed out that overt sexism is no longer the norm in televised coverage and that women athletes receive more respectful, yet lackluster, coverage, which they deemed “gender-bland sexism” (p. 575). Musto et al. theorized that sports media make coverage appear equitable but actually assert male superiority and masculine hegemony.

In the Olympic Games, women athletes recently have received more airtime and televised media space than men (Billings et al., 2014, 2018; Coche & Tuggle, 2016; MacArthur et al., 2016). However, women athletes in professional and college sports continue to lack equitable sports-media coverage. For example, the NBA is vastly more covered by sports journalists than the WNBA, and the men’s NCAA basketball tournament receives more attention than the women’s tournament. A focus on accomplished women athletes has occurred in some venues, such as media celebrations of the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup champions, the U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team.

Coverage of the Paralympic Games

The Paralympic Games are the second largest multisport festival (Brittain, 2016) yet receive nowhere near the audience nor the level of coverage of the

Olympic Games. Founded shortly after World War II as a competition for disabled ex-servicemen and ex-servicewomen in England, these competitions are conducted at the same location and on the same courses, courts, fields, and arenas as the Olympic Games (Gold & Gold, 2007). Studies of Paralympic media coverage also are fewer than those of Olympic media coverage, mostly focusing on the broader context of disability sport.

Some Paralympic Games studies have concentrated on the stereotype of the “cyborg” or “supercrip”—inspirational stories that depict athletes with disabilities as having special powers to “overcome” adversity and perform athletically (Howe, 2011). Howe (2011) notes a hierarchy of disability categories among athletes with disabilities, with wheelchair disabilities at the top. The original classification system that was developed by the International Wheelchair and Sport Association (IWAS) can be understood as a major reason why wheelchair athletes are celebrated ahead of athletes from other impairment groups. This system classified athletes with spinal cord injuries according to where the lesion was in their spine, because back function is of great importance in sport (Howe, 2011, p. 870).

Howe (2011) adds that athletes with certain impairments benefit from advances in technology, while others do not. Those with visual impairment, cerebral palsy, or intellectual impairment may participate in sport without technological aids, such as wheelchairs or prosthetic limbs. Those with technological help may receive the “superhuman” label because of the advantage this technology provides, but they also often receive the attention and glory. Howe writes, “Technology empowers some while leaving the status of others at best unaltered and at worst increasing their liminality” (p. 880). Yet the superhuman narrative—in an attempt to popularize disability and make it “sexy”—could run counter to elite sports agendas (Pullen et al., 2019). Furthermore, these narratives disregard the true impairments that coexist with tremendous athleticism, often leading to the dismissal of the needs of those with less visible disabilities (Briant et al., 2013) and coming at the cost of othering the individual (Pullen et al., 2019).

A 2019 study focusing on media coverage of athletes with disabilities found that sports media emphasized the competitors’ athleticism more than their disability (Rees et al., 2019). This research, which examined media articles from 2001 through 2018, also found that women athletes with disabilities received less media coverage than their men counterparts. However, sports media continued to perpetuate a narrative that these athletes are superhuman. Rees et al. (2019), akin to Howe (2011), found that media coverage gave preference to certain disabilities over others, such as wheelchair athletes over people with cerebral palsy. In reference to the

Paralympic Games, Thomas and Smith (2003), focusing on coverage of the 2000 games in Sydney, identified four key implications: (1) coverage of the successes of athletes was characterized by a medicalized conception of disability; (2) athletes were portrayed as aspiring to or emulating able-bodiedness; (3) most coverage minimized the visibility of an athlete's disability; and (4) men athletes were more likely to be cast in active poses. The first two points from Thomas and Smith highlight the superhuman narrative (Howe, 2011) and attempt to counterbalance the common stereotypes of disability with feats of athleticism. For example, portraying athletes as “victims” or as “courageous” people who have “overcome” their disability could be interpreted as seeking to evoke pity and creating a certain narrative about disability common in even more recent Paralympic Games (Beacom et al., 2016). The fourth point of Thomas and Smith's findings highlights the dual oppression that disabled women athletes can encounter. Not only are disabled women athletes subject to misrepresentations of their disability, but they also must deal with continuous gendered coverage that minimizes their athleticism in search of fitting into cultural norms. Others have suggested that the mediated coverage of sporting performances are framed in light of “particular facets of [an athlete's] identity” (Purdue & Howe, 2012, p. 4). Moreover, mediated coverage of disabled athletes—in particular, disabled women athletes—who compete at the highest level of athletic ability is rare and often can be negative.

Coverage of Women in the Olympic Games

Although women athletes have received more airtime in the Olympic Games than in the rest of the sporting world, the social status of women athletes has failed to equate with the coverage and status of men (K. K. Davis & Tuggle, 2012). A study of the 2012 London Olympic Games—sometimes called the “Women's Olympics” because of the plethora of women competing—found that for the first time since 1996, women athletes received more airtime than men (Coche & Tuggle, 2016). The authors warned about assuming the coverage was equitable; one third of the airtime was devoted to women's gymnastics, often perceived as a “feminine” sport (Hardin & Greer, 2009; Tjønndal, 2016). Additionally, more than 40% of the coverage was devoted to competitions in which women wore swimsuits, placing the appearance of women's bodies before their skills. A study of magazine coverage of the 2012 London Games confirmed that women competitors received more coverage than men in *Sports Illustrated*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* (Blankenship

& Everbach, 2013). In *Sports Illustrated* the amount of coverage equaled or surpassed that of men athletes in various sporting events, including soccer, softball, basketball, gymnastics, swimming, and track and field. Unlike the television coverage, the print media portrayed women athletes in action photos, appearing strong and competitive, rather than in passive poses. In fact, some of the men appeared in more sexualized photos than the women, particularly the swimmers (Blankenship & Everbach, 2013). In the 2016 Rio Summer Olympic Games, common themes from media representation included heterosexualizing women athletes, focusing on women as wives and mothers, the use of body shaming, and a focus on male privilege. A sense of propagating male hegemony was still present, with a strong focus on socially acceptable women's sports of gymnastics, diving, swimming, beach volleyball, and track, particularly during prime-time hours (Coche & Tuggle, 2017; MacArthur et al., 2016; Villalon & Weiller-Abels, 2018). On the other hand, Billings et al. (2018) assert that nationality has become more important than biological sex when it comes to televised Olympic Games coverage.

Media Representations of Women Athletes

Historically, women were not able to compete on an elite level in sports, particularly after childbirth. Commentary often focused on the women athletes' "last shot" because she was going to focus on her personal life (Pflum Peterson, 2016). Sports media influence the public view of athletes through framing. For women athletes, this is more than exceptionally true. Media gatekeepers' decisions on what is stressed in coverage and presentation of all athletes, particularly women athletes, affect public perception. Highlighting and covering women athletes in a gendered manner, especially in high-profile events such as the Olympic Games, demonstrates the framing of social acceptability. Emphasis usually centers on the grace and flexibility natural to women (Baraoffio-Bota & Banet-Weiser, 2006; Coche & Tuggle, 2016). This type of slanted media coverage depicts women as elegant and minimizes their power and strength (Daddario, 1998; Weiller et al., 2004).

Previous research has found that women athletes are likely to be represented in passive and sexual poses intended for the male gaze (Bishop, 2003; Daniels, 2009; L. R. Davis, 1997; Hardin et al., 2005; Salwen & Wood, 1994). The framing of women emphasizes their femininity and conformity to traditional gender roles rather than the multifaceted reality of different kinds of bodies, races and ethnicities, sexualities, and abilities (Kane &

Greendorfer, 1994). Frisby (2017) noted in her study of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN* magazine covers from 2012–2016 that despite an increase in sports participation of women since the 1972 passage of Title IX, the percentage of women featured on the covers had not increased and that women athletes continued to be presented in sexualized poses.

Narratives regarding the “ideal woman” are prevalent in media construction. This also supports the notion that the nature of media is to bombard audiences with messages that reflect a hegemonic view of the woman athlete. In intersecting the media representation of both gender and disability, Bissell and Parrott (2013) note that the very approach media take in representation suggests that audiences are presented with messages that aid in the creation of prejudices and stereotypes, perpetuating how we as a society should interpret and think about social groups and categories.

These representations can be explained in a second-wave feminist framework as a manifestation of hegemonic masculinity, which ensures the inferior status of women athletes in sports. Women athletes are pressured to conform to socially constructed ideals of beauty, rather than as aggressive, powerful, and strong athletes (Daniels, 2009; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994). The second-class status of women in sport can be illustrated by the fact that many men and boys still use the term *girl* as an insult on the court and field, relegating women to a secondary status. However, later feminist approaches may point to such sexualized representations as “empowering” to women, because the women are controlling their own sexuality (McRobbie, 2009). On the other hand, Daniels (2009) argues that sexualized images of women’s fit bodies remove them from athleticism and reframe them as sex objects.

Women athletes may internalize the dominant ideology reinforced by sports media that connects with masculinity the very qualities that make them good athletes—strength, competitiveness, and aggression. In turn, they may then feel pressure to present themselves in stereotypically feminine ways such as posing for glamorous, sexy photos in order to prove or enhance their femininity. A study of women college athletes’ perceptions about posing for sexual and nude photos showed that the women struggled with socially constructed gender roles (Everbach & Mumah, 2014). The study found that some of the athletes embraced Western societal notions of beauty such as ultra femininity, thinness, and youth. However, other athletes saw such depictions as exploitative and wondered why they did not receive the same recognition for their athletic ability as men did. The study concluded that the masculine hegemony of sports forced women athletes to either accept or reject its norms rather than changing them.

The May 2019 *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition featured 13 pages of

members of the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team. However, instead of highlighting their skills and talent, the magazine posed them in \$100–\$300 bikinis, see-through swimsuits, and thongs (Watts, 2019, pp. 99–114). Player Alex Morgan was quoted as saying, “The opportunity to be featured in the Swimsuit Issue four weeks before the World Cup is a huge honor” (p. 107). In contrast to this, after the U.S. women won the World Cup in July 2019, *Sports Illustrated* featured players on the cover in their soccer uniforms, on the field celebrating the victory, more in line with coverage of men who win championships. It was a stunning juxtaposition of women athletes' portrayals and an example of how social construction of women athletes continues to be presented in a binary manner. Musto et al. (2017) note that current sports journalism considers women's sports to be less interesting than men's and women athletes as less accomplished, even while insinuating that sports give women and girls an equal opportunity. “When compared to the overt forms of sexism in past televised sports news, today's gender-bland sexism makes the unequal status quo in sport even more difficult to see, and thus to challenge,” the authors write (Musto et al., 2017, p. 592).

Despite the presence of women reporters on the sidelines during television broadcasts of men's professional and college sports, women working in sports journalism are few and far between. In 2018 the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, which issues periodic report cards on gender and race in sports-media hiring, gave the Associated Press Sports Editors, which represents 75 major media organizations, a grade of F in gender hiring. The report found that 90% of sports editors were men and that 88.5% of sports reporters were men (Lapchick, 2018). Sports continue to be the domain of men, and men's sports have higher status than women's sports, a vicious circle that negates the value of media coverage of women's sports (Hardin & Shain, 2006). In addition, women athletes with disabilities face marginalization compared with men athletes with disabilities.

Intersectionality

Developed to analyze how multiple marginalized identities—in particular, the *misogynoir* experienced by Black women—operate within systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1990; Stewart, 2018), intersectionality can serve as a guiding framework to understand how the multiple identities of individuals (e.g., disability, gender, race) may impact individual experiences in different contexts (Moodley & Graham, 2015). Critical disability scholarship has argued that disability is socially constructed into binary categories; in other words, individuals are perceived as either normal or abnormal, weak or

strong, depending on able-bodiedness (Hill Collins, 2019). Therefore, ability and able-bodiedness are linked to power, just as being male is interpreted as more powerful than being female. Men athletes are seen at the top of the hierarchy of strength and ability. Paralympic athletes defy the hegemonic and binary notions of able-bodiedness (Butler & Bissell, 2015), and Paralympic women athletes contradict notions of athletic strength and ability belonging inherently to men. Disabled women athletes' existence is contrary to normative societal standards of an athlete. Therefore, these women athletes experience oppression for not conforming to what is "normal," on multiple intersecting levels. Furthermore, it must be recognized that "sport serves as an arena wherein a multitude of forces are played against and upon individual athletes in the service of competition and winning" (Stewart, 2018, p. 42).

News Framing

News framing consists of patterns by which media producers construct news stories, therefore setting a purported agenda of what audiences perceive as important (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Entman, 2010). These socially constructed narratives often are subjective and biased, despite the fact the mainstream media in the United States purport to be objective and neutral (Entman, 2010). For instance, media coverage of African Americans has been shown to produce stereotypical patterns, such as linking Black people disproportionately to violence (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Journalists adopt these patterns of bias, often unconsciously, through their training and education in journalism schools and in newsrooms (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Feminist research has pointed out that news frames often reinforce gender-related socially constructed myths that reinforce a dominant ideology placing men at the top of a social hierarchy (Hardin & Whiteside, 2010). Sports journalists assume that audiences prefer men's sports to women's, without any evidence to back up that assertion, and therefore devote more coverage to men's sports (Creedon, 1994; Knight & Giuliano, 2003). A similar bias is shown in coverage of disability sport. Much like gendered stereotypes are reinforced through media coverage, positive or negative views of disability are influenced heavily by the framing of coverage (Zhang & Haller, 2013). As previously noted, the purpose of this study is to examine the media coverage of disabled women athletes participating in the Paralympic Games. As little focus has previously been directed at the intersection of gender and disability in the sports coverage of athletes, this exploratory study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How is disability framed in NBC's coverage of the 2018 PyeongChang Paralympic Games?

RQ2: How is gender framed in NBC's coverage of the 2018 PyeongChang Paralympic Games?

RQ3: How can the framing of disability and gender be viewed in an intersectional way?

Method

To examine differences in media coverage of gender and disability, three main sports (i.e., six alpine skiing events, five cross-country events, and three snowboard events) from the 2018 Winter Paralympics were recorded from the National Broadcast Company (NBC) coverage. Each of the three included both women's and men's divisions. The coverage consisted of 46 hours with commercials and included both event coverage and narration as well as feature packages on individual athletes. The total amount recorded (with commercials and announcements) for each sport across each individual event was 22 hours of alpine skiing coverage, 11 hours of cross-country coverage, and 13 hours of snowboarding coverage. Due to the extensive volume of coverage, analysis was limited to the alpine skiing coverage, as the women's and men's alpine skiing events were structured similarly and could be used comparatively.

Three researchers developed coding guidelines based on the previous literature regarding media coverage of women in sports, media coverage of disability in sports, media framing, and intersectionality. To guide analysis, the following specific initial concepts were developed as codes to which the researchers paid attention in their viewing of the broadcasts:

- Portrayals of athletes by medicalized descriptions of disability
- Portrayals of athletes as having "superhuman" talents or abilities
- Comparison of athletes to able-bodied counterparts
- Characterization of Paralympic athletes as inferior to Olympic athletes
- Characterization of men athletes as superior
- Characterizations of women athletes as inferior
- Sexualized representations of women athletes
- Portrayals of women athletes by family relationships

- Portrayals of women athletes by physical appearance
- Intersection of gender and disability in coverage

The coders, scholars who included a former journalist familiar with media-production practices, watched the coverage, took notes, wrote memos through an inductive and comparative approach (Creswell, 2007), and then met to discuss their findings. Through multiple discussions and phenomenological, comparative examination of notations and quotes taken from coverage, the authors developed themes and subthemes that were then discussed until authors reached 100% agreement.

The authors began with descriptive coding, as outlined by Hesse-Biber (2017), in which they identified initial concepts in the language used by the announcers and through the visuals presented (see list of initial concepts above). They then progressed to the second step of categorical coding, in which they began to identify patterns through the broadcasters' language and the visual images. Finally, researchers developed the third and final round of analytical codes to identify the overall themes evidenced by the coverage. Internal reliability and validity checks were conducted by continuously meeting to compare details, notes, and consistency of researchers' theme development. The researchers agreed on the following overall themes in the 2018 Paralympic Games coverage, which reflect culturally embedded frames journalists often employ to make meaning and sense of the stories they tell (Van Gorp, 2010).

Results

Results indicated four major frames (two disability related and two gender related) in the NBC coverage of the 2018 Paralympic Games. Themes referring to disability coverage are (1) athletes framed as "overcoming" their impairment and (2) athletes seen as inferior to able-bodied athletes. Themes referring to gender differences in coverage are (1) traditional gender-role stereotypes and (2) sexualization of women. The intersectional nature of the framing also is discussed.

Disability

The first research question sought to identify patterns in the coverage of athletes' disability during the competition. The following themes emerged for Research Question 1: How is disability framed in NBC's 2018 coverage of the PyeongChang Paralympic Games?

Athletes were framed as “overcoming” their impairment. Much of the discussion about these athletes focused on medical definitions of their impairment. While each category of competition had specific requirements for athletes to ski (such as standing or sitting, or visual impairment), the announcers went into great detail about the disabilities of these skiers. They included specific medical information on each impairment, including visual impairment, accidents, amputations, birth defects, and cerebral palsy, and they reported how athletes became impaired. For example, in the men’s downhill standing event, an announcer noted that Japanese skier Hiraku Misawa is “a one-leg amputee, from a road accident when he was just 6 years old.” The announcer added, “He has had time to work with his impairment and go about adapting.” This framing that the impairment needed to be prevailed over repeatedly emerged. Czech skier Tomas Vaverka “has cerebral palsy,” an announcer said. “You can hear his groans as he fights the course.”

When discussing Dutch skier Neils De Langen in the downhill sitting competition, an announcer noted the skier lost his leg when he was 11 months old and that “these athletes will tell you they are not deterred by their impairments.” Japanese champion Taiki Morii “began skiing after watching the 1998 games in Nagano on television as he was hospitalized for a motorcycle accident,” according to the announcer. “He took that inspiration, and here he is, a multiple gold and silver medal winner at the Paralympic Games.” A profile of gold medalist Andrew Kurka noted that he once was a wrestler, “but his dream was shattered when he broke his back at age 13 in an ATV accident.” His physical therapist recommended skiing, and Kurka was featured as saying, “It took me breaking my back and then starting to ski again to realize I could still be the best in the world.”

This type of narrative suggests athletes with disabilities have something to overcome. It is also framed to serve as inspiration for nondisabled people, adding to the diminishment of the athletes’ work and skill.

Athletes were seen as inferior to able-bodied athletes. Several times, announcers applauded athletes for just “getting to the bottom” of the hill, remarks seldom or never heard in nondisabled skiing competitions. “Getting to the bottom and finishing on the opening day is sometimes more of an achievement to some of these athletes than going for the medals,” said one announcer. While the Paralympics feature the world’s top athletes in their field, announcers commonly framed them as lesser than Olympic competitors. In the women’s super-G competition, an announcer noted two different athletes’ limb impairments and then said,

Why are these athletes competing together? Essentially, they are competing against the standard they have set in their class. But they also are

competing against other people. In some ways it's like they are held to a much higher standard. They not only have to do well for themselves but do better than others.

The NBC broadcast showed these athletes falling repeatedly, often framing them as incompetent. "Oh, it's a poor, poor start for Britain's Menna Fitzpatrick," an announcer said during the women's downhill visually impaired competition. When a skier wiped out in the women's standing downhill event, an announcer said, somewhat gleefully, "Down we go!" In other cases, a fall was met with silence from the announcers, or coverage would abruptly move to the next competitor without explanation. When Canadian Braydon Luscombe fell in the men's downhill standing event, the announcer noted that "his body weight is out of the normal range for the ski" and that "we learn from our failing, and I am sure Luscombe will go back to his team and talk it out." Although discussion of any athlete's falling is common among media coverage—particularly during events such as skiing—how the Paralympics announcers framed this coverage was holistically different for the disabled athletes. In reference to disabled athletes, the announcers seemed to view this occurrence as an inevitability. Whereas with nondisabled athletes, a fall would be tragic and unexpected, for the disabled athletes, the announcers seemed to view the completion of the event as the unexpected outcome.

These sorts of characterizations serve to paint athletes with disabilities as different from nondisabled athletes, suggesting that they are to be pitied rather than heralded. Furthermore, framing the accomplishments of these athletes as inspirational for just showing up perpetuates the stigma of disability.

Gender

The following themes were identified with regard to Research Question 2: How is gender framed in NBC's 2018 coverage of the PyeongChang Paralympic Games?

Traditional gender-role stereotypes were upheld. The NBC Paralympics alpine skiing announcers, all men (the main program anchor was a woman, Carolyn Manno), repeatedly drew attention to the sex of the women competitors, but they did not mention the sex of the men competitors. Commentators referred to women competitors multiple times as "lady," whereas men competitors were identified by their country (e.g., the Spaniard, the Italian, the Norwegian). In essence, this framing inferred

that men were representing their country, while women were representing themselves. Commentators used terms that identified women athletes as less athletic than the men. The focus was largely on their gender rather than their status as athletes. For example, a man broadcaster described a French woman skier as “the lady who has given us 1:30:30 and there is a familiar smile in there.” When a Swiss woman skier fell in her event, an announcer said, “She is a fighter, believe me, this lady is a fighter.” No men athletes were identified by their sex in the coverage we watched and coded. For men competitors, announcers used phrasing such as “Can the great Spaniard do it again?”; “It’s an even bigger day for the young Italian;” and “Big support here for the Welshman.” This is consistent with literature showing that men athletes are considered the top of the hierarchy in sports coverage.

Coverage framed several women athletes by their status as a wife or a mother. The broadcasters made numerous references to women athletes’ husbands and children when covering the competitions. For instance, coverage of U.S. alpine skier Danelle Umstead, who competes in the visually impaired category, focused on her 2008 wedding to her husband, coach, and guide, Rob Umstead. The feature also included shots of their child and highlighted her commenting that she is “a pretty lucky girl.” The announcers also noted that she is known as the “team mom.” During her run down the hill, the announcers referred to her husband’s coaching work as a major factor in her success, although she is the athlete. (“He is coaching her to be more aerodynamic.”) After she finished in eighth place, an interviewer asked her what it means to have her husband and her son by her side. This not only emphasized traditional gender roles but assumed heterosexuality as the norm in women’s sports.

On the other hand, coverage of the men did not emphasize their marital or parental status. Announcers sometimes referred to a man competitor’s relative also being an athlete (“His sister also is on the circuit”) or to the fact that he had children. But the family members were not named, and the athlete’s role as a husband or father was not the main focus. This type of gendering contributes to the marginalization of women athletes by placing more importance on external factors in their lives than on their skill, strength, and talent, or the myriad other attributes they possess.

Coverage perpetuated the sexualization of women athletes. The announcers used particularly feminine markers to characterize successful women skiers. Comments using terminology such as “grace and beauty” or “beautiful form” were commonly used with women, while the announcers referred to men athletes as “powerful” and as having “precision,” “focus,” and “perseverance.” Broadcasters described a woman skier by her “hair

flowing in the wind behind her helmet.” They characterized several women athletes as skiing “passively.” The men also expressed surprise when women excelled in the competition. “When I watch her ski, it absolutely blows me away, how well she skis,” an announcer said about U.S. skier Stephanie Jallen. When a woman fell on the course, “it must have been nerves,” the announcer said. This focus on women’s appearance and their descriptions as inferior athletes diminished their accomplishments.

The men skiers, on the other hand, were described as aggressive, ambitious, and strong. Announcers applauded men athletes for being “at the top of the pile” and also for being the “medal hopes” for their countries. One man skier was a “gentle giant”; another “wants, craves, one of the medals here”; and a third was “a big, powerful athlete.” When a man fell, the course was unusually slippery, or the skier “hit a bump.” Men were represented as the superior athletes in competition. Additionally, more airtime in the NBC alpine skiing coverage was devoted to men’s events than to women’s events; more men skiers competed than women skiers. Only 23.6% of the overall competitors in the 2018 Paralympics were women, which corresponds with the lack of airtime for women’s competitions (Bell, 2019). The broadcasters’ treatment of women as secondary and their use of feminine markers during the competition contributed to women’s marginalization in sports. It also should be noted that the athletes represented little racial or ethnic diversity; they all were from White European or Asian backgrounds, which is common, but not exclusive, to winter sports.

Intersectionality

Addressing Research Question 3, analysis of the coverage of the 2018 Winter Paralympic Games in PyeongChang revealed that women athletes with disabilities were doubly stereotyped and marginalized by both their sex and their status as disabled athletes—highlighting the intersectionality of gender and disability and affirming previous literature showing that women athletes with disabilities are subject to a “double oppression,” marginalized for both their disability and also for being women (Deegan & Brooks, 1985; Fawcett, 2000; Fine & Asch, 1988; Moradi, 2017; Wendell, 1989). Coverage of the women athletes focused on women’s traditional gender roles. This broadcast emphasized the women athletes’ femininity and traditional, stereotyped cultural norms, rather than the multifaceted contributions of women in society. The emphasis was on women athletes being less powerful and less capable than men. Women athletes in the Paralympic Games were

portrayed as heterosexual wives and mothers, without any possibility of other sexuality or role in society. They also were portrayed as individual competitors, rather than part of a team. This minimized their athletic success and continued the idea of their marginalization as athletes. However, men Paralympic athletes did not receive this kind of coverage. Men were referred to as representatives of their countries and heralded for their roles as athletes who trained hard for their success. Even when a woman athlete competed in the Paralympics—the top competition in the world—she was not given complete credit for her own success, as demonstrated by the broadcasters' attribution to Danelle Umstead's husband and coach for her performance on the course. While this type of sexism may not be blatant, it fits into the “gender-bland sexism” framework identified by Musto et al. (2017). The intersection of disability and gender in the coverage resulted in slanted, stereotypical portrayals of the women athletes.

Discussion

While the literature shows that Olympic coverage of nondisabled women athletes recently has become more prevalent and less gendered, this study suggests that women athletes in the 2018 Paralympic Games were stereotyped and minimized in intersectional ways. The intersection of multiple identities, as described by Crenshaw (1990), within systems of oppression can serve to privilege or oppress. In the case of these women Paralympic athletes, it served to oppress, as they were continually characterized by the broadcasters as outsiders and othered, both because of their sex and because of their disability. These results mirror and expand upon those found by Buysse and Borchering (2010) of the 2008 Paralympic Games. The authors showed how the amount of coverage and ways of representing disability were skewed against disabled women athletes. Furthermore, disabled women athletes were represented as nonathletic and inferior to their men counterparts, further reinforcing gender and disability stereotypes and amplifying the “male and able-bodied hegemony in sport” (Buysse & Borchering, 2010, p. 319). Unfortunately, when it comes to appropriately addressing those with multiple marginalized identities, sports media has done little to nothing to correct this poor representation.

Producers and announcers of such broadcasts must become mindful that their comments and language can further marginalize women athletes, particularly those with disabilities, by treating them as less than men athletes and adhering to outdated gender stereotypes and heavily medicalized definitions of disability. Commentators and producers in future

Paralympics Games should take steps to check the language they use. For example, calling a woman athlete a “lady” only is appropriate if using the term “gentleman” for men athletes. More equitable language would identify all athletes by their country affiliation. Profiles of athletes should be about the athletes’ accomplishments and achievements, not about their affiliation with a spouse or partner, and they should not be focused on the mishaps of the athlete or medicalized nature of the disability.

Broadcasters also are advised to refrain from framing the experiences of athletes with disabilities as inspiring because they “overcame” their disability to compete in the Paralympics or that athletes “should be proud just to be there.” This indicates to audiences that they should feel sympathy or pity for these athletes and further propagates the social stigma of disability (Ellis, 2009). It also can insinuate that these athletes possess “special” powers (as described by Howe, 2011) to reach the status of international competition while trying to emulate nondisabled athletes. Ultimately, by failing to represent disability appropriately (Beacom et al., 2016), coverage belittles the important role these athletes serve as representatives for younger generations by framing participation as “overcoming” akin to “inspiration porn” (Martin, 2019). This type of framing perpetuates stigmas of disability to please nondisabled audiences, rather than portraying the athletes’ skill or providing meaningful representation for future disabled athletes. Instead of discussing medicalized descriptions of the competitors’ impairments—which highlights their differences in relation to nondisabled people—sports journalists should treat them as athletes in their own right. Multiple shots of skiers wiping out on the course and pitying comments by announcers caused the athletes to appear as victims of their impairments, rather than as athletes who made errors, much as Thomas and Smith (2003) found in coverage of the 2000 Paralympic Games. It also served to minimize their achievements because of their disability, rendering them less important than able-bodied athletes of the Olympic Games.

Furthermore, though this analysis focused on the representation of disability and gender within the Paralympic Games, little mention was given to those with additional identities who may also be marginalized. As this analysis included only the winter sports, the ability to analyze a third level of oppression stemming from racial or ethnic identities was moot—though, perhaps this speaks more to how those with identities other than White are impacted more broadly in winter sports than the representation within the Paralympic Games or the media coverage therein. Additionally, though men and women were prominent genders represented and women, as mentioned, are subjected to greater oppression within media coverage, gender is a diverse

construct that should no longer be solely seen within a binary (Thorne et al., 2019). Grouped within “men’s” and “women’s” events, this forced binary is represented by media to oppress women’s sport—further still, noncisgendered individuals may experience greater levels of misrepresentation and oppression that traditional methodologies may have difficulty in analyzing.

Sports-media coverage of the intersection of gender and disability continues to be problematic. Overall, athletes with disabilities are not objects of pity, nor are they “superhuman.” The work ethic, training, skill, and talent of Paralympic athletes are equal to those of Olympic athletes, and they should be framed with respect, accuracy, and equality in media coverage. To ensure appropriate representation within media coverage, sports journalists and announcers should seek to authentically represent athletes without stereotypical, engendered language and to employ camera angles similarly for all athletes. (For examples, see National Center on Disability and Journalism, n.d.). As media continue to hold tremendous sway over the societal views of topics, they must work to appropriately provide representative coverage. This may be best accomplished by including women and disabled individuals as anchors, field reporters, editors, producers, technicians, and visual journalists.

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