

Sport Communication

Gashaw Abeza

Introduction

The Sport Communication section of the *Sport Management Digest* has examined a broad array of communication and sport related topics in its last five issues. These topics have been featured in leading journals including *Communication and Sport*, *International Journal of Sport Communication*, *Journal of Sport Management*, *Sport Management Review*, *European Sport Management Quarterly*, and *the Journal of Global Sport Management*, among others. The examination underscores the growing interest and active engagement in expanding the knowledge base within the field of sport communication. Starting with the first issue (of SMD's sport communication section), the journal addressed the media representation of disability, mental illness, and women in sport, along with the details of sport media coverage and consumption. Moving to the second issue (Issue #2), the scope expanded to include discussions on the connections between sport and politics, the impacts of COVID-19, race, and the significant role of mega-events in media stories. The third issue (Issue #3) continued with gender representation, the challenges for sport journalists, and the complex interactions between social media and sport psychology. The fourth issue (Issue #4) turned its attention to media content creation, the influence of media on sport, fan culture, and ethical concerns around doping and politics in sport. The latest issue (Issue #5) covered how sport and media construct cultural and national identities across different regions.

Current developments in sport communication

Continuing the trend, the sport management research community actively contributed to the field of sport communication from September 2023 to March 2024 (Issue #6), with the publication of over 51 articles across various journals. During this review period, the two leading journals in communication and sport, namely *Communication and Sport (C&S)* and *International Journal of Sport Communication (IJSC)*, were highly active. C&S published 18 research articles across two issues, along with 8 articles in a special issue, while IJSC released 9 research articles in

Volume 16, Issue 4, and 16 scholarly commentaries in its special issue. As mentioned, during the period of the 6th issue, these journals introduced two special issues. IJSC's special issue (Vol. 16, Issue 3) focused on social media and sport, and C&S's special issue (Vol. 12, Issue 1) explored the mediating the East Asian era of the Olympic Games (2018-2022). This digest begins by summarizing the special issues from both journals, before turning its attention to the original research works published in their regular issues.

The C&S special issue (Vol 12 Issue 1) on "Mediating the East Asian Era of the Olympic Games (2018-2022)" offers a broad exploration of the intersection between sport, media, and geopolitical dynamics during three consecutive Olympic Games held in East Asia, namely the Olympic Games held in PyeongChang, Tokyo, and Beijing. Edited by Koji Kobayashi, John Horne, Younghan Cho, and Jung Woo Lee, and featuring 8 original research by 13 authors, the issue presented a range of studies that address themes such as the political framing of the Games by international media, the cultural and national identity implications of athlete naturalization, and the nuanced portrayal of athletes across different national contexts. Additional topics include the challenges faced by journalists in reporting critically on the Games, the strategic communication employed in crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic, and the role of the Olympics in nation branding and regional diplomacy. The studies shed light on how the Olympic Games have served as a focal point for discussing broader issues of political tension, national pride, and the global sport landscape's influence on societal perceptions and international relations.

The IJSC special issue on social media and sport, co-edited by Gashaw Abeza and Jimmy Sanderson, offered a comprehensive exploration of the evolving relationship between social media and sport studies. Featuring 16 scholarly commentaries by 25 leading researchers from 21 universities across five countries, this issue examined current trends, challenges, and developments in the field, aiming to advance knowledge and encourage future research. The contributions cover a wide range of topics, including brand communities, dynamic content research, relationship marketing, brand management, consumer behavior, and the impact of social media on athlete welfare and legal issues. Each scholarly commentary presented fresh perspectives, innovative methodologies, and critical insights. This issue did not only highlight gaps in the literature but also offered

constructive discourse within the sport communication community, challenging prevailing theories and proposing new research directions.

In the two regular issues of C&S (Vol 11 Issue 5 and Vol 11 Issue 6) reviewed for this issue, the journal published a total of 18 research articles. The two issues focused on themes that range from gender identity and representation, national identity and consumer behavior, to the nuanced dynamics of media representation and bias. Specifically, the articles examine how gender, especially transgender athletes' participation, challenges traditional narratives and draw out media controversies, alongside examining the influence of national sentiments in consumer responses to advertising. Additionally, the articles address the ways in which auditory qualities impact media representation, investigate the complex relationship between sport entities and their fan bases, and examine the portrayal of athletes in media to reflect on broader societal values and tensions. Through diverse lenses—ranging from the business strategies of sport organizations to the portrayal of gender, national identity, and the role of corporate sponsorship in shaping athlete identity—the articles highlight the multi-layered impact of sport on society and culture, offering insights into the continuing dialogue around equity, representation, and community engagement within the sport domain.

Similarly, in the issue (Vol 16 Issue 4) under review of the IJSC, the journal published a total of 9 research articles. The research articles covered topics that can be broadly categorized into six common themes surrounding the interactions between sport and media/social media, the societal and political dimensions of sport, fan behavior and motivation, representation and perception in sport, cultural and generational influences, as well as visual representation and branding in the sport context. These research works highlight a multidimensional exploration of sport in contemporary society, emphasizing the significant interplay between sport, media, and the public.

The two journals combined published a total of 27 original research works covering topics that fall under six broadly categorized but inter-related themes, namely:

- a) Consumer behavior,
- b) Equity, diversity, and inclusion
- c) Global perspectives and international relations
- d) Media narratives and gender identity

- e) Social issues and activism in sport
- f) Technology and digital media in sport

From the six identified themes, this issue of SMD focuses on the topic of media narratives and gender identity. Under this specific theme, five articles have been identified. These articles explored the intricate relationship between sport, gender, and media, and contributed by 12 authors from 8 universities (Arizona State University, Brock University, Miami University, University of Delaware, University of Kentucky, University of Maryland, University of Waikato, Xiamen University). Among the methodological approaches employed in these articles are: content analysis of articles, sentiment analysis of Twitter content, narrative thematic analysis, and coding airtime mentions for quantitative content analysis. Although the studies have not clearly explained their theoretical and/or conceptual framework adopted, some of them were influenced by framing theory. Brief summary of the articles is presented next.

Scovel, Nelson, and Thorpe's (2023) study examined the role of the media in framing transgender participation in sport. The authors contended that media framings are influential, pushing readers to choose a side in a divisive debate instead of promoting more detailed, ethical, and compassionate reactions to a complicated matter. In the second article, Xu (2023) explored how Twitter users perceived the inclusion of trans athletes at international sporting events by empirically examining the Twitter network of Laurel Hubbard, the first out trans female athlete in Olympic history. The author found that there was a predominantly negative reaction on Twitter towards Laurel Hubbard's participation in the Olympics, highlighting the influential role of social media influencers and the segmented nature of online discussions. Third, Zanin et al. (2023) attempted to document the lived experiences of TGNC athletes within the binarized structures of sport. The study revealed common themes of gender challenges and discrimination within sport's binary structures, along with counter-narratives that challenge these structures, highlighting the need for changes in sport narratives to promote gender inclusion beyond the binary. Forth, Scott, Li, and Bingaman (2023). examined how an official free-to-air Australian broadcaster portrayed male and female athletes who participated at the 2018 Commonwealth Games. The study reported that despite some progress in media coverage and discourse surrounding female athletes, male athletes still received significantly more coverage during the 2018 Commonwealth

Games, highlighting ongoing issues of gender equity in sport media portrayal in Australia. Last, Yang (2023) investigated how Chinese news outlets use different beliefs and ideas to justify the roles and statuses they assign to two female sport stars. The study revealed how Chinese media uses ideological narratives to portray athletes Quan Hongchan and Gu Eileen differently, reflecting the state's ambitions and navigating tensions between socialist values and neoliberal ideals in constructing national sport heroes. Collectively, the studies explore the intersection of gender, media representation, and public perception in sport, ranging from the framing of transgender athletes' participation to the portrayal of male and female athletes in media and the lived experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming athletes in competitive sport.

Annotated bibliography

Scovel, S., Nelson, M., & Thorpe, H. (2023). Media framings of the transgender athlete as “legitimate controversy”: The case of Laurel Hubbard at the Tokyo Olympics. *Communication & Sport, 11(5)*, 838-853.

These three researchers from the University of Maryland and University of Waikato investigated how media coverage frames transgender participation in sport, focusing on Laurel Hubbard's participation in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Through a content analysis of 620 articles across three distinct phases surrounding Hubbard's Olympic debut, the study uncovers how journalists employ polarizing strategies—such as sourcing practices, the invocation of science, and policy questioning—to frame transgender athletes' participation as a "legitimate controversy." The analysis reveals a notable absence of Hubbard's personal perspective, with a preference for "authoritative" sources that challenge her participation and the relevant International Olympic Committee policies. The authors contend that such media approach encourages divisive debates over more nuanced discussions, highlighting journalists' significant influence in shaping public discourse around the inclusivity of sport spaces. The findings underscore the media's power in framing complex issues in ways that may either restrict or expand the inclusivity of sport.

Xu, Q. (2023). Competing as the first out transgender female Olympian: A twitter network analysis of Laurel Hubbard during the 2020 Tokyo games. *Communication & Sport, 11(5)*, 854-878.

This researcher from the University of Kentucky investigates the Twitter discourse on Laurel Hubbard, the first openly transgender woman to compete in the Olympics, during the 2020 Tokyo Games. Utilizing R programming, the author collected and analyzed 20,977 tweets related to Hubbard, followed by a sentiment analysis aided by Python and TextBlob. The study sheds light on public sentiment and perceptions regarding the inclusion of transgender athletes in international competitions, providing empirical insights into the Twitter network's reaction to Hubbard's historic participation. The analysis contributes valuable understanding to the discourse surrounding transgender athletes' roles in sport, highlighting the broader implications for inclusion and representation in international sporting events.

Zanin, A. C., LeMaster, L. T., Niess, L. C., & Lucero, H. (2023). Storying the gender binary in sport: Narrative motifs among transgender, gender non-conforming athletes. *Communication & Sport*, 11(5), 879–904.

Researchers from Arizona State University explored the lived experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) athletes through a dual-layered narrative analysis. This study documented the stories of 20 TGNC athletes, highlighting recurring themes such as gender sanctioning, survival within binary gender constructs, transition and disclosure, and gender affirmation. The analysis went further to dissect the structural narratives that perpetuate binary gender norms in sport, revealing both the exclusion of non-binary athletes and the emergence of counter narratives that challenge these binary constraints. By examining these personal and structural narratives, the study offers insights into the potential for reshaping sport narratives to embrace gender inclusivity beyond traditional binaries, suggesting significant theoretical and practical implications for fostering a more inclusive sporting environment.

Scott, O., Li, B., & Bingaman, J. (2023). Still battling for equity: Examining biological sex portrayals through the lens of the Gold Coast during Australian prime time coverage of the 2018 Commonwealth Games. *Communication & Sport*, 11(6) 1058–1079.

These authors from Brock University, Miami University, and the University of Delaware, explored the portrayal of male and female athletes by Australia's Seven Network during the 2018 Commonwealth Games. Their study, which examined over 31 hours of prime-time coverage, assessed clock-time, name mentions, and verbal descriptions of athletes to understand the evolution of gender portrayals in major sporting events broadcast in Australia. Adopting a coding approach that considered the athletes' sex, ethnicity, nationality, sport, and ability status, the researchers aimed to evaluate progress in gender representation. The findings indicated a continued dominance of male athletes in terms of airtime and an ambiguous portrayal of female athletes, despite some positive shifts in media discourse. The study concludes that, despite advancements, achieving media equity between male and female athletes in sports remains a challenge, underscoring the need for further efforts towards gender equality in sports broadcasting.

Yang, X. (2023). Incommensurability between “filial daughter” and “all-capable princess”: Discursive legitimation in chinese media coverage of Quan Hongchan and Gu Eileen. *Communication & Sport*, 1(6) 1080–1101.

This author, from Xiamen University, explored the ideological underpinnings in the portrayal of two Chinese female athletes, Quan Hongchan and Gu Eileen, by the national media, drawing from a comprehensive analysis of 449 articles about Quan, 353 about Gu and ten articles about both persons. Employing critical discourse analysis, the author investigated how these athletes' identities are framed within China's aspirations to be a sporting superpower and achieve the "China Dream." The study identified a dichotomy in media representations: Quan is depicted as a "socialist filial daughter," symbolizing a mobilization call to the youth for national commitment, while Gu is presented as a "neoliberal all-capable princess," reflecting a strategy to mitigate elite discontent and foster a cosmopolitan outlook. These portrayals, embodying contrasting societal values and expectations, highlight the complex practices Chinese media engage in to legitimize divergent athlete identities in support of state ideologies. This research illuminates the nuanced and multifaceted ways through which media narratives contribute to the broader discourse of national identity, cultural values, and global aspirations in contemporary China.