



## Media Representation of Women Athletes at the Olympic Games: A Systematic Review

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to conduct a systematic review of the literature on the coverage of women at the Olympic Games. A total of 144 records were collected from the Web of Science database which were screened to  $n = 58$  for in-depth examination. A content analysis was performed with the data gathered based on the following thematic categories: evolution of scientific publications by years; types of studies carried out; countries and regions with the longest track record in the topic; citations, authors and main findings, and future research strands. The results showed that the studies were mainly performed in the United States, especially in recent years, and with a strong incidence in 2015, in areas such as the social sciences and communication and with a greater focus on television, albeit with a growing interest in the new digital media. In general, they continue to report a lack of fairness in the amount of coverage, coupled with gender differentiation in the representation of women's sport. Further studies are suggested to reveal whether such imbalances persist or progress is being made towards greater fairness.

**Keywords:** media, Olympic Games, sport, systematic review, women.

## Introduction

Since their beginnings, studies on sports media coverage have found a meagre female presence, since sportswomen have been excluded or sidelined in the media, especially in routine news coverage (Toffoletti, 2016), but also during major events such as the Olympic Games (Delorme & Testard, 2015; Salido-Fernandez, 2020). This is because the media, particularly the sports media, are a male-dominated space which affords priority to sports played by men and which are broadcast to a largely male audience. Women are underrepresented in these media (Billings et al., 2010; Jones, 2013) and need to attain major accomplishments to achieve any kind of presence. Moreover, when they do appear, they are portrayed in a trivialised, biased and stereotypical way, with comments about their emotions, physical appearance and family life (Eagleman, 2015; Ravel & Gareau, 2016).

Research on the representation of women in sport in the media began in the United States in the 1980s, although it was not until the 1990s that it became more widespread. In this regard, particular mention may be made of the work by Duncan (1990), focusing on the 1984 and 1988 Games, who found photographic coverage images that downplayed sportswomen's achievements in the form of comments on their beauty or attire. Meanwhile, Lee (1992) discovered highly unequal coverage in both text and pictures at these same Games, coupled with biological differentiation by sex including a tendency to trivialise and sideline sportswomen. Towards the end of the 1990s, Toohey (1997) analysed the 1988 and 1992 Games and confirmed this quantitative female inferiority, with a media presence of 30%-32% compared to a prominent 60% male presence. These figures became less pronounced in the following Games, as female coverage on NBC at Barcelona 1992 reached 44%, albeit still with biases which emphasise sports regarded as appropriate for women, i.e., the more aesthetic and mainly solo sports, such as gymnastics (Daddario, 1997). These coverage figures dropped to around 30%-33% again at the Sydney 2000 and Athens 2004 Games (Capranica et al., 2005; Capranica et al., 2008; Greer et al., 2009), although they rose to 40% in Beijing.

In recent years, studies have continued to show an imbalance between participation data and media coverage, as demonstrated by the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP, 2015), which points to a worldwide female presence in the general media (radio, press and television) of 24% and of barely 4% in the sports media, although women's participation in sport amounts to 40% (UNESCO, 2020). In contrast to these figures, more recent studies found a much more equal female coverage of the Rio 2016 Games of 58.5% on the US NBC network (Billings et al., 2017). This progress has been fostered by the national and international

institutions and organisations over the years, as they have begun to call for greater levels of equality in sport and its media coverage, most notably the efforts of the International Olympic Committee, which has advocated gender equality through the continuous updates of its Olympic Charter (IOC 2020a). Indeed, its forecast for the Tokyo Games is a women's participation of 49% (IOC 2020b).

Therefore, and despite an increasingly more balanced quantitative coverage of both sexes, researchers and sportswomen alike continue to perceive an invisibilisation and the existence of stereotypes such as beauty, physical appearance and sexuality (Coche & Tuggle, 2016; Martínez-Abajo et al., 2020), infantilisation and victimisation, as well as female emotion, passivity and weakness (Eagleman, 2015; Jones, 2013) in comparisons with male athletes, ambivalence and trivialisation (Lichfield, 2018). These forms of disparate representation extend to the digital media, where coverage of women is also scant, and biases and stereotypes identical to those of the legacy media continue to persist (Johnson et al., 2020; Lichfield & Kavanagh, 2019). This is coupled with a growing presence of female profiles defined exclusively by their romantic ties to male athletes which undercut women athletes' media presence (Gómez-Colell, 2015; Muñoz-Muñoz & Salido-Fernandez, 2018).

The purpose of this paper was to gain an insight into how the coverage of women's sport in the media during the Olympic Games has evolved by reviewing the research conducted in this field from the early 2000s to the present day in order to pinpoint the most prolific years, the main areas addressed by these studies, their authors and current research strands, as well as the proposals for the future.

## Methodology

This study conducted a systematic review of the main published research on women's representation in the media during the Olympic Games. For this purpose, a search was carried out in the Web of Science (WOS), the database which compiles the leading scientific publications in all fields, including the social sciences.

## Search strategy

This study followed the approach taken in other systematic reviews (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018; Cruz-González et al., 2020) and criteria focused on the appropriateness of the topic, time evolution, thematic areas, countries, authorship and research approach were used to select the articles. Thus, the following exclusion and inclusion criteria were established: articles or reviews published in scientific journals from the year 2000 onwards to ascertain the evolution

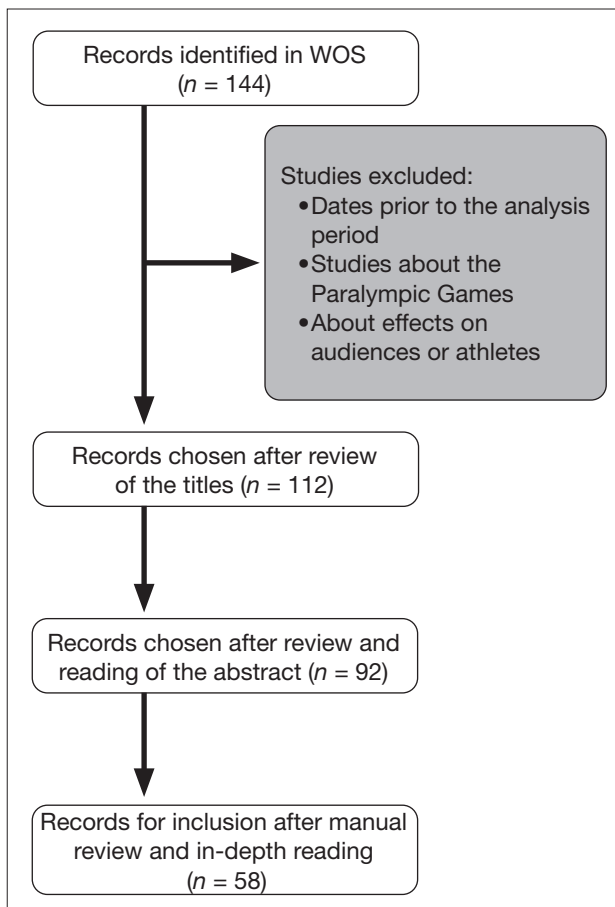
over the last 20 years, also focussing on the study of the media representation of women athletes during the Olympic events held from that year onwards in the social sciences and humanities.

The keywords used in the search equation were: TSS=(wom\*n AND Olympic AND media).

### Data screening and extraction

As shown in Figure 1, the search yielded a total of 144 specific records in WOS. The search was then refined through a review of the articles to remove any prior to the cut-off date, those related to the Paralympic Games, as their characteristics did not match the analysis, or studies addressing the effects of unequal media coverage on audiences or elite athletes, as their objectives did not tie in with this research. This left a total of 112.

Following this screening, the final data extraction process consisted firstly of an in-depth reading of the abstracts to reduce the number of records to 92 and then of the full articles to rule out any that were not relevant to the research as they did not fulfil the study objective. Hence  $n = 58$  articles were finally included in the analysis.



**Figure 1**  
Study selection. Source: authors.

After the records to be included in the analysis had been defined, the articles were compared and examined in depth based on their characteristics (areas, source, authorship, etc.) and main findings (Okoli & Schabram, 2010), which led the following thematic categories to be established:

1. Evolution by years of the scientific output on women's Olympic coverage (the first studies, the most prolific years, etc.).
2. Type of analyses conducted (by areas of knowledge).
3. Countries and regions with the greatest influence and track record in research.
4. Citations, authorship and most relevant findings.
5. Future research strands.

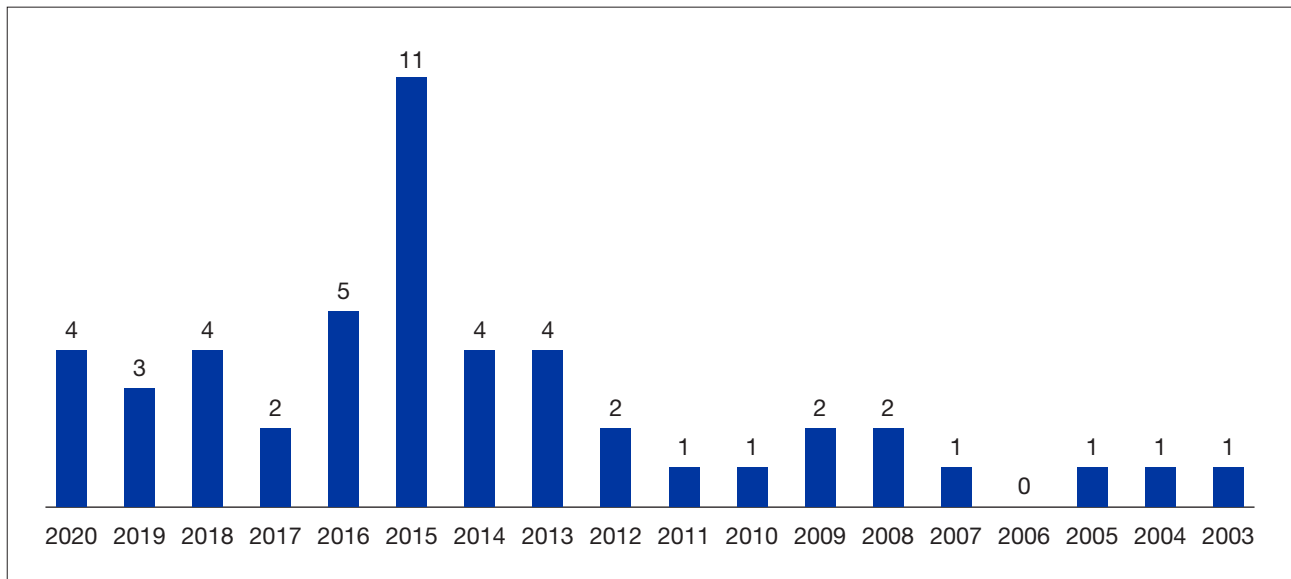
## Results

### Evolution of research on women's Olympic coverage

Studies on gender and the Olympics in the media have clearly grown, as is shown in Figure 2. They have increased from a mere one or two publications per year in the early 2000s to a significant expansion since the London 2012 Olympic Games, with four publications per year in the two years following the Games, reaching an all-time high of a total of 11 publications in 2015, tapering off to just two studies in 2017 and levelling off to around four publications per year in subsequent years.

If researchers' interest in each Olympic event is examined, there was only one publication on the Barcelona 1992 and Atlanta 1996 Games (Higgs et al., 2003), which was also the case for Sydney 2000, with one specific publication (Capranica et al., 2005). This figure rose to three for Athens 2004 (Billings, 2007; Capranica et al., 2008; Greer et al., 2009), there were none for Turin 2006, and Beijing 2008 yielded nine studies, including those by Billings et al. (2010), Li (2011), Tang and Cooper (2012), Amara (2012) and Jones (2013). Vancouver 2010 was covered by Angelini et al. (2012) again, as well as by Jones and Greer (2012) and Smith (2016).

From 2012 onwards, publications on women's Olympic coverage flourished as it was the year of the London Games, called "the women's Games" due to the high levels of participation and success achieved by women. This sparked great interest among researchers, with 15 specific studies on the Games, including the papers by Ravel and Gareau (2016), Frank and O'Neill (2016), Delorme and Testard (2015), Eagleman (2015) and Godoy-Pressland and Griggs (2014). The Winter Games were also found to warrant increasingly greater attention, generating four studies for Sochi 2014 (Delorme & Pressland, 2016;



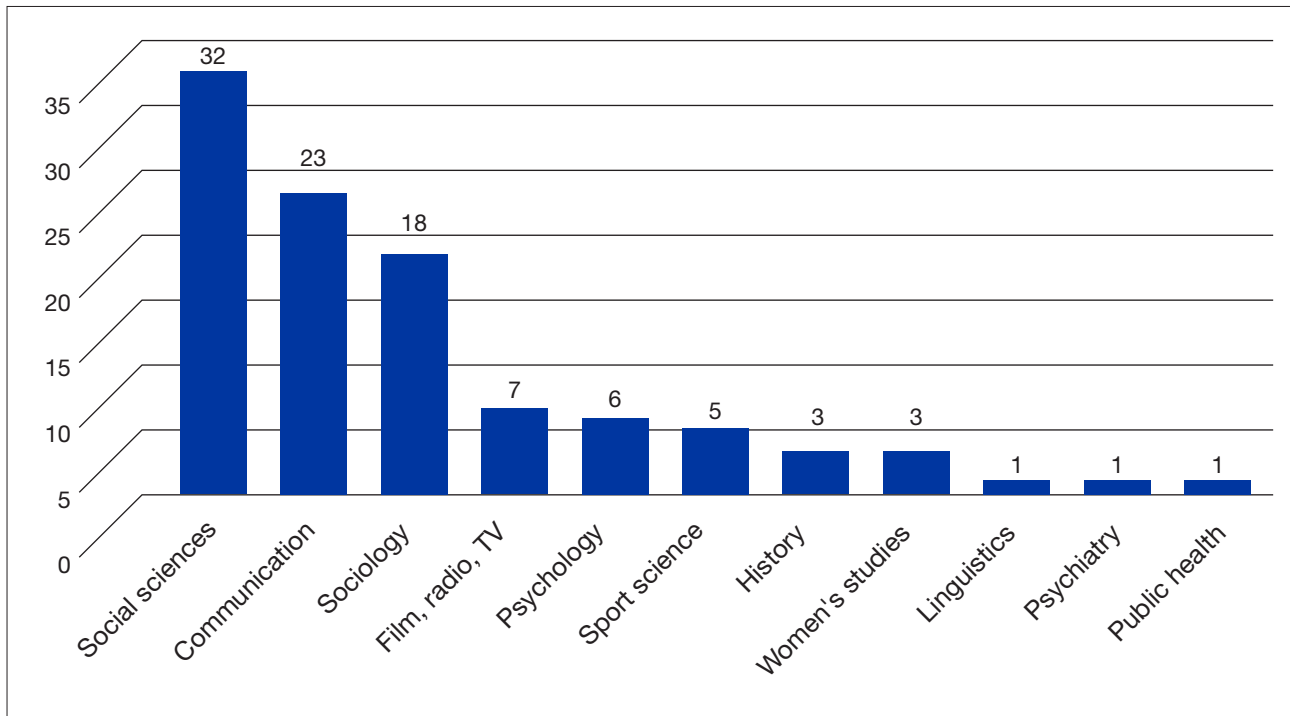
**Figure 2**  
Scientific publications by years. Source: authors using WOS data.

Jakubowska, 2017; MacArthur et al., 2016; 2017) and, for the moment, two publications about Pyongyang 2018 (Oh et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2020). To date, six specific studies about the recent Rio 2016 Summer Games have been published (Dashper, 2018; Litchfield, 2018; Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2019; Villalon & Weiller-Abels, 2018; Xu et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2019), although studies on these Games have also been found in some longitudinal analyses combining a number of Olympic periods (Johnson et al., 2020; Organista et al., 2020).

### Types of studies carried out

Being interdisciplinary, women's, media and sport studies have moved forward through several areas in the course of their evolution (Fig. 3). The social sciences and communication are the most prominent domains, although sports science, psychology, history and linguistics also figure prominently, and in some cases records were found in several disciplines at the same time. Thus, the highest percentage was in the social sciences, accounting for 55% of the total number of publications, particularly papers such as the ones by Xu et al. (2020, 2019, 2018) on the last two Olympic events (the 2016 Summer and 2018 Winter Games), examining the coverage provided by Chinese and Australian television. They found an underrepresentation of women, although particularly a clear difference in the attribution of athletes' success and failure, with women prevailing on account of their skills and men by dint of their experience. In areas such as communication, which accounted for 40% of the total, research about the print media occupied a significant position, including

papers by Delorme and Pressland (2016) and Delorme and Testard (2015), the latter based on photo analysis. Both described significant differences in the quantity and quality of coverage, with gender bias, invisibilisation and underrepresentation of women. Another representative area was sociology, which accounted for 31%, particularly featuring studies on image restoration and public apologies by women athletes (Litchfield, 2018), notions which were revisited and amended by sport, gender and third-wave feminist studies. This area also includes the research by Amara (2012), in a study about media accounts of the clash of cultures addressing the representation of Muslim sportswomen and the use of the veil at the 2008 Beijing Games. Furthermore, film, radio and television accounted for 12% of the total, and studies in this discipline largely examined television coverage, finding more airtime and more mentions for men (61.2%), significant differences in physical and personality descriptions based on gender (Billings, 2007; MacArthur et al., 2017), more pictures of women's body parts and inferior sports status compared to male athletes (Kian et al., 2013), as well as differences in visual production, making women's sport appear to be somewhat less exciting (Greer et al., 2009). Other outstanding areas were psychology, with 10.3%, and sports science (8.6%), which shared articles with the areas mentioned above. Sports science includes papers by Xu et al., 2019; Litchfield and Kavanagh, 2019; Dashper, 2018 and Litchfield, 2018. The remaining areas, albeit a minority, transferred these studies to history and addressed the historical evolution of women's representation in men's sports such as skiing and its impact on the current rise in women's participation (Hofmann, 2012), public



**Figure 3**  
Areas of knowledge of the research. Source: authors using WOS data.

health and psychiatry. Finally, research on linguistics also featured, for instance by Zhang (2015), focusing on gendered language about Chinese gymnasts in Western and Chinese coverage, revealing gender discrimination in both of them. In the former, they were depicted as childlike, passive victims of the severe Chinese training programmes, whereas the latter casts them as submissive, innocent and obedient to the country's norms.

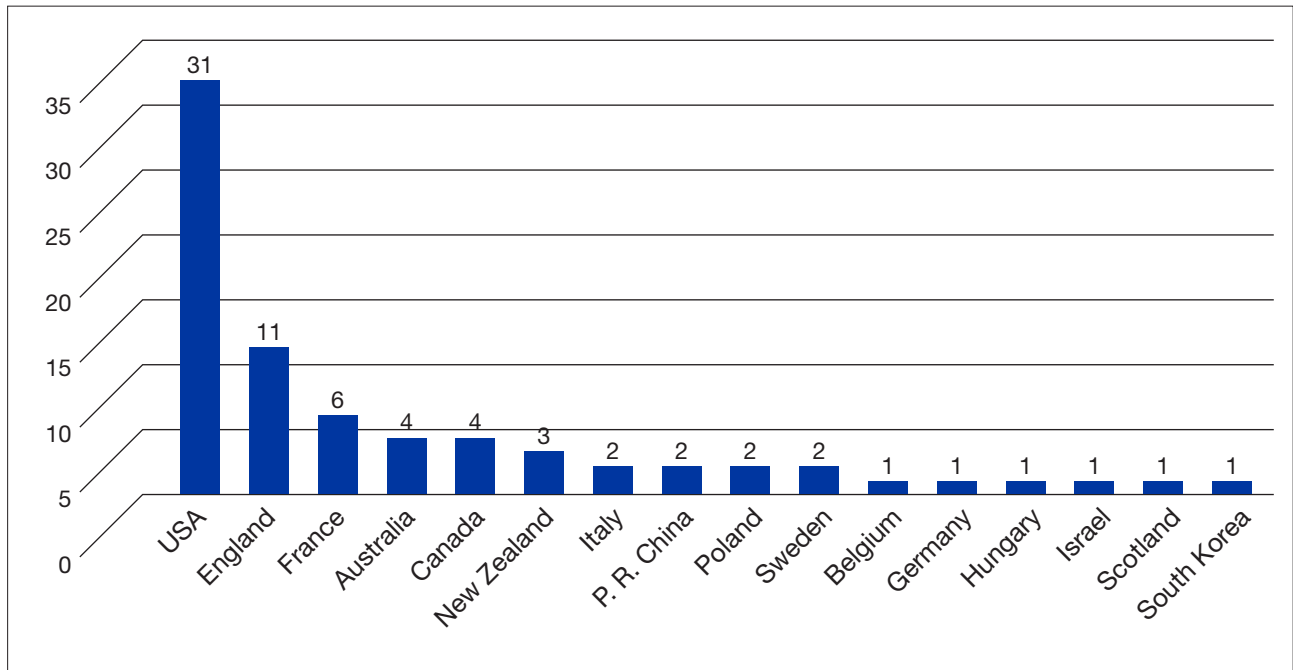
### Countries and regions with the longest track record and interest in the coverage of women at the Olympic Games

The studies on women's Olympic sport and the media have expanded over the years to a number of countries and regions, although, as shown in Figure 4, the initial and greatest incidence has been in the United States. Hence, 53% of the output in this field has been produced in the United States and covers everything from the print media (Knight & Giuliano, 2001) and magazines such as *Sport Illustrated* (Dafferner et al., 2019) to the new media and social networks (Johnson et al., 2020), although the TV networks, particularly the NBC (Angelini et al., 2012; Billings, 2007; Billings et al., 2010; Greer et al., 2009; Higgs et al., 2003; MacArthur et al., 2016; Smith, 2016), have warranted the greatest attention.

The United Kingdom holds second place, with 19% of publications, with several studies addressing the

representation of women in the British national press, where women athletes are still underrepresented (O'Neill & Mulready, 2015), including bias in photos (Godoy-Pressland & Griggs, 2014) and a low proportion of women sports journalists (Franks & O'Neill, 2016). Additionally, comparative studies between countries were also found, such as those by Delorme and Pressland (2016) on France, Britain and Spain, which identified variations in media discrimination in each country, with Spanish coverage being the fairest. The comparisons also analysed cultural differences, such as the representation of the veil (Amara, 2012) and of Muslim women in general in the Western press, where they were presented as childlike, victims and helpless, and also objectified and constructed from othering and exclusionary essentialism (Samie & Sehlkoglou, 2015).

France accounted for 10.3% of total scientific output, focusing on the study of female underrepresentation in the French media (Delorme & Testard, 2015). However, comparisons between countries such as Belgium, Denmark, France and Italy (Capranica et al., 2005) were also found, as well as an examination of the US media (Dafferner et al., 2019), evincing significant progress in the coverage of women's achievements, albeit with persisting biases based on the sexualisation and objectification of their bodies. Other countries presenting the highest incidence of studies on women athletes were Australia (Litchfield, 2018; Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2019; Xu et al., 2019) and

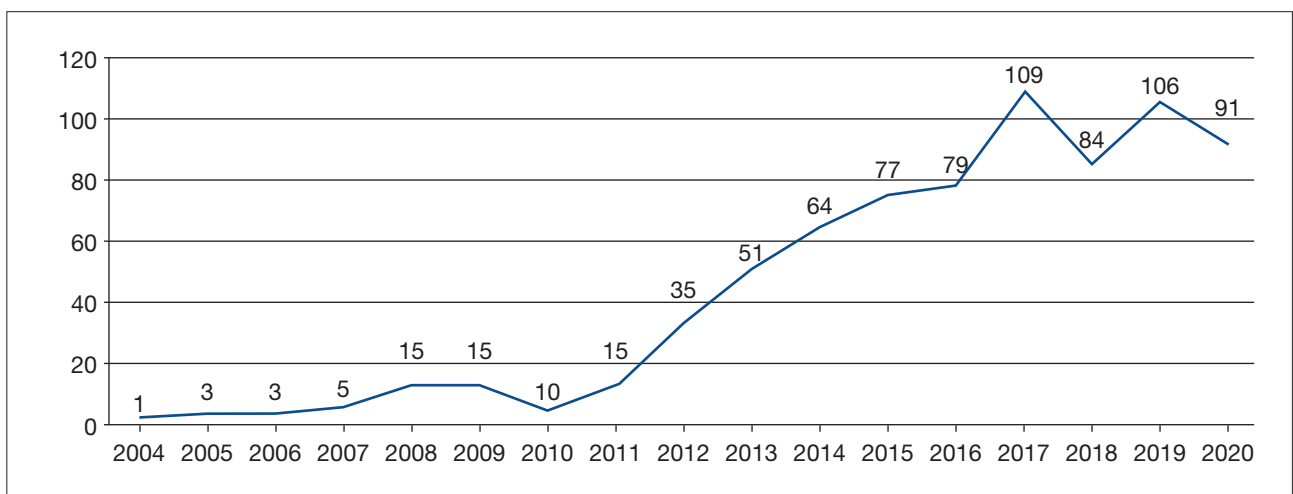


**Figure 4**  
Countries/regions with the highest incidence of research. Source: authors using WOS data.

Canada (Johnson et al., 2020; McGannon et al., 2015), each one with approximately 7%. Lastly, New Zealand provided 5% (Eagleman, 2015; Eagleman et al., 2014), with token contributions by Italy (Capranica et al., 2008), China (Oh et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2020), Poland (Organista et al., 2020) and Sweden (Hedenborg, 2013; Hellborg & Hedenborg, 2015), with 3.5% each. These percentages refer to the total number of articles analysed (58) and vary due to the fact that some studies were conducted by more than one country.

**Citations, authors and main findings**

Scientific publications on the media coverage of women at the Games total 763 citations with an average of 13.16 citations per article, 44.8 citations per year for all studies and an h-index of 15. In addition, there has been a major increase in citations since 2011 (15), which peaked in 2017 (totalling 109). This total dipped slightly to 84 the following year, followed by an increase in 2019 (to 106), and totalling 91 this year so far (2020) (Fig. 5).



**Figure 5**  
Evolution in citations by years. Source: authors using WOS data.

The following table (Table 1) lists some of the most significant research on the Olympic Games published since the year 2000. The earliest studies examined American television (NBC) in particular, finding, first of all, more male than female coverage across the different editions of the Games (Angelini et al., 2012; Billings, 2007; Billings et al., 2010; Higgs et al., 2003). Subsequent types of studies revealed gender differences rooted in biases according to the sport; for

example, winter sports were perceived as more masculine as they tend to be more demanding and involve more physical contact (Billings, 2007). However, the studies also extended to images or pictures, more exciting in the case of male athletes, as seen in the Athens 2004 Games (Greer et al., 2009), or to the use of language, with differences in the descriptions of athletes' personality and physique in the case of Sochi 2014 (MacArthur et al., 2016).

**Table 1**  
*Evolution of research on women's coverage.*

Author and year	Olympic event	Medium analysed	Main findings
Higgs et al. (2003)	Barcelona 92- Atlanta 96	Television: NBC	More male coverage, sports regarded as appropriate for women, greater criticism of women's mistakes
Capranica et al. (2005)	Sydney 2000	Print media	Nationalism, greater equality in coverage
Billings (2007)	Athens 2004	Television: NBC	Gender-differentiated coverage: subjectivity and bias in the portrayal of women
Greer et al. (2009)	Athens 2004	Television: NBC	Image biases: visually more exciting male coverage, symbolic male authority
Billings et al. (2010)	Beijing 2008	Television: NBC	Less female coverage, gender differences and lack of balance in depictions
Jones (2013)	Beijing 2008	Digital television: ABC, BBC, CBC and TVNZ	Twice as many male stories and pictures and gender stereotypes: sportswomen as emotionally weak or dependent and less committed
Angelini et al. (2012)	Vancouver 2010	Television: NBC	Quantitative imbalance: 3/5 male airtime and 75% of mentions
Kian et al. (2013)	London 2012	Various media	Sports regarded as appropriate for women, sexualisation, infantilisation and secondary status for women
Godoy-Pressland & Griggs (2014)	London 2012	Print media	More male photo coverage, more active and in teams
Eagleman (2015)	London 2012	Print media	Gender-differentiated framing, appropriate sport, infantilised, simplified and female body depictions
Delorme & Testard (2015)	London 2012	Sports media	Underrepresentation of women in photographs, albeit without significant differences in size, position or content
MacArthur et al. (2016)	Sochi 2014	Television: NBC	Less coverage of women (41.7%) Gender differences in depictions of physicality and personality
Litchfield & Kavanagh (2019)	Rio 2016	Twitter pages	Progress in the amount of coverage (47% male and 42% female). Gender-differentiated images and infantilisation of women
Xu et al. (2018)	Rio 2016	China Central Television	No significant differences found. Male figure skaters received more airtime than in Western countries
Organista et al. (2020)	Vancouver 2010, London 2012, Sochi 2014, Rio 2016	Media	Significant underrepresentation of women and differences in the description of rival competitors, nationalism and scant consideration of non-Polish women athletes

Source: authors.

From 2012 onwards, studies began to straddle other media, such as digital television. Of note here is the paper about Beijing 2008 by Jones (2013), who also found quantitative differences in online images and obvious stereotypes such as emotion, dependence and lack of commitment to the sport in the case of women, and additionally in the print media, ranging from female underrepresentation in text and pictures at London 2012 (Delorme & Testard, 2015; Godoy-Pressland & Grigg, 2014) to gender-differentiated framing (Eagleman, 2015) and the prevalence of stereotypes such as female sexualisation and infantilisation (Kian et al., 2013). This contrasted with the study by Xu et al. (2018) that found greater fairness in Chinese television coverage. Analyses of the social media have begun to emerge in recent years, including, for example, the study by Litchfield and Kavanagh (2019) on the Twitter accounts of two institutions at Rio 2016, where they also identified greater levels of fairness, albeit also persistent gender differences with more active male images and infantilisation of women. The latest situation update was provided by Organista et al. (2020) about the Polish press in a longitudinal study covering all the Olympic Games, both winter and summer, staged since 2010, which revealed a significant underrepresentation of women and the maintenance of gender biases which was more understated in its national team due to the distinct nationalist discourse associated with this type of global competition event.

### Future strands

Over time, researchers on women's representation during Olympic events have proposed extending the analysis beyond the legacy media and exploring the coverage of women in new media such as digital platforms in greater depth (Xu et al., 2020). They have also proposed the conduct of more in-depth qualitative studies comparing different Olympic events or different sports, including not only disciplines deemed appropriate for women but also those appropriate for men or neutral (Eagleman, 2015). In addition, continuous media monitoring is proposed to measure the impact of the different gender equality measures implemented by national and international organisations and to ascertain how the daily routine coverage of women in the sports media is progressing outside the major championships (Delorme & Testard, 2015).

### Discussion and conclusions

Studies on the coverage of women during the Olympic Games have evolved slowly but steadily since the early 2000s,

peaking in 2015 with a total of 11 publications. This has been prompted by the interest in women's successes, particularly since the London 2012 Games, which attracted the attention of a large number of researchers seeking to examine the coverage of women athletes and their achievements, totalling 15 publications exclusively about these Games. Following London, the Rio 2016 Games sustained this high level of attention (six publications), which is not expected to end in the near future.

These studies are highly interdisciplinary, to the extent that they are addressed from fields such as the social sciences (55 %) and communication (40 %), psychology (10.3 %) and sports science (8.6 %). A large part of this research is produced in the United States (53 %), followed by the United Kingdom (19 %) and France (10.3 %) and other countries, making Europe the second-largest source with more than 46 % of total output. This research is also beginning to spread to other countries, including Australia and Canada (6.9 % each).

The impact of this research has also increased substantially from just one citation in 2005 to a maximum of 109 in 2017 and close to 100 in 2020, amounting to a mean of almost 45 citations per year for all authors. In general, the studies cover all media, ranging from television (Billings, 2007; Greer et al., 2009, Xu et al., 2018) to the print media (Capranica et al., 2005, Godoy-Pressland & Griggs, 2014, Eagleman, 2015), the new digital media (Jones, 2013) and the social media (Litchfield & Kavanah, 2019). These papers suggest that although significant progress has been made in terms of the quantity of coverage received by women, which is now fairer and more extensive (Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2019, Xu et al., 2018), biases persists, including underrepresentation in text and pictures (Billings, 2007; Jones, 2013; MacArthur et al., 2016), gender-based differences in depictions of athletes (Billings et al., 2010; Organista et al., 2020), and a greater focus on sports regarded as appropriate for males and females (Eagleman, 2015). Furthermore, sportswomen are still portrayed as emotionally weak or dependent (Jones, 2013) or childlike and passive (Godoy-Pressland & Griggs 2014) with an emphasis on female beauty and sexualisation (Kian et al., 2013).

Accordingly, the researchers recommend extending the study approach to other competitions and sports considered masculine or neutral (Eagleman, 2015) and to explore the coverage provided by the new media such as digital platforms (Xu et al., 2020) further. They also suggest rounding out the research with new studies to ascertain whether the measures put in place by organisations to further gender equality in sport are reflected in these media (Delorme & Testard, 2015).

In summary, despite the evident progress made in the coverage of women's sport, gender and gender norms



continue to shape the media coverage of the Olympic Games today, regardless of the medium, the sport or the country in which they are held. Therefore, compiling the papers produced by researchers is intended to help to move forward in new studies which monitor the media to ascertain whether the progress made in the amount of female coverage is eventually consolidated. Ultimately, and above all, the intention is to shift the focus towards qualitative studies to ascertain the story framings imposed by the media on audiences, to find out whether the existing gender differences persist, whether others tailored to the new media emerge and whether progress is being made towards greater equality in the representation of sport in the media.

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