

Understanding Audience Perceptions of Gender Equality in Contemporary Sports Media: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

The underrepresentation and gendered portrayal of female athletes in sports media have significant implications for how audiences perceive and evaluate male and female athletes in contemporary society. Despite growing scholarly attention to this issue, the literature remains fragmented across disciplinary traditions. This scoping review, guided by PRISMA-ScR, examines the impact of gendered sports media representation on public perceptions of male and female athletes. Studies published in English between 2005 and 2025 were identified through Scopus, SPORTDiscus and SocINDEX and screened in Rayyan. Eligible studies used content analysis, framing analysis, or qualitative methods to examine gendered sports media portrayals and audience perceptions. 54 studies were included. For each study, the country, media type, sport, method, design or sample, and findings on portrayal and on audience perception were charted. The findings were synthesised using reflexive thematic analysis, which produced five themes: *1. Underrepresentation and Marginalisation; 2. Sexualisation and Trivialisation; 3. Framing Asymmetry; 4. Audience Perception and Gender Socialisation; and 5. Digital Media as a Site of Contestation*. From a practical perspective, these five themes and the evidence underpinning them provide broadcasters, sport managers, and policymakers with a theoretically grounded and empirically supported basis for developing more equitable and impactful strategies for the representation of female athletes across contemporary sports media platforms.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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<i>Clearly state the AI tools used.</i>	
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sport occupies a unique and powerful position in contemporary society. It is one of the few cultural domains that commands the sustained attention of billions of people worldwide, transcending national borders, language barriers, and generational divides. However, despite its universality, sport has never been a level playing field and nowhere is this inequality more visible than in its media representation. For decades, female athletes have competed at the highest levels of their disciplines, broken records, won championships, and demonstrated physical and mental capacities that rival and often surpass those of their male counterparts. Nevertheless, the media landscape through which most people experience sport continues to reflect a markedly different story, one in which male athletes occupy centre stage. In contrast, female athletes remain peripheral, their achievements underreported, their identities reduced, and their sporting worth perpetually questioned.

This dissertation is concerned with that gap, the gap between what female athletes do and how they are represented, and crucially, the consequences of that representational gap for the people who consume sports media. The study, titled *"Understanding Audience Perceptions of Gender Equality in Contemporary Sports Media,"* addresses the following research question: *"What evidence exists regarding the portrayal of gender in sports media and its influence on public perceptions of male and female athletes?"* This is not simply a question about media fairness or editorial practice, although those dimensions are relevant. It is fundamentally a question about the social power of media representation: how the stories we tell about sport, and the stories we choose not to tell, shape the beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions of the audiences who receive them.

The significance of this question extends well beyond the sports page. Media representations of athletes' function as cultural narratives about gender itself, about what bodies can do, who deserves recognition, and whose achievements are worth celebrating. When female athletes are consistently underrepresented, trivialised, or reduced to their physical appearance in sports media, those messages do not remain contained within the world of sport. They circulate through the broader culture, reinforcing gender hierarchies that operate across education, employment, leadership, and public life (Cooky et al., 2013; Francombe-Webb, 2024). Conversely, when female athletes are represented with the same complexity, respect, and prominence afforded to male athletes, there is evidence that audience attitudes shift, that people become more likely to watch women's sports, more willing to attribute athletic

credibility to female competitors, and more supportive of gender equality in sporting institutions (Darvin & Sagas, 2017). The stakes of getting sports media representation right are therefore not trivial. They are, in a meaningful sense, the stakes of gender equality itself.

The relationship between sports media and gender inequality has attracted sustained scholarly attention since at least the 1970s, when researchers first began documenting the systematic underrepresentation of women in sports broadcasting and print journalism (Cooky et al., 2013). The foundational insight of this body of work, that sports media does not merely reflect social attitudes toward gender but actively produces and reproduces them, has remained remarkably durable across five decades of research and profound transformation in the media landscape. What has changed is the complexity and reach of the systems through which sports content is produced and consumed.

In the pre-digital era, sports media was dominated by a relatively small number of institutional gatekeepers, such as national broadcasters, major newspapers, and sports magazines, whose editorial decisions determined what audiences saw and read about sport. The gender biases embedded in those decisions were well-documented: female athletes received a fraction of the coverage afforded to male athletes, and the coverage that they received was frequently framed in terms of their appearance, femininity, or relationship to male figures in their lives rather than their athletic accomplishments (Capranica et al., 2005). These patterns were consistent across contexts, suggesting they reflected structural features of sports journalism as an institution rather than the idiosyncratic choices of individual editors or producers.

The emergence of digital and social media in the mid-2000s appeared to offer a corrective to this institutional bias. Platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram created new channels through which female athletes could represent themselves directly, bypassing the gatekeeping structures of traditional media and reaching audiences who had previously had little access to women's sports (Sherwood, 2019; Antunovic et al., 2021). The growth of independent women's sports media, fan-run websites, dedicated podcasts, and digital journalism outlets covering women's leagues and athletes represented a structural diversification of the sports media ecosystem that held genuine promise for more equitable representation. For a period, it seemed plausible that technological change might accomplish what decades of advocacy and institutional reform had not: a media environment in which female athletes received coverage commensurate with their athletic achievements.

That optimism has proven to be only partially warranted. While digital and social media have undoubtedly created new spaces for female athletic visibility, the evidence accumulated over the past decade suggests that the structural dynamics of gendered representation have proven more resilient than the transformative narrative implied. Studies of Olympic social media coverage consistently find that broadcasters apply the same asymmetric framing strategies to female athletes on Instagram and Twitter that characterise their television coverage (Johnson et al., 2020; Adá-Lameiras & Rodríguez-Castro, 2021). Research on sports news coverage across platforms documents persistent disparities in the volume and quality of coverage afforded to women's sports despite the proliferation of available channels (Fujak et al., 2025). Furthermore, qualitative investigations of the attitudes of sports journalists and media editors reveal that the underrepresentation of women's sports is frequently naturalised not as a product of institutional bias but as an accurate reflection of audience interest and market demand (Organista & Mazur, 2020a). The problem, in other words, is not primarily technological. It is cultural, institutional, and deeply embedded in the practices and assumptions of sports media as a professional field.

This is the context in which the present study is situated. It does not approach gendered sports media representation as a historical problem that digital technology is in the process of solving. Rather, it treats the relationship between media portrayal and audience perception as a live and consequential question, one that requires systematic attention to the full range of evidence produced across two decades of scholarship in sport sociology, media studies, communication, gender studies, and sport management.

This dissertation undertakes a scoping review of the academic literature on gender representation in sports media and its impact on audience perception. The review draws on 54 peer-reviewed studies identified through a systematic search of three specialist databases, Scopus, SocINDEX, and SPORTDiscus and is limited to the period 2005–2025. The analytical framework integrates three methodological traditions represented across the included literature: qualitative analysis, content analysis, and framing analysis.

The study is explicitly interdisciplinary in scope. It draws on scholarship from sport sociology, communication studies, media studies, gender studies, journalism, and sport management, treating the insights from each tradition as complementary rather than competing. The media platforms examined span the full contemporary sports media ecosystem, from traditional broadcast television and print journalism to Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and digital

news outlets. The sports covered across the included literature are diverse, with the Olympic Games and football featuring most prominently, alongside basketball, netball, gymnastics, American football, swimming, athletics, snowboarding, wrestling, and Australian rules football, among others.

The study does not collect primary data. It is a synthesis of existing evidence, and its conclusions are therefore bounded by the scope and quality of the literature it reviews. The methodological implications of this are acknowledged in full in the methodology chapter, including the limitations imposed by the English-language restriction and the absence of formal quality appraisal of included studies.

The significance of this study operates at multiple levels. At the academic level, it provides a systematic, theoretically informed synthesis of an interdisciplinary field that has not previously been reviewed with this combination of scope, temporal range, and analytical framework. By integrating evidence from qualitative analysis, content analysis, and framing analysis traditions, it produces a more complete picture of the relationship between gendered sports media representation and audience perception than any single tradition could achieve.

At the social level, the study speaks to questions of gender equity that have attracted increasing institutional attention across sport, media, and public policy. Organisations, including the International Olympic Committee, national sporting bodies, and media regulators, have in recent years committed to improving the representation of female athletes in sports coverage. The evidence synthesised in this review provides an empirically grounded basis for understanding both the mechanisms through which current representational practices perpetuate gender inequality and the conditions under which more equitable representation might produce meaningful shifts in audience attitudes and public culture.

At the level of sport management practice, the findings of this review are relevant to broadcasters, sports organisations, and digital media producers who are making decisions about how to represent female athletes across an increasingly complex media landscape. Understanding how different representational choices in terms of framing, volume, visual treatment, and platform selection affect audience perception is directly actionable knowledge for practitioners concerned with growing audiences for women's sports, building the commercial case for women's sporting events, and contributing to broader institutional commitments to gender equality.

This dissertation comprises four chapters. Chapter 1, the present chapter, has introduced the research topic, established the rationale for the study, defined its scope and boundaries, and articulated its significance. Chapter 2 presents the full methodological framework, including the scoping review design, database selection, search strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, screening process using Rayyan, analytical methods, and the theme generation process through which the five themes structuring the findings were generated. Chapter 3 presents the findings of the review, organised around five themes developed through the reflexive thematic analysis: Underrepresentation and Marginalisation; Sexualisation and Trivialisation; Framing Asymmetry; Audience Perception and Gender Socialisation; and Digital Media as a Site of Contestation. Chapter 4 synthesises the findings in relation to the research question, discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the review, acknowledges its limitations, and identifies directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

The chapter begins by establishing the research paradigm within which the study is situated. It then justifies selecting a scoping review as the appropriate research design and outlines the reporting framework adopted. This is followed by a detailed account of the selected databases and the temporal boundaries of the search, the construction and justification of the search string and its components, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied during screening. The chapter also describes the two-stage screening process conducted using the systematic review management tool Rayyan, along with the data extraction and synthesis procedures used to organise information from the included studies.

Research Paradigm

Before outlining the specific methods employed, it is important to situate this study within a broader paradigmatic framework, as the philosophical assumptions underpinning a research project shape every methodological decision that follows. This study is positioned within a pragmatist research paradigm. Pragmatism rejects the rigid dichotomy between positivism and interpretivism, arguing instead that the research question itself rather than an a priori commitment to a particular epistemological tradition should guide methodological choice (Feilzer, 2010; Morgan, 2007). For a research question concerned simultaneously with the measurable patterns of gendered media representation and the interpretive, socially constructed nature of audience perception, pragmatism is the most intellectually honest position. It permits the integration of qualitative, quantitative, and framing-based evidence without privileging one mode of inquiry over another, which is precisely the epistemological flexibility required by a scoping review that draws on a methodologically diverse body of literature.

This study does not claim to generate objective, value-free knowledge. Rather, consistent with a pragmatist stance, it acknowledges that knowledge about gender, media, and audience perception is socially situated, historically contingent, and shaped by the positionality of researchers and the cultural contexts in which studies are conducted. This acknowledgement does not undermine the validity of the synthesis; rather, it calls for reflexivity on the part of the researcher, a commitment to being transparent about interpretive choices and their consequences for the conclusions drawn.

Audience perception, in the context of this study, refers to the cognitive, attitudinal, and evaluative processes through which individuals make sense of, interpret, and respond to media representations of athletes. Perception is not a passive process of simply receiving information; it is an active, socially shaped process through which individuals filter media content through pre-existing schemas, cultural norms, and personal experiences (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). The concept of audience perception therefore encompasses not only what people think about female and male athletes as a result of media exposure, but how those thoughts are formed, reinforced, or challenged over time. In sport contexts specifically, audience perceptions have been shown to shape a range of outcomes including willingness to watch women's sports, assessments of athlete credibility and competence, and broader attitudes toward gender equality in sporting institutions (Darvin & Sagas, 2017).

Sports media, as used in this study, is not restricted to any single platform or format. It refers to the full ecosystem of channels through which sporting content is produced, distributed, and consumed including television broadcasting, newspaper and magazine journalism, online news platforms, and digital social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. The inclusion of both traditional and digital media is deliberate. The contemporary sports media landscape is characterised by convergence, in which audiences move fluidly across multiple platforms, and in which the boundaries between institutional media production and user-generated content have become increasingly blurred (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). A review that examined only broadcast or print media would therefore provide an incomplete and anachronistic picture of how gendered representations are constructed and consumed today.

The conjunction of these two constructs, audience perception and sports media in the title, signals that this review is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between representation and reception: not simply with documenting how female and male athletes are portrayed, but with understanding the social and psychological consequences of those portrayals for the people who watch, read, and engage with sports content. This relational focus distinguishes the present study from purely descriptive content analyses and demands a methodological framework capable of integrating evidence from multiple analytical traditions. The remainder of this chapter explains how that framework was constructed.

Research Design: Scoping Review

A scoping review was identified as the most appropriate research design for this study. The scoping review methodology was originally conceptualised by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and has since been refined and extended by Levac et al. (2010) and Tricco et al. (2018). Unlike a systematic review, which aims to answer a specific, bounded empirical question and typically involves a formal quality appraisal of included studies, a scoping review is designed to map the existing literature on a topic, clarify key concepts and definitions, identify the types and sources of evidence available, and highlight gaps in the current evidence base (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Peters et al., 2020). These objectives align precisely with the aims of the present study.

Several characteristics of the research question make a scoping review the most appropriate design. First, the question is broad and multi-dimensional, encompassing both the nature of gendered media portrayal and its impact on audience perception, two related but analytically distinct phenomena that together require a synthesis of a large and diverse body of literature. A systematic review with meta-analysis would require a narrow, homogeneous set of studies with comparable outcome measures, which does not reflect the state of this field. Second, the literature on gendered sports media representation spans multiple disciplines, like sport sociology, communication studies, media studies, gender studies, sport management, and social psychology making it difficult to apply a single disciplinary quality appraisal framework. Third, prior to undertaking a narrower systematic review or primary research on any specific dimension of the topic, a scoping review is the appropriate first step in establishing what is known, how it has been studied, and where the most significant gaps lie (Munn et al., 2018).

The PRISMA extension for Scoping Reviews (Tricco et al., 2018) was adopted as the reporting framework for this review. PRISMA-ScR provides structured guidance on the transparent and reproducible reporting of scoping reviews, including the documentation of search strategies, screening procedures, and data extraction processes. Adherence to this framework ensures that the review meets current best-practice standards in evidence synthesis and can be evaluated and replicated by future researchers.

Database Selection and Justification

Three electronic databases were selected for the literature search: Scopus, SocINDEX, and SPORTDiscus. The selection of these databases was deliberate and grounded in their disciplinary coverage, indexing quality, and relevance to the subject matter of this review.

Scopus

Scopus is the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature and is widely regarded as a gold-standard resource for academic research synthesis (Falagas et al., 2008). It provides comprehensive coverage across social sciences, communication, and interdisciplinary fields, making it particularly well-suited to a topic that bridges gender studies, media studies, and sport sociology. Scopus indexes journals across more than 230 subject areas and includes citation analysis tools that support the identification of high-impact literature. Its inclusion in this review ensures broad and rigorous coverage of the academic evidence base.

SocINDEX

SocINDEX, produced by EBSCO, is a specialist database focused on sociology and social science research. It is one of the most comprehensive sociology-specific databases available, covering key journals in gender studies, media and communication, cultural studies, and sport sociology. Given that this review is grounded in sociological frameworks relating to gender representation, media framing, and audience reception, SocINDEX provides access to theoretical and empirical literature that may not be indexed in more generalist databases. Its inclusion deepens and sharpens the search's disciplinary specificity.

SPORTDiscus

SPORTDiscus, produced by EBSCO, is the leading database for sport and exercise science literature. It provides specialised indexing of research in sport management, sport media, sport sociology, kinesiology, and recreation. As the primary database within sport-specific research, SPORTDiscus ensures that relevant studies at the intersection of sports media, gender, and audience perception are not overlooked. Many journals focused on sport media and gender, such as the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, the *Sociology of Sport Journal*, and the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, are indexed in SPORTDiscus. Its inclusion is therefore essential to ensuring the comprehensiveness and domain relevance of this review.

Rationale for Database Combination

The use of three complementary databases was designed to maximise the coverage of the relevant literature while minimising the risk of publication bias. Each database contributes a distinct disciplinary perspective: Scopus provides broad interdisciplinary coverage and citation-level quality assurance; SocINDEX ensures depth within sociological and gender studies literature; and SPORTDiscus anchors the search within the specialised field of sports research. Together, these databases span the core disciplines underpinning this review and

collectively reduce the likelihood of relevant studies being missed. This multi-database approach is consistent with the PRISMA-ScR best-practice guidelines for scoping reviews.

Temporal Scope: 2005–2025

The review was restricted to literature published between 2005 and 2025. This 20-year window was selected for the following reasons:

First, 2005 represents a significant turning point in the sports media landscape. The mid-2000s witnessed the mass adoption of broadband internet, the emergence of user-generated content platforms (including YouTube, launched in 2005), and the beginning of a transition from print- and broadcast-dominated sport coverage toward digital media environments (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Studies published prior to this period were considered less likely to reflect the digital media dynamics that shape contemporary audience perceptions.

Second, the 2005–2025 period encompasses critical developments in the discourse on gender equity in sport. The growth of women's professional sport, the increasing media coverage of events such as the FIFA Women's World Cup and the Women's Ashes, the emergence of gender equality campaigns such as the International Olympic Committee's gender equity frameworks, and the role of social media in amplifying marginalised voices in sport have all occurred substantially within this timeframe (Francombe-Webb, 2024).

Third, the 20-year window is sufficiently broad to identify longitudinal trends and shifts in media representation and audience perceptions, while remaining methodologically manageable and analytically focused. A broader timeframe risked including studies incompatible with the current media environment; a narrower timeframe risked insufficient coverage of patterns identified and developed through the analysis and contradictory findings.

The upper boundary of 2025 ensures that the most recent literature, including studies examining the impact of streaming platforms, algorithmic content curation, and social media influencer culture on gendered sports media, is captured within the review.

Search Strategy

Search strings were developed using a combination of controlled vocabulary (database-specific thesaurus terms) and free-text keywords derived from the research question and its key theoretical constructs. Boolean operators (AND, OR) and proximity operators (W/4), and (N4) were used to combine and relate terms across four conceptual clusters: media type and platform, gendered representation, sport and athletes, and audience perception.

Truncation symbols (asterisks) were applied to capture morphological variants of root terms (e.g., "represent*" capturing represent, representation, representations, representative; "sport*" capturing sport, sports, sporting).

Full Search String

The following search string was applied across all three databases (Scopus, SocINDEX, and SPORTDiscus), with minor adaptations to reflect each platform's search interface and indexing conventions (*Have used "N4" for EBSCO databases; like SPORTDiscuss and SocINDEX*):

(Media OR TV OR Television OR Print OR YouTube OR Instagram OR Blog*) W/4
(Represent* OR Portray* OR Coverage*)

AND

Gender* OR Male OR Female OR Sex

AND

Sport* OR Athlete*

AND

Audience* OR Viewer* OR People OR Perception* OR Opinion

Breakdown and Justification of Search String Components

The search string is structured around four conceptual blocks, each linked by the Boolean operator AND to ensure that retrieved studies must engage with all four dimensions of the research question simultaneously. Within each block, terms are connected by OR to broaden the search and capture synonymous or related terminology. The rationale for each component (Table 1.) is detailed below.

Table 1

Block	Terms	Operator Logic	Justification
Block 1: Media Type & Platform	Media OR TV OR Television OR Print OR YouTube OR Instagram OR Blog*	OR within block; W/4 proximity to representation terms	Captures the full range of contemporary sports media platforms, both traditional (TV, print) and digital (YouTube, Instagram, blogs) ensuring the search reflects the current multi-

Block	Terms	Operator Logic	Justification
			platform media environment.
Block 2: Representation	Represent* OR Portray* OR Coverage*	OR within block; linked to Block 1 via W/4 proximity operator	Targets studies examining how athletes and gender are depicted in media. The W/4 proximity operator ensures media-type terms appear within four words of representation terms, reducing irrelevant results and increasing precision.
Block 3: Gender	Gender* OR Male OR Female OR Sex	OR within block; AND to all other blocks	Ensures retrieved studies directly engage with gender as a variable. The truncated term gender* captures gender, gendered, gendering, and genderisation. Male, Female, and Sex are included as direct synonyms used variably across disciplines.
Block 4: Sport & Athletes	Sport* OR Athlete*	OR within block; AND to all other blocks	Anchors the search within the sports domain. Sport* captures sport, sports, sporting, and sportsperson; Athlete* captures athlete and athletes. This block prevents the retrieval of media and gender studies unrelated to sport.
Block 5: Audience & Perception	Audience* OR Viewer* OR People OR Perception* OR Opinion	OR within block; AND to all other blocks	Ensures the search captures the audience reception dimension of the research question. Audience* and Viewer* target studies examining media consumption; Perception* and Opinion target attitudinal and cognitive response studies. The inclusion of 'People' broadens retrieval for

Block	Terms	Operator Logic	Justification
			studies using lay-audience terminology.

Justification of Individual Search Terms

Each term was chosen deliberately, and the rationale for ambiguous or boundary-marking inclusions (Table 2.) is explained below.

Table 2

Term	Justification for Inclusion	Considerations
Media	A broad umbrella term capturing studies that refer collectively to communication channels without specifying a single platform. Essential for retrieving literature on multi-platform or hybrid media environments.	Intentionally broad; precision is achieved through the W/4 or N4 proximity link to representation terms rather than restricting the term itself.
TV / Television	Television remains the dominant medium for live sports broadcasting globally and is central to the historical literature on gendered sports coverage. Both abbreviated and full forms are included to capture terminological variation across studies.	Both forms are necessary as the literature uses them inconsistently; relying on one alone risks missing relevant studies.
Print	Print journalism including newspapers and sports magazines has been a primary site of gendered athlete representation research since the 1980s and remains relevant across the review period, particularly for studies examining legacy media.	Captures newspaper, magazine, and tabloid coverage studies without requiring each publication type to be listed individually.
YouTube	YouTube is the world's largest video-sharing platform and a significant site of sports content consumption and athlete self-representation. Its inclusion reflects the review's aim to capture digital environments that have reshaped sports coverage since the mid-2000s.	TikTok and Twitter/X were considered but excluded to maintain precision; their sport-media research base is limited within the 2005–2025 window. Studies referencing these platforms may still be captured through the broader 'media' term.
Instagram	Instagram has become a key platform through which female athletes have	Facebook was considered but excluded as sport-specific gendered representation

Term	Justification for Inclusion	Considerations
	negotiated their own visibility and challenged traditional media framing. A growing body of research specifically examines gendered self-representation on Instagram, making its explicit inclusion necessary.	research on Facebook is less developed relative to Instagram and YouTube.
Blog*	Truncated to capture blog, blogs, blogging, and bloggers. Sports blogs represent an important category of non-institutional digital media contributing alternative framings of gendered athleticism, particularly in the 2005–2015 period before social media dominance.	Acknowledges the role of citizen journalism and participatory media in sports coverage theoretically relevant to questions of representation and gatekeeping.
Gender*	The primary theoretical construct of this review. Truncated to capture gender, gendered, gendering, genderisation, and gender-based terms used within sociological and media studies frameworks to describe socially constructed categories of identity and representation.	Distinct from 'Sex'; both are retained as the literature uses them differently depending on disciplinary tradition and publication era.
Male / Female	Used as explicit categorical identifiers in studies comparing media coverage of male and female athletes. Many empirical studies in sport management and sport sociology use Male and Female as descriptors rather than the broader term 'gender'.	Included alongside gender* rather than as substitutes, to ensure coverage of both theoretical and empirical literature regardless of terminological preference.
Sex	In a portion of the literature particularly older studies and those in sport science or psychology 'sex' is used in place of 'gender' for male/female categorisation. Excluding this term risks missing studies from these traditions that are directly relevant to the research question.	Potential false positives are mitigated by AND logic requiring co-occurrence with sport* and audience* terms, which contextualises the term within the relevant domain.
Sport*	The primary domain anchor of the search string. Truncated to capture sport, sports, sporting, sportsperson, and sportswoman/sportsman, ensuring all retrieved literature is situated within the field of sport.	Truncation is essential; 'sport' alone would miss 'sports journalism' and 'sporting coverage', which are common constructions in the target literature.

Term	Justification for Inclusion	Considerations
Athlete*	Captures athlete and athletes. Many studies frame their subject around athletes as the objects of media representation rather than sport as a domain; this term ensures such studies are retrieved where sport* alone would not suffice.	Provides complementary coverage to sport* by capturing person-centred rather than domain-centred terminology.
Audience*	A central concept in media studies used to describe those who receive and interpret media content. Truncated to capture audience and audiences. Its inclusion ensures the search retrieves studies engaging with the reception dimension of the research question.	Primary term for the reception cluster; all other terms in this block are complementary to this anchor.
Viewer*	Used particularly in television and broadcast-focused research as the specific term for media audiences. Its inclusion alongside Audience* prevents the exclusion of broadcast-centred studies that use 'viewer' rather than 'audience' as their primary descriptor.	Disciplinary variation between media studies (audience) and broadcasting research (viewer) makes both terms necessary for comprehensive retrieval.
People	Included to capture studies using lay or non-specialist language particularly survey-based and social psychology research that refers to general public respondents rather than formalised audience categories.	Acknowledged as the broadest term in the string; its precision relies on co-occurrence with all other blocks via AND logic. Included after deliberate consideration to avoid excluding empirically grounded studies with informal language conventions.
Perception*	Directly mirrors the language of the research question ('public perceptions') and is used extensively in social cognition, sport psychology, and audience reception research to describe how individuals process and interpret media representations.	One of the strongest conceptual anchors in the block, directly linking the search string to the research question's framing.
Opinion	Captures studies examining expressed attitudes or evaluative judgements toward athletes and media content, particularly in public opinion research and media effects literature where 'opinion' is used as a primary outcome variable in audience surveys.	'Attitude*' and 'belief*' were considered as additions. These may be incorporated in a supplementary search if initial results are insufficient in the attitude-measurement tradition of social psychology.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 3

Inclusion Criteria

Category	Criteria	Justification
Source Type	Peer-reviewed empirical or theoretical studies (journal articles, theses, book chapters).	Ensures methodological rigour and scholarly credibility in line with PRISMA-ScR standards.
Topic Focus	Studies examining direct or indirect impact of sports media portrayal on public perceptions/attitudes regarding gender.	Directly addresses the research question concerning gendered representation and its social reception.
Audience Focus	Studies exploring audience responses to gendered sports coverage.	Reflects the review's dual focus on media content and its broader social impact.
Publication Date	2005–2025.	Captures the 20-year transformation of sports media through digitalisation, social media, and streaming.
Study Design	Content Analysis and Framing Analysis and Qualitative Analysis.	These three approaches form a methodologically coherent and mutually reinforcing framework. Content analysis establishes the empirical landscape of gendered representation; framing analysis explains the mechanisms through which that representation operates on audience cognition; and qualitative analysis surfaces the live audience responses that result. No single approach could adequately address all three layers of the research question. It is their combination within the narrative synthesis that gives this review its analytical depth.
Discipline	Sport sociology, communication, journalism, media studies, gender studies, sport management.	Reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the research problem.
Media Type	Traditional and digital media (TV, newspapers, online, streaming, social media).	Captures evolving patterns of gendered representation across shifting media consumption landscapes.

Table 4**Exclusion Criteria**

Category	Criteria	Justification
Source Type	Opinion pieces, editorials, non-academic news, conference abstracts without full papers.	Do not meet methodological rigour threshold for academic scoping review.
Topic Focus	Studies solely on athlete experiences or production processes without addressing audience impact.	Fall outside the scope of the research question.
Relevance	Studies on performance, physiology, coaching, or participation without media/gender engagement.	Do not address media portrayal or audience perception.
Publication Date	Published outside 2005–2025.	Pre-2005 literature may not reflect contemporary digital media landscapes.
Commercial Focus	Studies exclusively on sponsorship, branding, or advertising without gendered representation.	Primarily concerned with commercial strategy rather than representation.
Language	Non-English language studies.	Practical constraints on language accessibility and consistent interpretation of findings.
Duplicates	Duplicate records across databases.	Removed per PRISMA-ScR screening procedures to prevent duplicate analysis.

Analysis of Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***Strengths of the Criteria Framework***

The inclusion and exclusion criteria developed for this review demonstrate several notable strengths. The criteria are clearly operationalised across seven categories, providing transparency for both inclusion and exclusion decisions. The rationale for each criterion is explicitly tied to the research question and PRISMA-ScR standards, which support reproducibility and reduce the risk of reviewer bias during the screening phase.

The breadth of disciplines included (sport sociology, communication, journalism, media studies, gender studies, and sport management) reflects the inherently interdisciplinary nature of the research question. Restricting the review to a single discipline would risk a partial

and fragmented evidence base. The multi-disciplinary scope also aligns with contemporary theoretical frameworks for studying media and gender, which increasingly draw on intersecting fields.

The inclusion of all these three approaches forms a methodologically coherent and mutually reinforcing framework. Content analysis establishes the empirical landscape of gendered representation; framing analysis explains the mechanisms through which that representation operates on audience cognition; and qualitative analysis surfaces the live audience responses that result. No single approach could adequately address all three layers of the research question, as it is their combination within the narrative synthesis that gives this review its analytical depth.

Potential Limitations

Several limitations of the criteria framework warrant acknowledgement. Excluding non-English-language studies introduces a language bias, as relevant research published in Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, or other languages will not be captured. This is particularly significant given that gender representation in sports media is a global issue, and non-English-speaking contexts including Latin America, Europe, and East Asia have produced substantive research in this area. While this limitation is noted in the exclusion criteria, it represents a real constraint on the comprehensiveness and cross-cultural applicability of the review's findings.

Excluding conference abstracts without full papers may inadvertently omit emerging or preliminary findings that have not yet reached full publication. This is a standard caveat in systematic and scoping reviews; however, it is worth recognising that some significant theoretical contributions in sport and media studies have been initially presented at conferences such as those of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) or the Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand (SMAANZ).

The inclusion criterion requiring studies to address 'audience impact' alongside media portrayal is methodologically appropriate but potentially limiting. Some highly influential theoretical and critical studies in gender and sports media such as foundational work on media framing or newsroom gatekeeping may be excluded if they do not empirically engage with audience reception. This criterion could be interpreted as narrowing the theoretical scope of the review at the cost of methodological inclusion.

Screening and Selection Process

Following the database searches, records were exported and processed for deduplication prior to the commencement of screening. A total of 333 records were identified across the three databases; 204 from Scopus, 73 from SPORTDiscus, and 56 from SocINDEX. Following the removal of 20 duplicate records, 313 records remained eligible for screening.

Screening was conducted using Rayyan, a web-based systematic review management tool developed by Qatar Computing Research Institute and widely used in health and social science evidence synthesis (Ouzzani et al., 2016). Rayyan was selected for this review because it provides a structured, transparent, and auditable screening environment that is consistent with PRISMA-ScR best practice. The platform allows researchers to screen records by title, abstract, and full text within a single interface, to apply and record inclusion and exclusion decisions with associated reasons, to flag conflicts for resolution, and to generate exportable records of the screening process. Its use in this review ensures that the screening decisions are documented, reproducible, and accessible to supervisory review.

Screening was conducted in two stages within Rayyan, following the PRISMA-ScR flow shown in Figure 1. Before screening began, the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Tables 3 and 4) were to confirm that they could be applied consistently.

Stage 1: title and abstract screening. The titles and abstracts of all 313 records remaining after deduplication were screened against the pre-specified criteria. Each record was marked include, exclude, or maybe, and every exclusion was recorded in Rayyan with a single primary reason. Records marked maybe were retained for full-text assessment rather than excluded on incomplete. This stage excluded 206 records for topical irrelevance, for publication outside 2005–2025, for non-English language, and for ineligible source type. The remaining 107 records were advanced to full-text assessment.

Stage 2: full-text assessment. Full texts were sought for all 107 records and all 107 were retrieved. Each was read in full and assessed against all criteria, with particular attention to whether the study engaged with both the media portrayal dimension and the audience perception dimension of the research question. Where a report met more than one exclusion criterion. 53 reports were excluded at this stage: 28 for having no audience or perception focus, 19 for having no gendered media portrayal, and 6 for being a non-peer-reviewed source. The remaining 54 studies were included in the review.

PRISMA Flow Diagram

Scoping Review: Databases Searched: Scopus | SPORTDiscuss | SocINDEX | Period: 2005–2025

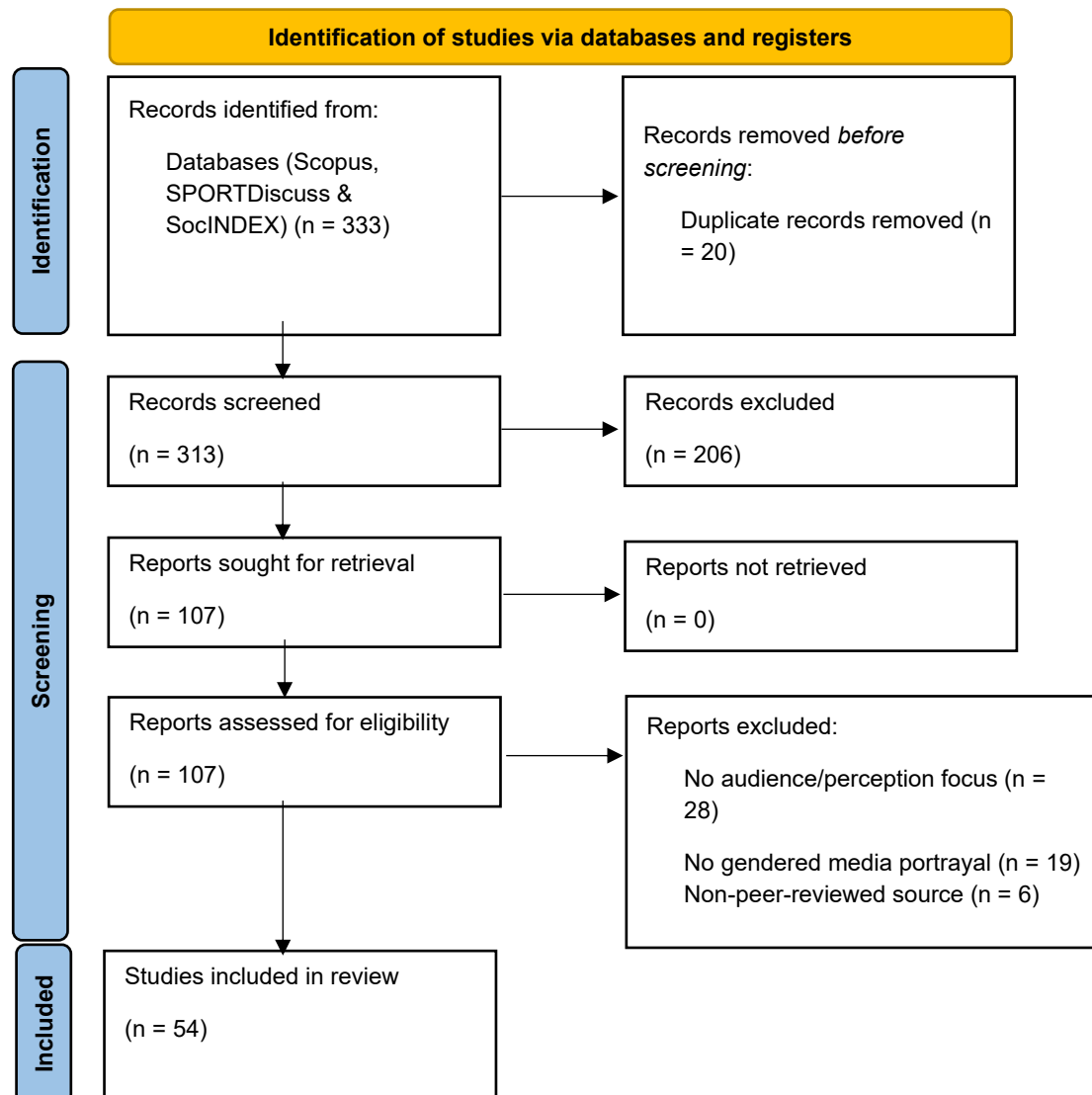


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram

Table 5*Summary of the Publications Included in this Scoping Review*

Publication	Author(s)	Year	Country	Method	Design / Sample
Canada 2015: perceptions and experiences of the organisation and governance of the Women's World Cup <i>Sport in Society</i>	Dunn, C.	2018	United Kingdom	Qualitative Analysis	In-depth Interviews / Document Analysis
Gender and politics at the 2012 Olympics: media coverage and its implications <i>Sport in Society</i>	Boykoff, J., & Yasuoka, M.	2013	United States	Content Analysis	Systematic Content Analysis of Broadcast and Print Media
Gender Equality in the "Next Stage" of the "New Age?" Content and Fan Perceptions of English Media Coverage of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup <i>Sociology of Sport Journal</i>	Pope, S., Allison, R., & Petty, K.	2024	United Kingdom	Content Analysis	Newspaper Content Analysis; Audience Survey
Missing in Action: The Portrayal of Women in Sport in the Print Media <i>Loyola Journal of Social Sciences</i>	Veena P. Rawjee, Nisha Ramlutchman, & Nereshnee Govender	2011		Content Analysis	Print Media Content Analysis
Constructions of Australia's sportswomen: 'Race', 'whiteness' and contemporary media <i>Sport, Education and Society</i>	Wrench, A., & Garrett, R.	2018	Australia	Qualitative Analysis	Critical Discourse Analysis / Media Texts
The development of an adolescent sporting gendered habitus: young people's interpretation of UK sports-media coverage of Rio 2016 Olympic Games <i>European Journal for Sport and Society</i>	Metcalfe, S. N.	2019	United Kingdom	Qualitative Analysis	Focus Groups / Thematic Analysis young people aged 13–16
Playing but Losing: Women's sports After Title IX <i>American Sociological Association</i>	Cheryl Cooky & Nicole M. Lavoie	2013	United States	Qualitative Analysis	Critical Analysis / Policy Review
Beyond Figure Skating and Hockey: How U.S. Audiences Gender Type Winter Olympic Sports <i>The International Journal of Sport and Society</i>	Jennifer D. Greer and Amy H. Jones	2013	United States	Qualitative Analysis	Survey / Audience Reception Study
Mediated football: representations and audience receptions of race/ethnicity, gender and nation <i>Soccer & Society</i>	van Sterkenburg, J., & Spaaij, R.	2014	Netherlands	Qualitative Analysis	Focus Groups / Audience Reception diverse ethnic groups
State Versus Professional: A Case Study of How Chinese New Media Construct Elite Female Athletes <i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>	Xu, Q., & Kreshel, P. J.	2021	China / United States	Framing Analysis	Media Framing Analysis / Case Study online news platforms
Objectification in Sport Media: Influences on a Future Women's sporting Event	Darvin, L., & Sagas, M.	2017	United States	Qualitative Analysis	Experimental Survey of college students

Publication	Author(s)	Year	Country	Method	Design / Sample
<i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>					
Adventure and the Gender Gap: Acknowledging Diversity of Experience <i>Loisir et Société / Society and Leisure</i>	Little, D. E., & Wilson, E.	2005	Australia	Qualitative Analysis	In-depth Interviews / Thematic Analysis
Redressing the Balance: Women in Sport and Exercise Academic Network Conference, University of Worcester, April 2021 <i>Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal</i>	Renfree, G.	2023	United Kingdom	Qualitative Analysis	Conference Report / Thematic Review
The Olympic Games in London 2012 from a Swedish Media Perspective <i>The International Journal of the History of Sport</i>	Hedenborg, S.	2013	Sweden	Content Analysis	Newspaper and Broadcast Content Analysis
Sexist Acts in Sports Media: Reactions and Forms of Apologia <i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>	Janet S. Fink, John F. Borland, & Sarah K. Fields	2010		Qualitative Analysis	Rhetorical / Discourse Analysis
Reading Tiffany Chin: The Birth of the Oriental Female Skater on White Ice <i>The International Journal of the History of Sport</i>	Seo, J. C., Turick, R., & Kim, D.	2019	United States	Framing Analysis	Critical Race Framing Analysis / Media Narrative
Kicking goals: Exploring the experiences of girls who play Australian Rules football <i>Health Promotion Journal of Australia</i>	Kernebone, P. N., O'Shea, A., Jerebine, A., & Barnett, L. M.	2021	Australia	Qualitative Analysis	Focus Groups / Thematic Analysis- adolescent girls
'Getting Noticed, Respected, and Supported': Mediated (In)Visibilities of Women's American Football in the United States <i>The Professionalisation of Women's sport</i>	Antunovic, D., Taylor, K., Watt, M., & Linden, A. D.	2021	United States	Qualitative Analysis	In-depth Interviews / Thematic Analysis
Athlete or Sex Symbol: What Boys Think of Media Representations of Female Athletes <i>Sex Roles</i>	Daniels, E. A., & Wartena, H.	2011	United States	Qualitative Analysis	Focus Groups / Interviews- adolescent boys
"Naturally" Less Exciting? Visual Production of Men's and Women's Track and Field Coverage During the 2004 Olympics <i>Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media</i>	Greer, J. D., Hardin, M., & Homan, C.	2009	United States	Content Analysis	Visual Content Analysis- broadcast footage coding
From 'hollow-eyed pixies' to 'team of adults': media portrayals of Olympic women's gymnastics before and after an increased minimum age policy <i>Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health</i>	Eagleman, A. N., Rodenberg, R. M., & Lee, S.	2014	United States	Framing Analysis	Media Framing Analysis- newspaper articles across two Olympic cycles
Athlete Portraits in News: Influence of Media Representation and Gender on Social Perception <i>The Spanish Journal of Psychology</i>	Herrera, A., Sánchez-Hernández, M. D., Herrera, M. C., & Expósito, F.	2024	Spain	Qualitative Analysis	Experimental Study- social perception measurement

Publication	Author(s)	Year	Country	Method	Design / Sample
"They Never Do This to Men": College Women Athletes' Responses to Sexualized Images of Professional Women Athletes <i>Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal</i>	Everbach, T., & Mumah, J.	2014	United States	Qualitative Analysis	Focus Groups- college female athletes
Citizen journalists, sports fans or advocates? The motivations of female independent sports media producers in Australia <i>Australian Journalism Review</i>	Sherwood, M.	2019	Australia	Qualitative Analysis	In-depth Interviews / Thematic Analysis
Women, Sport, and the Press in Twentieth-Century Mexico <i>The International Journal of the History of Sport</i>	Brewster, C., & Brewster, K.	2018	Mexico	Content Analysis	Historical Print Media Content Analysis- archival newspapers
Analysis from a gender perspective of the Olympic Games on Twitter <i>European Sport Management Quarterly</i>	Adá-Lameiras, A., & Rodríguez-Castro, Y.	2021	Spain	Content Analysis	Social Media Content Analysis- Twitter posts during Olympic Games
An xG of Their Own: Using Expected Goals to Explore the Analytical Shortcomings of Misapplied Gender Schemas in Football <i>Journal of Sport Management</i>	Narayanan, S., & Pifer, N. D.	2024	United States	Framing Analysis	Statistical / Gender Schema Framing Analysis- football broadcast data
Gender stereotypes in the Olympic Games media? A cross-cultural panel study of online visuals from Brazil, Germany and the United States <i>Sport in Society</i>	Petca, A. R., Bivolaru, E., & Graf, T. A.	2012	Brazil / Germany / United States	Content Analysis	Cross-cultural Visual Content Analysis- online media images; panel study
Go "Heavy" or Go Home: An Examination of Audience Attitudes and Their Relationship to Gender Cues in the 2010 Olympic Snowboarding Coverage <i>Mass Communication & Society</i>	Jones, A., & Greer, J.	2012	United States	Framing Analysis	Experimental Framing Study- audience attitude measurement; gender cues
"I Can't Stand Women's sports": The Perception of Women's sports by Polish Sports Journalists <i>Communication & Sport</i>	Organista, N., Mazur, Z., & Lenartowicz, M.	2019	Poland	Qualitative Analysis	In-depth Interviews- sports journalists
Gender, Sports, and New Media: Predictors of Viewing during the 2008 Beijing Olympics <i>Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media</i>	Tang, T., & Cooper, R.	2012	United States	Qualitative Analysis	Online Survey- audience viewing behaviour predictors
Gender Differences in Sports News Coverage on Twitter <i>International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health</i>	Clara Sainz-de-Baranda, Alba Adá-Lameiras, & Blanco-Ruiz	2020		Content Analysis	Social Media Content Analysis- Twitter sports news
Italian Women's Television Coverage and Audience During the 2004 Athens Olympic Games <i>Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport</i>	Capranica, L., D'Artibale, E., Cortis, C., Tessitore, A., Casella, R., Pesce, C., & Camilleri, E.	2008	Italy	Content Analysis	TV Broadcast Content Analysis; Audience Survey

Publication	Author(s)	Year	Country	Method	Design / Sample
Guardians of the Hegemonic Structure of Sports? Women's sports as Perceived by Polish Female Sports Journalists <i>Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej</i>	Organista, N., & Mazur, Z.	2020	Poland	Qualitative Analysis	In-depth Interviews- female sports journalists
Gendering 'Thursday Night Football': Examining dialogue differences between all-female and all-male broadcast teams <i>Journal of Gender Studies</i>	Sadri, S. R., Bell, T. R., & Billings, A. C.	2020	United States	Content Analysis	Broadcast Dialogue Content Analysis- NFL commentary coding
"I've never really thought about it": the process of news construction and perception of underrepresentation of Women's sport media coverage by editors-in-chief in mainstream Polish media <i>Sport in Society</i>	Organista, N., & Mazur, Z.	2020	Poland	Qualitative Analysis	In-depth Interviews- media editors-in-chief
Media coverage and pay in women's basketball and netball in Australia <i>Handbook on the Economics of Women in Sports</i>	Ross Booth	2013	Australia	Content Analysis	Media Content Analysis; Pay Gap Review
Mainstreamed and Marginalized: Female Athletes as the "Other" in International Sport Media Coverage <i>Discourses on Nations and Identities</i>	Daddario, G.	2021	United States	Framing Analysis	Critical Framing Analysis / Discourse Analysis- international sport media
More Than Empowerment <i>Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Global Sport Community</i>	Kassing, J. W.	2025	United States	Qualitative Analysis	Book Chapter / Conceptual Review
Serious Athletes or Media Clowns: Female and Male Wrestlers' Perceptions of Media Constructions <i>Sociology of Sport Journal</i>	Mari Kristin Sisjord & Elsa Kristiansen	2008		Qualitative Analysis	In-depth Interviews- elite wrestlers
Separate and Unequal? Representations of Sportswomen on espnW's and ESPN's Instagram <i>International Journal of Sport Communication</i>	Fraidenburg, K., & Backstrom, L.	2021	United States	Content Analysis	Visual Content Analysis- Instagram posts
Newspaper Coverage of Women's sports During the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games <i>Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport</i>	Capranica, L., Minganti, C., Billat, V., Hanghoj, S., Piacentini, M. F., Cumps, E., & Meeusen, R.	2005	Multi-national	Content Analysis	Newspaper Content Analysis- multi-national comparison
NBC's televised media portrayal of female athletes in the 2016 Rio Summer Olympic Games: a critical feminist view <i>Sport in Society</i>	Villalon, C., & Weiller-Abels, K.	2018	United States	Framing Analysis	Critical Feminist Framing Analysis- NBC Olympic television coverage
Media Coverage of Emergent Women's Leagues Within Mainstream Sports: Exploring Intersecting Hegemonies <i>Leisure Sciences</i>	Fujak, H., McLeod, J., & Wymer, S.	2025	Australia	Content Analysis	Media Content Analysis- mainstream sports news outlets

Publication	Author(s)	Year	Country	Method	Design / Sample
Not worth watching? Examining gender bias, perceptions of ability, and consumer behaviour for the Women's Australian Football League <i>Australian Journal of Psychology</i>	Glazbrook, M. R., McLinton, S. S., Webb, S. N., & Owen, M. S.	2025	Australia	Qualitative Analysis	Online Survey- audience gender bias and consumer behaviour
"Rockets" Without Destination: Gender Sustainability and Identity Challenges in Indian Sports Explored Through Rashmi Rocket <i>Navigating Gender Identity in India</i>	Koley, T., & Banerjee, J.	2025	India	Qualitative Analysis	Film / Thematic Analysis- sports film as media text
Sport is king: an investigation into local media coverage of Women's sport in the UK East Midlands <i>Journal of Gender Studies</i>	Adams, C., Ashton, M., Lupton, H., & Pollack, H.	2013	United Kingdom	Content Analysis	Local Newspaper Content Analysis- UK East Midlands
Women as 'Armchair Audience': Evidence from German National Team Football <i>Sociology of Sport Journal</i>	Henk Erik Meier and Marcel Leinwather	2012	Germany	Qualitative Analysis	Survey / Audience Reception Study
Sports Talk: How Gender Shapes Discursive Framing of Title IX <i>Politics & Gender</i>	Rosenthal, C. S.	2008	United States	Framing Analysis	Discursive Framing Analysis- media and political texts on Title IX
The Impact of Media Representation on Female Athlete Identity and Self-Perception <i>International Journal of Sport Studies for Health</i>	Şahin, A., Soylu, D., Toktas, E., & Köse, N.	2024	Turkey	Qualitative Analysis	In-depth Interviews / Thematic Analysis- female athletes
"They've Never Played the Game": "Cool Sports Girls," Gender Inequality, and Garbage Time in Sports Punditry <i>Sociology of Sport Journal</i>	Henry, T. M.	2024	United States	Framing Analysis	Discourse / Framing Analysis- TV sports punditry
Shared Space: How North American Olympic Broadcasters Framed Gender on Instagram <i>Communication & Sport</i>	Johnson, R. G., Romney, M., Hull, K., & Pegoraro, A.	2020	United States / Canada	Framing Analysis	Media Framing Analysis- Instagram posts by Olympic broadcasters
Women and men portrayal on television news: a study of Spanish television newscast <i>Feminist Media Studies</i>	Matud, M. P., Espinosa, I., & Rodríguez Wangüemert, C.	2019	Spain	Content Analysis	TV Newscast Content Analysis- Spanish national broadcasters
Social Media and the Olympics: A Chance for Improving Gender Equality <i>Frontiers in Sports and Active Living</i>	Grabmüllerová, A.	2022	Czech Republic	Content Analysis	Social Media Content Analysis — Olympic coverage across platforms

Table 6
Included Publications

Country	No.	Method	No.	Period	No.
United States	23	Content Analysis	18	2020 – 2025	22
Australia	7	Framing Analysis	10	2010 – 2019	26
United Kingdom	5	Qualitative Analysis	26	2005 – 2009	6
Spain	3				
Poland	3				
Germany	2				
Netherlands	1				
China	1				
Sweden	1				
Mexico	1				
Brazil	1				
Italy	1				
Multi-national	1				
India	1				
Turkey	1				
Canada	1				
Czech Republic	1				

Data Charting and Data items

Data charting process. Data were charted using a structured charting form developed for this review, in line with the data charting approach set out by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), Levac et al. (2010) and the JBI guidance (Peters et al., 2020). Bibliographic details (title, authors, year and source) were taken from the records exported from Rayyan. All remaining items were charted by the author; by reading each of the 54 included studies in full. All data were taken from the published reports. Where an item was not reported in a study, it was recorded as "not reported" rather than inferred.

Charted data were used in two ways. The descriptive items populate Tables 5 and 6 and the Description of Included Publications. The findings items were carried into the familiarisation notes (Phase 1) and initial coding (Phase 2) of the reflexive thematic analysis described in the Generating Themes section, so that every code could be traced back to a charted study. Charting recorded what each study reported. The interpretive work of coding and theme construction was done through reflexive thematic analysis, not at the charting stage.

Data items. Nine variables were charted for each included study. The first four describe the study and its source: (1) publication details, title, journal or source, author(s) and

year; (2) country, defined as the country of origin of the study as recorded in the database record, and recorded as "multi-national" or "not reported" where applicable; (3) publication period, with year of publication grouped into 2005–2009, 2010–2019 and 2020–2025; and (4) method, defined as the study's primary analytical approach and classified as qualitative analysis, content analysis or framing analysis, the three approaches specified in the inclusion criteria. The next three describe the study's design and context: (5) design and sample, meaning the data collection approach and data source (for example interviews, focus groups, surveys or media texts) and, where reported, the sample; (6) media type, classified as traditional (television and print) or digital and social (for example Instagram, YouTube and online news platforms); and (7) sport or event, the sport or event that formed the context of the study. The final two variables capture the substantive evidence: (8) findings on portrayal, meaning how the study reported male and female athletes being represented, and (9) findings on audience perception, meaning how the study reported audiences interpreting, responding to or being influenced by that portrayal. Both sets of findings were recorded as reported by the original authors.

Assumptions and simplifications. Each study was assigned to a single method category based on its primary analytical approach, even when it combined methods (for example, a content analysis accompanied by an audience survey was classified by its primary approach). Findings were charted as reported by the original authors, and no re-analysis of primary data was undertaken. No critical appraisal of the sources was conducted, consistent with scoping review methodology (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Peters et al., 2020).

Description of Included Publications

Of the 54 publications identified for the present review, the majority emanated from the United States ($n = 23$) and the United Kingdom ($n = 5$). Other publications came from Australia ($n = 7$), Poland ($n = 3$), Spain ($n = 3$), Germany ($n = 2$), and one each from Sweden, the Netherlands, China, Mexico, Italy, Turkey, India, the Czech Republic, Brazil, and multi-national contexts. Four publications did not report the country of origin, likely reflecting incomplete metadata at the database export stage. The geographical spread of the included literature reflects the predominantly Western and English-language orientation of sports media and gender research. The dominance of United States-based studies is consistent with the broader field, where scholars have historically examined gendered representation through the

lens of major American broadcasting institutions, professional leagues, and high-profile events such as the Olympic Games.

Regarding publication period, most included studies ($n = 26$) were published between 2010 and 2019, with ($n = 22$) published between 2020 and 2025. A smaller proportion ($n = 6$) was published between 2005 and 2009, reflecting the review's lower boundary. The concentration of studies in the 2010–2019 period is particularly notable. It reflects the rapidly growing scholarly interest in gendered sports media representation on social media platforms, the professionalisation of women's sports, and the increasing public discourse around gender equality in sport. This temporal distribution also suggests that the field has gained significant momentum in recent years, producing a richer and more methodologically diverse evidence base than was available in earlier decades.

Regarding methodological approach, the three methods specified for this review, qualitative analysis, content analysis, and framing analysis, are represented across the 54 included publications. Qualitative analysis was the most prevalent approach ($n = 26$), encompassing studies that employed in-depth interviews, focus groups, thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and critical feminist analysis. These studies were particularly concerned with the lived experiences of athletes, journalists, and audiences regarding gendered media representation. They tended to yield rich interpretive findings on how gender inequality is experienced, negotiated, and perpetuated at the individual and institutional levels. Content analysis was the second most common approach ($n = 18$), reflecting the long-established tradition in sports media research of systematically coding media texts, including newspaper articles, television broadcasts, Instagram posts, and Twitter data, to document patterns of representation and identify quantifiable disparities in coverage of male and female athletes. Framing analysis accounted for the remaining studies ($n = 10$), examining how media texts construct and present gendered meanings through selective emphasis, narrative choices, and visual framing. The relatively even distribution across these three methods reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the research question. It is a strength of the review, as it enables the synthesis to draw on quantifiable evidence of representation patterns, theoretical explanations of how those patterns are constructed, and qualitative accounts of how they are experienced and perceived by audiences.

Regarding the media types examined, the included studies collectively cover a broad range of platforms. Traditional media, including television broadcasting, newspaper coverage, and sports magazines, feature prominently, particularly in earlier studies within the review period. Digital and social media, including Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and online news platforms, are increasingly prominent in studies published after 2015, reflecting shifts in how sports content is produced, distributed, and consumed. Several studies examined multiple platforms simultaneously or adopted a comparative approach across media types, which is particularly valuable given the research question's interest in how audience perceptions are shaped across a converging media landscape.

The sports examined across the included publications are diverse but not evenly distributed. Football (soccer) and the Olympic Games feature most frequently, which is consistent with their status as the two most globally prominent sporting contexts and the subjects of the largest volume of sports media research. Other sports examined include basketball, netball, American football, gymnastics, swimming, athletics, snowboarding, wrestling, golf, and Australian rules football. The concentration of Olympic-focused studies is notable and reflects the Olympics' unique status as a site where gendered representation has been studied extensively, given the breadth of sports covered, the scale of media production, and the international comparability of coverage.

Analytical Methods

Three analytical approaches are represented across the 54 included studies and were used to guide the analysis of findings in this review. Rather than treating these as separate methodological traditions, this review positions them as a complementary and mutually reinforcing framework, each contributing a distinct but related layer of evidence to the synthesis.

Qualitative analysis (n = 26) provides the interpretive foundation of the review. Qualitative approaches including thematic analysis, in-depth interviews, focus groups, critical discourse analysis, and feminist analysis illuminate the meanings, experiences, and social processes underlying patterns of gendered representation. For a research question concerned with how audiences perceive and make sense of gendered portrayals, qualitative evidence is indispensable. It captures nuance in how different audience groups defined by gender, age, cultural background, or sporting affiliation respond to and negotiate media representations in

ways that quantitative data alone cannot convey. Qualitative studies in this review were particularly concerned with the lived experiences of athletes, journalists, and audience members, and produced rich interpretive findings on how gender inequality is experienced, perpetuated, and at times challenged at an individual and institutional level.

Content analysis (n = 18) extends the evidence base by providing systematic, replicable documentation of representation patterns across large volumes of media output. Within the gendered sports media literature, content analysis has been the dominant empirical method for measuring disparities in airtime, column space, linguistic treatment, and visual framing between male and female athletes. It establishes the empirical landscape, documenting the persistent and measurable underrepresentation and trivialisation of female athletes across broadcast, print, and digital media platforms. This quantifiable evidence base is essential for grounding the interpretive claims generated by qualitative and framing approaches in demonstrable patterns.

Framing analysis (n = 10) bridges the two approaches and is particularly well-suited to the theoretical orientation of this review. Grounded in Goffman's (1974) concept of frames as cognitive organisational structures and developed within media studies by Entman (1993), framing analysis examines how media texts select, emphasise, and present information in ways that actively shape audience interpretation. In the context of gendered sports media, framing analysis identifies the persistent narrative frames applied to male athletes' heroism, athleticism, dominance, competitive drive and those applied to female athletes' appearance, emotionality, domesticity, and relationship to male figures and examines how these frames function to reproduce gendered hierarchies of sporting value. By incorporating framing analysis studies, this review captures not only what is represented but how representational choices are structured to produce audience effects, directly addressing the causal dimension of the research question.

Together, content analysis establishes the empirical landscape of gendered representation; framing analysis explains the mechanisms through which that representation operates on audience cognition; and qualitative analysis surfaces the live audience responses that result. No single approach could adequately address all three layers of the research question, and it is their combination within the narrative synthesis that gives this review its analytical depth.

Generating Themes

The primary analytical approach used to identify and construct themes in this review was Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021). RTA was selected because the purpose of the analysis was not simply to summarise or aggregate findings from the included studies, but to interpret patterns of meaning across a methodologically diverse body of literature and construct themes that addressed the relationship between gendered sports media representation and audience perception. This approach was considered appropriate because the review incorporated evidence generated through qualitative analysis, content analysis, and framing analysis, requiring an interpretive approach capable of bringing these different forms of evidence into a coherent analytical account.

Thematic synthesis was not used as the primary analytical approach. While thematic synthesis can be used to organise and analyse findings from qualitative research, the present analysis required a more explicitly interpretive and reflexive process in which the researcher actively examined relationships between codes, considered shared underlying meanings, and constructed themes in relation to the research question. The analysis therefore followed the principles of RTA, with themes treated as analytic constructions developed through engagement with the literature rather than as entities that simply emerged from the data.

The distinction is important because the purpose of the analysis was not to produce a descriptive aggregation of the findings of individual studies. Instead, the analysis sought to develop an interpretive account of how patterns of gendered representation relate to audience perceptions across the wider body of literature. RTA therefore provided the primary framework for coding, theme construction, review, definition, and reporting throughout the analysis.

Phase 1: Familiarisation. All 54 included studies were read in full, with initial notes taken on key arguments, theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and methodological approaches. This immersive reading process was designed not only to build familiarity with the dataset but to begin identifying patterns, tensions, and recurring ideas across studies. Notes from this phase were deliberately broad and exploratory, capturing impressions about what each study contributed to the understanding of the relationship between gendered media portrayal and audience perception.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes. Following familiarisation, the notes and relevant findings from each study were revisited and organised according to their relevance to the

research question. Meaningful passages, findings, arguments, and observations were assigned initial descriptive codes. Coding was undertaken across two interconnected areas: first, how male and female athletes were represented in sports media; and second, how audiences interpreted, responded to, or were potentially influenced by those representations.

The coding process was iterative. Initial notes from the familiarisation stage were compared across studies, with similar observations grouped and given provisional labels. Where a finding appeared relevant to more than one aspect of the research question, it was retained across the relevant coding categories rather than forced into a single category. This enabled relationships between media representation and audience perception to remain visible during the subsequent development of themes.

Initial codes included quantitative underrepresentation of female athletes, trivialisation of women's sports, sexualisation and appearance focus, heroism and athleticism framing for male athletes, audience acceptance of gender hierarchy, critical audience awareness, social media as an alternative representation space, intersectionality of race and gender in media, and institutional gatekeeping in sports journalism. These codes were not treated as predetermined themes. Rather, they functioned as provisional analytical labels that were subsequently compared, interpreted, combined, differentiated, and developed during the theme-construction phase.

Phase 3: Constructing themes. The initial codes were then examined in relation to one another to identify broader patterns of shared meaning. Codes addressing related aspects of the research question were grouped and compared across the 54 studies. At this stage, the analysis moved beyond identifying whether particular issues were present and considered the relationships among coded findings that revealed the broader phenomenon of gendered sports media representation and audience perception.

For example, codes relating to differences in coverage volume, limited visibility of female athletes, and the marginal positioning of women's sport were considered together because they reflected a broader pattern of unequal visibility of female athletes. Similarly, codes relating to sexualisation, appearance-focused coverage, and trivialisation were examined collectively because they indicated a pattern in which non-athletic characteristics displaced female athletic achievement. Codes relating to audience acceptance, gender stereotypes, socialisation, and perceptions of athletic credibility were considered in relation to how media

representations may contribute to the formation, reinforcement, or negotiation of gendered perceptions.

The development of themes, therefore, involved an interpretive process rather than simply grouping similar words or topics. Candidate themes were constructed by considering the underlying meaning shared across related codes, their relevance to the research question, and their recurrence and significance across the included literature. Codes were consequently combined, separated, or reconsidered where closer examination suggested that their underlying meanings were distinct or more closely connected to another developing theme.

Through this iterative process, five candidate themes were constructed: Underrepresentation and Marginalisation; Sexualisation and Trivialisation; Framing Asymmetry; Audience Perception and Gender Socialisation; and Digital Media as a Site of Contestation. These candidate themes were subsequently reviewed against the wider dataset during Phase 4 to assess their coherence, distinctiveness, and analytical relevance.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes. Candidate themes were tested against the full dataset to assess their coherence, distinctiveness, and analytical relevance to the research question. Themes that were too narrow, too overlapping with others, or that did not speak meaningfully to the research question were refined, merged, or reconceptualised. The boundaries between themes were explicitly defined to preserve each theme's analytical distinctiveness while acknowledging points of conceptual connection.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes. Each theme was given a clear, analytically precise name and a written definition capturing its core meaning, scope, and relationship to the research question. Theme names were chosen to be intellectually precise while remaining accessible, capturing the essential nature of the pattern they represent without reducing complex evidence to an oversimplified label.

Phase 6: Producing the report. The themes are presented in Chapter 3, that connects findings across studies, identifies points of convergence and divergence in the literature, and addresses the research question in a theoretically grounded way. The synthesis does not merely summarise individual studies but constructs an argument about what the collective evidence reveals about the relationship between gendered sports media portrayal and audience perception.

The five themes developed from this process are, “*Underrepresentation and Marginalisation, Sexualisation and Trivialisation, Framing Asymmetry, Audience Perception and Gender Socialisation, and Digital Media as a Site of Contestation*,” they are discussed in depth in Chapter 3. Each theme draws on evidence from the three analytical approaches; content analysis, framing analysis, and qualitative analysis and together they provide a comprehensive and layered response to the research question.

Conclusions

The methodological decisions underpinning any academic study are not merely procedural. They reflect a set of intellectual commitments about what counts as knowledge, how that knowledge can be produced, and what kind of evidence is sufficient to support the claims a study makes. This chapter makes those commitments explicit. It presents a transparent and detailed account of every methodological decision made during this research, from the philosophical stance that orients the study through to the analytical process by which themes were constructed from the included literature. Rather than treating methodology as a formality to be discharged before the substantive findings are presented, this chapter treats it as an argument, demonstrating the rigour, coherence, and appropriateness of the approach taken given the nature of the topic and the current state of the field.

The topic of gendered sports media representation and its impact on audience perception is not straightforward to investigate through secondary research. It sits at the intersection of multiple academic disciplines, draws on a wide variety of methodological traditions, and encompasses both the measurable patterns of media content and the interpretive, socially shaped processes through which audiences make sense of what they watch and read. Any methodological framework capable of doing justice to that complexity must be broad enough to integrate diverse forms of evidence without losing analytical focus and structured enough to ensure that the synthesis produced is systematic, transparent, and defensible. The framework presented in this chapter was designed with precisely those demands in mind.

Chapter 3: Findings

Introduction

The systematic analysis of 54 peer-reviewed studies identified through the scoping review process has constructed five distinct themes that collectively address the research question. This chapter presents those themes and the evidence underpinning them. Before the themes are developed individually, several observations about the research context are offered, as these shape how the findings should be interpreted. The chapter then presents the five constructed themes in depth, drawing on evidence from across the included literature to construct a coherent and theoretically grounded account of how gendered sports media representation shapes public perceptions of male and female athletes.

Observations About the Research Context

A number of observations have emerged throughout the review process that relate to the broader research context rather than to any individual theme but are important to acknowledge before the findings are presented.

The first concerns the relationship between the three analytical methods, qualitative analysis, content analysis, and framing analysis, and the type of evidence each contributes to the synthesis. Content analysis studies predominantly address the “*what*” of gendered sports media representation; they document, measure, and quantify the patterns of coverage received by female and male athletes across platforms and contexts. Framing analysis studies address the “*how*”; they examine the narrative and interpretive structures through which media texts construct meanings about gender and athletic identity. Qualitative studies address the “*so what*”; they engage with audiences, athletes, and media producers to understand how representational practices are experienced, interpreted, negotiated, and, in some cases, resisted at the level of lived experience. No single approach could adequately address all three dimensions of the research question, and it is the combination of evidence from all three traditions that gives this review’s findings analytical depth. Throughout this chapter, findings from across these three traditions are integrated within each theme rather than presented separately, reflecting the view that representation and reception are inseparable dimensions of the same social phenomenon.

The second observation concerns the temporal dimension of the findings. The included literature spans 2005 to 2025, a period that witnessed a profound transformation in the sports media landscape from the dominance of broadcast television and print journalism

through the rise of social media and digital platforms to the current multi-platform environment in which audiences consume sports content across a bewildering variety of channels simultaneously. This temporal span means that some findings, particularly those relating to the volume and quality of television and newspaper coverage, reflect conditions that have evolved significantly over the review period, while others, particularly those relating to the structural dynamics of gendered framing and audience socialisation, have proven remarkably stable across the full two decades. Where temporal variation is relevant to the interpretation of a theme, it is noted explicitly.

The third observation concerns the geographical concentration of the included literature. Most studies were conducted in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, with smaller representations from Poland, Spain, and a range of other national contexts. This Western bias in the evidence base means that the findings of this review are most directly applicable to Anglophone, Western media environments, and that caution is warranted in generalising conclusions to global contexts where the relationship between sports media and gender inequality may take different forms. This is acknowledged as a limitation of the review in Chapter 2 and is flagged again here as a contextual consideration relevant to interpreting the findings.

Summary of Key Study Findings

This section summarises the main findings of each of the 54 included studies, grouped by the primary method assigned in Table 5. The themes that follow integrate these findings across studies rather than presenting them individually.

Content analysis studies (n = 18). Capranica et al. (2005) analysed newspaper coverage of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games across several countries and found that female athletes received a disproportionately small share of coverage, even though women competed in nearly as many disciplines as men. Capranica et al. (2008) found that Italian television coverage of the 2004 Athens Olympics gave women a higher proportion of coverage than usual, and that female audiences showed greater interest in and identification with female athletes than male audiences. Boykoff and Yasuoka (2013) found that female athletes received markedly less coverage than male athletes at the 2012 Olympics despite comparable success, and that the coverage they received more often foregrounded personal and political narratives than athletic performance. Pope et al. (2024) found that increased volume and improved quality of English media coverage of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup were

associated with more positive fan perceptions. Rawjee et al. (2011) found that South African print media gave women in sport only a fraction of the column space and visual prominence given to men. Hedenborg (2013) found that Swedish coverage of the 2012 London Olympics privileged male athletes in terms of volume, prominence, and framing, and often framed female athletes' achievements through their personal lives and emotions. Greer et al. (2009) found that camera work in broadcast track-and-field coverage emphasised female athletes' bodies over their performance. Brewster and Brewster (2018) found that twentieth-century Mexican newspapers framed female athletes in terms of novelty, propriety, and national modernisation rather than competitive achievement. Adá-Lameiras and Rodríguez-Castro (2021) found persistent disparities in the volume and quality of Olympic coverage on Twitter despite the platform's capacity for democratised content production. Petca et al. (2012) found that female athletes received higher proportions of online media coverage during Olympic periods, but that gendered patterns in the visual representation of athletes remained across countries. Sainz-de-Baranda et al. (2020) found that gendered disparities in the tone and framing of tweets from major sports news accounts persisted across both volume and substance. Sadri et al. (2020) found systematic differences in the language, tone and content of all-female and all-male broadcast teams covering American football, reflecting assumptions about the sporting authority of men and women. Booth (2013) found an association between the volume of media coverage of women's basketball and netball in Australia and the pay available to the athletes. Fraidenburg and Backstrom (2021) found that the ESPN and espnW Instagram accounts represented female athletes in more appearance-focused and less action-oriented ways than they did male athletes. Fajak et al. (2025) found persistent disparities in the volume and quality of sports news coverage of women's sports across platforms and examined these through an intersectional lens. Adams et al. (2013) found that local newspaper coverage in the East Midlands underrepresented women's sport and often treated it as a novelty or a human-interest story. Matud et al. (2019) found that Spanish television newscasts framed men and women in gender-differentiated ways across all topics, including sport, with women more often shown in relational or emotional contexts and men in contexts of agency and authority. Grabmüllerová (2022) found that athlete-generated Olympic social media content was more gender-balanced than broadcaster-generated content, suggesting social media can support more equitable visibility.

Framing analysis studies (n = 10). Eagleman et al. (2014) found that even after institutional reforms, media frames of Olympic women's gymnasts across two Olympic

cycles continued to centre on appearance and femininity rather than athletic accomplishment. Villalon and Weiller-Abels (2018) found that NBC's coverage of the 2016 Rio Olympics used appearance-focused commentary and visual framing that reduced female athletes to their bodies. Johnson et al. (2020) found that North American Olympic broadcasters presented male athletes in action contexts and female athletes in posed or emotionally expressive contexts on Instagram, replicating the asymmetries of their television coverage. Rosenthal (2008) found that the public and political debate around Title IX was itself structured by asymmetric assumptions about the athletic value of men and women. Narayanan and Pifer (2024) found that gender schemas were misapplied to football broadcast data, resulting in women's performance being judged against a male standard. Jones and Greer (2012) found that audiences exposed to framing that emphasised gender differences in Olympic snowboarding formed different evaluations of the competence of male and female athletes, even after controlling for prior knowledge. Daddario (2021) argued that international sport media position female athletes as a perpetual "Other" defined in relation to a male norm. Henry (2024) found that female sports pundits were framed as less authoritative and less knowledgeable than male pundits. Xu and Kreshel (2021) examined how Chinese digital media construct elite female athletes, finding that the form and intensity of gendered representation varied across national contexts. Seo et al. (2019) used critical race framing analysis of media narratives about the figure skater Tiffany Chin to show how race and gender intersect in the representation of athletes.

Qualitative studies (n = 26). Dunn (2018) found that the marginalisation experienced by players and fans of the 2015 Women's World Cup was rooted in organisational decisions about scheduling, venues and prize money. Wrench and Garrett (2018) examined how race and whiteness shape media constructions of Australian sportswomen, pointing to the importance of intersectional dynamics. Metcalfe (2019) found that British adolescents had internalised the gender hierarchy of mainstream sports media and experienced it as natural, which they analysed as a sporting gendered habitus. Cooky and Lavoie (2013) examined women's sport after Title IX and documented the long-standing underrepresentation of women's sport in sports media. Greer and Jones (2013) examined how U.S. audiences' gender-type Winter Olympic sports. van Sterkenburg and Spaaij (2014) found that some audience members actively contested the racialised and gendered representations they encountered in mediated football. Darwin and Sagas (2017) found in an experiment that exposure to objectified images of female athletes reduced intentions to attend future women's

sporting events, and that female participants showed more awareness of and resistance to the sexualised framing. Little and Wilson (2005) explored the diversity of women's experiences of adventure and the gender gap. Renfree (2023) reported that conference proceedings showed a marked expansion in the volume and diversity of scholarship on gender and sports media. Fink et al. (2010) found that media organisations responded to public criticism of sexist incidents with apologia that minimised, deflected or denied the gendered harm. Kernebone et al. (2021) found that adolescent girls who played Australian rules football were aware of the absence of visible female role models in mainstream coverage and looked beyond it for representations of female athletic competence. Antunovic et al. (2021) found that female American football players experienced media invisibility as a form of symbolic violence, while also valuing social media as a space for self-representation. Daniels and Wartena (2011) found that adolescent boys exposed to sexualised or marginalised images of female athletes evaluated them as less competent, and that whether an athlete was framed as an athlete or a sex symbol predicted boys' judgements of her credibility. Herrera et al. (2024) found that both the athlete's gender and the perceiver's gender influenced evaluations of athlete portraits, with female athletes rated less favourably on competence when coverage emphasised appearance. Everbach and Mumah (2014) found that college female athletes recognised and criticised sexualised images of professional female athletes but continued to internalise the beauty and femininity standards those images implied. Sherwood (2019) found that female independent sports media producers were motivated by a mix of fan advocacy, journalistic purpose and feminist commitment, and that their growth challenged mainstream gatekeeping. Organista et al. (2019) found that Polish sports journalists often held internalised beliefs about the inferiority of women's sport, which acted as self-fulfilling prophecies in their editorial decisions. Tang and Cooper (2012) found that gender and prior interest in specific sports predicted which Olympic events audiences followed across new and traditional media. Organista and Mazur (2020a) examined how Polish female sports journalists perceive women's sport. Organista and Mazur (2020b) found that Polish editors-in-chief naturalised the underrepresentation of women's sport as a reflection of audience demand rather than an editorial choice. Kassing (2025) offered a conceptual treatment of empowerment in the global sport community, arguing that progress toward equality requires moving beyond documenting representational deficits toward a positive account of empowerment. Sisjord and Kristiansen (2008) found that elite female wrestlers perceived the media as constructing them as "media clowns", in contrast to the athletic framing of male wrestlers. Glazbrook et al. (2025) found that Australian audiences exposed to low coverage of

the Women's Australian Football League were less likely to attend matches or buy merchandise. Koley and Banerjee (2025) found that the Indian sports film *Rashmi Rocket* created an alternative representational space in which gender-verification testing was critiqued, while also reproducing some conventional tropes. Meier and Leinwather (2012) found that German football audiences positioned women, and women positioned themselves, as an "armchair audience" for the men's national team. Şahin et al. (2024) found that Turkish female athletes described a tension between seeking media visibility and resisting the sexualised terms on which it was offered.

Constructed Themes

Five themes were constructed from the reflexive thematic analysis of the 54 included studies. These themes are not mutually exclusive; there are points of connection and overlap between them, and some studies contribute evidence to more than one theme. Rather than treating this as a weakness of the analysis, this review treats it as a reflection of the interconnected nature of the phenomena under investigation. Gendered sports media representation is not a collection of separate problems; it is a system of interlocking practices, each reinforcing and being reinforced by the others. The five themes represent the most analytically significant and empirically consistent patterns within that system (Figure 2.), and together they provide a comprehensive response to the research question.

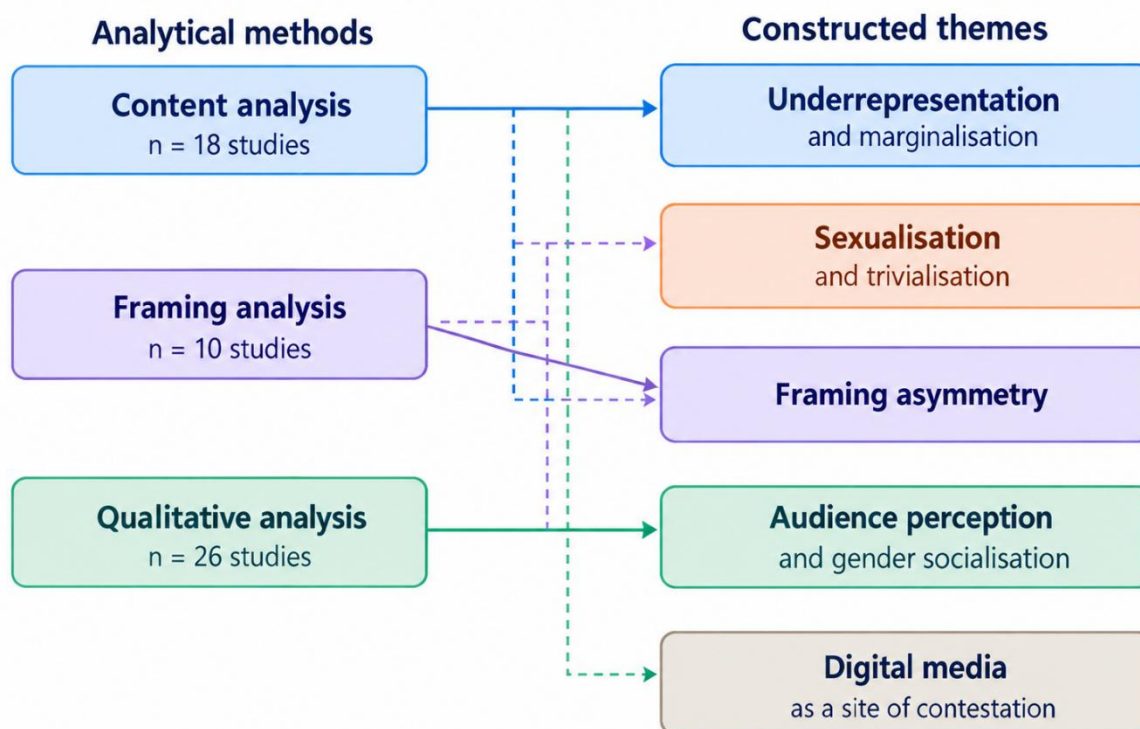


Figure 2: Relationship between analytical methods and constructed themes

Figure 2., depicts the relationship between the three analytical methods and the five constructed themes, illustrating how each method contributes evidence to the reflexive thematic analysis. It shows the three analytical methods on the left and the five constructed themes on the right, with arrows indicating which methods contribute evidence to which themes. Solid lines show primary contributions and dashed lines show secondary contributions. The colour coding matches: blue for content analysis feeding into underrepresentation and framing, purple for framing analysis, and green for qualitative analysis feeding into audience perception and digital media themes.

Underrepresentation and Marginalisation

The first and most empirically consistent finding across the included literature is the persistent underrepresentation of female athletes in sports media. This theme was constructed through content analysis studies in the review, which collectively document a stubbornly persistent gap in media coverage between male and female athletes despite two decades of advocacy, institutional reform, and technological transformation. However, the theme is not reducible to a simple quantitative disparity. The qualitative and framing analysis studies included in this review reveal that underrepresentation is also a qualitative experience, a form

of symbolic marginalisation that communicates to audiences, to athletes, and to the sports media industry itself that women's sports occupy a secondary and conditional position in the cultural hierarchy of athletic achievement.

Visibility and Media Attention

At the quantitative level, the evidence is unambiguous. Through multinational analysis of newspaper coverage, female athletes were found to receive a disproportionately small share of sports coverage even during the Olympic Games, an event at which women competed across nearly as many disciplines as men (Capranica et al., 2005). This finding was replicated in the context of local media coverage in the United Kingdom, demonstrating that the underrepresentation of women's sports was not confined to national or international outlets but also characterised local journalism, suggesting a systemic pattern embedded at every level of the sports media infrastructure (Adams et al., 2013). Similar dynamics were identified in Swedish media coverage of the 2012 London Olympics, where even in a national context with relatively strong institutional commitments to gender equality, sports media coverage continued to privilege male athletes in terms of volume, prominence, and framing (Hedenborg, 2013). Content analysis of broadcast and print coverage of the same games found that female athletes received markedly less coverage than their male counterparts despite comparable levels of competitive success, and that the coverage they did receive was more likely to foreground personal and political narratives than athletic performance (Boykoff & Yasuoka, 2013). An equivalent pattern was documented in South African print media, where women in sport were allocated a fraction of the column space and visual prominence afforded to male athletes, underscoring the global reach of this representational asymmetry well beyond the Anglophone media markets that dominate the included literature (Rawjee et al., 2011).

The disparity is not static across all contexts. The Olympic Games have been identified as a partial exception to the general pattern of underrepresentation, with female athletes receiving higher proportions of coverage during Olympic periods than during the regular sporting calendar (Capranica et al., 2008; Petca et al., 2012). However, this temporary equalisation is misleading in two important respects. First, it does not reflect a genuine revaluation of women's sports but rather the exceptional commercial and symbolic significance of the Olympics as a media event. This significance does not transfer to women's sports in its everyday forms. Second, even within Olympic coverage, female athletes are frequently subject to the qualitative forms of marginalisation, trivialisation, sexualisation, and framing asymmetry

addressed in subsequent themes. Quantitative visibility, in other words, does not automatically translate into respectful or equitable representation.

The qualitative dimensions of marginalisation are more consequential for audience perception than the raw volume of coverage. In-depth interviews with editors-in-chief of mainstream Polish media outlets revealed that the underrepresentation of women's sports was consistently naturalised by gatekeepers, who framed it not as an editorial choice but as an accurate reflection of audience demand (Organista & Mazur, 2020b). This naturalisation is significant because it transforms a structural inequity into an apparent market reality, obscuring the extent to which audience preferences are themselves shaped by the patterns of coverage to which audiences have been exposed. Interviews with Polish sports journalists extended this analysis, finding that many held deeply internalised beliefs about the inherent inferiority of women's sports that functioned as self-fulfilling prophecies within their editorial decision-making (Organista et al., 2019). When journalists believe that audiences do not want to watch women's sports, they produce less coverage of it, which in turn reduces audience familiarity and interest, which is then cited as evidence that the original belief was correct.

Audience Familiarity and Perceived Importance

The consequences of this marginalisation for audience perception are documented across several studies in this review. Australian audiences exposed to low levels of coverage of the Women's Australian Football League were found to be significantly less likely to attend matches or purchase merchandise, suggesting a direct relationship between media visibility and audience engagement that disadvantages women's sports in a commercially significant way (Glazbrook et al., 2025). Female American football players have been found to experience media invisibility not merely as a professional disadvantage but as a form of symbolic violence, a message that their athletic identities and achievements were not considered worthy of public attention (Antunovic et al., 2021). At the governance level, the marginalisation experienced by players and fans of the 2015 Women's World Cup was found to be rooted in organisational and administrative decisions, including scheduling, venue allocation, and prize money that preceded and reinforced the media coverage disparities documented elsewhere in the literature (Dunn, 2018). More encouraging evidence emerged from the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup, where increased volume and improved quality of English media coverage were associated with more positive fan perceptions of the tournament, suggesting that the relationship between coverage and audience engagement can also operate in the opposite direction when

representation improves (Pope et al., 2024). The commercial dimension of underrepresentation is further confirmed by analysis of media coverage and pay in Australian basketball and netball, which identified a direct association between the volume of media coverage afforded to women's leagues and the remuneration available to the athletes competing within them, providing economic confirmation that media visibility functions as a determinant of the material conditions of women's sports rather than merely a symbolic one (Booth, 2013). This experiential dimension of marginalisation is important because it connects the structural dynamics of media representation to the lived realities of the athletes who are its primary subjects.

The implications for audiences extend beyond the simple absence of female athletes from sports coverage. Limited exposure to women's sport can reduce audience familiarity, attendance and purchasing intentions, while increased and improved coverage has been associated with more positive fan perceptions of women's sport (Glazbrook et al., 2025; Pope et al., 2024). The evidence also points to a reciprocal relationship between media visibility and audience demand. When women's sport receives limited coverage, audiences may have fewer opportunities to develop familiarity and interest, which media gatekeepers may then interpret as evidence of limited demand. In this way, underrepresentation can reinforce perceptions of women's sport as less visible, less familiar and less important than men's sport, creating a cycle in which limited media attention and audience expectations continue to shape one another.

Sexualisation and Trivialisation

The second theme concerns the specific quality of coverage received by female athletes, which the included literature consistently characterises as disproportionately focused on physical appearance, femininity, and sexuality rather than on athletic performance and competitive achievement. This pattern of sexualisation and trivialisation operates alongside quantitative underrepresentation as a second mechanism through which sports media reproduces gender inequality. In some respects, it is the more insidious of the two, because it operates not through absence but through a particular kind of presence that simultaneously acknowledges female athletes and diminishes them.

Sexualisation in sports media has been documented across every platform examined in the included literature. Visual content analysis of broadcast coverage during the 2004 Athens Olympics demonstrated that the camera work applied to female athletes in track and field

events systematically emphasised bodies over performance, lingering on physical attributes in ways that had no equivalent in coverage of male athletes (Greer et al., 2009). A related but distinct dimension of this problem emerges through rhetorical and discourse analysis of explicitly sexist incidents in sports media when such incidents drew public criticism; media organisations and the individuals responsible were found to typically respond with forms of apologia that minimised, deflected, or denied the gendered harm involved rather than acknowledging it directly (Fink et al., 2010). This pattern of institutional self-protection is significant because it suggests that the sexualisation of female athletes is sustained not only by the original representational choices but also by the discursive strategies through which media organisations manage accountability when those choices are publicly contested.

Athletic Credibility and Seriousness

Even following institutional reforms designed to reduce the sexualisation of young female athletes, the narrative frames applied to Olympic women's gymnasts were found to continue centring on physical appearance and femininity rather than athletic accomplishment (Eagleman et al., 2014). Critical feminist analysis of NBC's coverage of the 2016 Rio Olympics similarly documented persistent patterns of appearance-focused commentary and visual framing that reduced female athletes to their bodies in ways that male athletes never experienced (Villalon & Weiller-Abels, 2018).

The social media context has not resolved these dynamics. Content analysis of ESPN's and espnW's Instagram accounts found that female athletes were still represented in more appearance-focused, less action-oriented ways than male athletes, even on a platform theoretically suited to athlete-controlled representation (Fraidenburg & Backstrom, 2021). North American Olympic broadcasters were similarly found to apply sexualised and appearance-focused framing to female athletes on Instagram, mirroring their television coverage, suggesting that the representational habits of institutional sports media travel across platforms rather than being transformed by them (Johnson et al., 2020).

Trivialisation operates alongside sexualisation as a related but distinct mechanism. Where sexualisation reduces female athletes to their bodies, trivialisation reduces their sport to something less serious, less competitive, and less worthy of attention than its male equivalent. Analysis of local UK sports media found that women's sports was frequently contextualised in ways that diminished its competitive significance, treated as a novelty or a human-interest story

rather than as sport in the full sense of the word (Adams et al., 2013). Similar patterns were identified in Swedish Olympic coverage, where female athletes' achievements were frequently framed in terms of their personal lives, family circumstances, or emotional responses rather than their athletic performances (Hedenborg, 2013). Interviews with elite Norwegian wrestlers captured a particularly explicit form of this trivialization; female wrestlers frequently perceived themselves as constructed by the media as "media clowns," figures whose athletic seriousness was undercut by a framing that treated their participation in a traditionally masculine sport as a curiosity rather than a legitimate competitive pursuit, in marked contrast to the straightforwardly athletic framing applied to their male counterparts (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008).

Audience Engagement and Gendered Expectations

The audience effects of sexualisation and trivialisation are among the most clearly documented findings in this review. Experimental evidence demonstrates that exposure to objectified representations of female athletes significantly reduced audience intentions to attend future women's sporting events, providing direct evidence of a causal relationship between sexualised representation and audience disengagement (Darvin & Sagas, 2017). Adolescent boys exposed to sexualised images of female athletes were found to be significantly less likely to evaluate those athletes as serious competitors, with implications for the long-term development of audience attitudes toward women's sports (Daniels & Wartena, 2011). These findings are particularly significant because they suggest that sexualisation and trivialisation are not merely representational inequities with symbolic consequences but have measurable and commercially significant impacts on the audiences that sports organisations depend on for their viability.

The responses of female athletes and female audiences to these representational practices are also documented in the included literature. Focus groups with female college athletes found that participants were acutely aware of the sexualised representations of professional female athletes in media and responded with a combination of frustration, disempowerment, and critical sophistication, recognising the mechanisms through which sexualisation functioned to undermine athletic credibility and articulating clearly the double bind it imposed on female athletes, who are simultaneously expected to conform to conventional femininity to attract media attention and penalised by that conformity in terms of how seriously they are taken as athletes (Everbach & Mumah, 2014). Similar dynamics were

identified in interviews with Turkish female athletes, who described the tension between seeking media visibility and resisting the sexualised terms on which that visibility was frequently offered (Şahin et al., 2024).

The effects of sexualisation and trivialisation are particularly evident in the ways audiences evaluate female athletes. Exposure to objectified representations can reduce intentions to attend women's sporting events and can lead audiences, particularly adolescent boys, to view female athletes as less serious or credible competitors (Darvin & Sagas, 2017; Daniels & Wartena, 2011). At the same time, the evidence shows that audiences can recognise and question these representational practices. Female athletes and audience members have identified how appearance-focused coverage can undermine athletic credibility and reinforce gendered expectations (Everbach & Mumah, 2014). Such awareness, however, does not necessarily prevent these representations from influencing perceptions. Sexualised and trivialised coverage can therefore affect how female athletes are understood in terms of competence, seriousness and athletic legitimacy. At the same time, audience responses remain shaped by differing levels of awareness and resistance.

Framing Asymmetry

The third theme extends beyond the content of individual stories or images to examine the narrative and interpretive frameworks through which male and female athletes are systematically represented in different terms. Drawing on framing analysis studies in particular, this theme captures the structural asymmetry between how male and female athletic achievement is contextualised, valued, and explained in sports media, an asymmetry that operates largely below the level of conscious awareness but has profound consequences for the attitudes audiences form toward male and female athletes.

Framing theory holds that media texts do not merely transmit information but actively shape the interpretive context within which that information is received, selecting certain aspects of a story for emphasis and backgrounding others, priming audiences to understand events in particular ways and to form particular judgements about their significance (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). In the context of sports media, framing asymmetry refers to the systematic application of different interpretive frameworks to male and female athletes, with consequences for how audiences evaluate their athletic identity, competence, and worth.

Gendered Standards of Athletic Achievement

The most consistent finding across framing analysis studies in this review is the contrast between the frames routinely applied to male and female athletes. Male athletes are predominantly framed through narratives of heroism, competitive dominance, strategic intelligence, and physical power, which position athletic achievement as the natural and defining expression of masculinity (Eagleman et al., 2014; Villalon & Weiller-Abels, 2018). Female athletes, by contrast, are frequently framed through narratives that centre on their appearance, their emotional responses, their personal relationships, or the novelty of their achievements, where the position of athletic success is surprising, exceptional, or requiring contextualisation in ways that male athletic success does not (Greer et al., 2009; Eagleman et al., 2014).

An analysis of how North American Olympic broadcasters framed gender on Instagram found that male athletes were systematically presented in action-oriented contexts. In contrast, female athletes were more frequently depicted in posed or emotionally expressive contexts (Johnson et al., 2020). This visual framing difference is significant because it communicates, at the level of imagery before any caption or commentary, that male athletic identity is defined by what athletes do. In contrast, female athletic identity is defined by how athletes look or feel. Examination of gendered discursive frames in public and political debate around Title IX found that the frameworks through which gender equity in sport was debated were themselves structured by the same asymmetric assumptions about male and female athletic value that characterise sports media more broadly (Rosenthal, 2008). Archival content analysis of twentieth-century Mexican newspapers demonstrated that this framing asymmetry has a long historical lineage. Female athletes were consistently framed through narratives of novelty, propriety, and national modernisation rather than competitive achievement, a pattern that anticipates in striking detail the contemporary framing dynamics documented elsewhere in this review (Brewster & Brewster, 2018). A contemporary counterpart to this historical evidence is found in content analysis of Spanish television newscasts, where male and female news subjects across all topics including sport, continued to be framed in gender-differentiated ways; women more frequently depicted in relational or emotional contexts, men in contexts emphasising agency and authority suggesting that the framing asymmetry identified within sports media reflects a broader pattern in televised news discourse (Matud et al., 2019).

A particularly important dimension of framing asymmetry that emerges from the included literature is the misapplication of gender schemas, the tendency for audiences and media producers alike to evaluate female athletic performance against a male standard, rendering women's achievements legible only through their relationship to men's sport (Narayanan & Pifer, 2024). This schema-based asymmetry is particularly consequential for audience perception because it operates largely outside conscious awareness. Audiences who have absorbed the male standard as the default measure of athletic excellence do not view their lower evaluations of female athletic performance as biased; they experience them as objective assessments of quality. Experimental evidence of this dynamic was provided through a study of audience attitudes toward gender cues in Olympic snowboarding coverage, finding that audiences exposed to framing that emphasised gender differences in athletic style formed significantly different evaluations of male and female athletes' competence even when controlling for prior knowledge of snowboarding (Jones & Greer, 2012).

Framing, Competence and Audience Interpretation

The framing asymmetry documented in this review is not confined to any single sport, platform, or national context. It appears in Olympic broadcasting across multiple countries (Hedenborg, 2013; Petca et al., 2012; Villalon & Weiller-Abels, 2018), in football media across Europe and the United States (Rosenthal, 2008), in social media coverage of major sporting events (Johnson et al., 2020; Adá-Lameiras & Rodríguez-Castro, 2021; Sainz-de-Baranda et al., 2020), and in the broadcast commentary of professional sports leagues (Sadri et al., 2020). Content analysis of sports news coverage on Twitter found that gendered disparities in tone and framing persisted across both the volume and substance of tweets produced by major sports news accounts, indicating that the framing asymmetries observed on Instagram are not specific to that platform but characterise sports-related social media content more broadly (Sainz-de-Baranda et al., 2020). This consistency across contexts suggests that framing asymmetry is not an artefact of any particular editorial culture or media system but a structural feature of how sports media, as an institution, conceptualises and communicates athletic achievement in gendered terms.

Analysis of gender inequality in sports punditry found that female pundits and analysts were systematically framed as less authoritative and less knowledgeable than their male counterparts in broadcast sports commentary, extending the analysis of framing asymmetry from the representation of athletes to the representation of women within sports media

institutions more broadly (Henry, 2024). Systematic differences in the language, tone, and content of all-female and all-male broadcast teams were similarly identified in American football commentary, reflecting internalised assumptions about the relative sporting authority of men and women (Sadri et al., 2020). Theoretically, the cumulative effect of these asymmetric frames has been argued to position female athletes as a perpetual "Other" within international sport media coverage, a category defined and understood primarily in relation to, and as a deviation from, the male athletic norm rather than as an autonomous category of athletic achievement in its own right (Daddario, 2021). A complementary audience-side perspective is provided by survey evidence from German football audiences, which found that women were predominantly positioned and largely positioned themselves as an "armchair audience" for the men's national team football. This framing operated reciprocally, reinforcing the marginal status of women both as subjects and as consumers of football media (Meier & Leinwather, 2012).

These differences in framing have important consequences for how audiences interpret athletic achievement. Repeated associations of male athletes with heroism, competence, strength, and competitive dominance can establish male athleticism as an implicit standard against which female performance is judged. Female athletes, by contrast, may be evaluated through frames that place greater emphasis on appearance, emotion or relationships. Experimental evidence indicates that such gendered framing can influence perceptions of athlete competence even when audiences have prior knowledge of the sport (Jones & Greer, 2012). Framing, therefore, influences more than the information audiences receive about athletes. Through repeated exposure, it can reinforce assumptions about what constitutes credible, competent, and legitimate athletic performance for men and women.

Audience Perception and Gender Socialisation

The fourth theme shifts analytical focus from the media text to the audience, examining how gendered sports media representations interact with the broader social processes through which individuals acquire, internalise, and reproduce gender norms. This theme is grounded primarily in the qualitative and audience reception studies included in the review, drawing on social learning theory, gender schema theory, and the sociology of sport to explain how patterns of media representation shape audience attitudes toward male and female athletes across the life course.

The central argument that emerges from the included literature is that audience perceptions of gender equality in sport are not formed independently of media exposure but are actively shaped by the representational patterns encountered from childhood onward. This is not a simple stimulus-response model in which media content directly determines audience attitudes. It is a more complex process of socialisation in which repeated exposure to representational frameworks across television, newspapers, social media, and digital platforms gradually shapes the cognitive schemas through which audiences make sense of gender and athletic achievement (Daniels & Wartena, 2011).

Formation of Gendered Perceptions

One of the most theoretically sophisticated accounts of this socialisation process emerges from a study of how adolescent sports media consumption shapes what Bourdieu termed the "sporting gendered habitus", a set of durable, largely pre-reflective dispositions toward sport that reflects the male-dominated structure of the media environment young people inhabit (Metcalf, 2019). Drawing on focus groups with British adolescents, young people were found to have internalised the gender hierarchy embedded in mainstream sports media to such a degree that they experienced it not as a social construction but as a natural state of affairs, as an accurate reflection of the inherent differences in the quality and interest level of male and female sport (Metcalf, 2019). This internalisation is significant because it suggests that the effects of gendered sports media representation are not merely attitudinal but dispositional; they shape not just what audiences think about gender and sport but how they are oriented to think about it, in ways that are difficult to access through conscious reflection alone. A complementary first-person account of this process emerges from focus groups with adolescent Australian girls who played Australian rules football, where participants were acutely aware of the comparative absence of visible female role models in mainstream coverage and frequently described having to look beyond conventional sports media to find representations of female athletic competence that affirmed their own participation, evidence that the gendered habitus is something young female athletes must actively negotiate around rather than internalise (Kernebone et al., 2021).

The developmental consequences of this socialisation process are demonstrated through an experimental study of adolescent boys' responses to media representations of female athletes. Boys predominantly exposed to sexualised or marginalised representations of female athletes were found to develop significantly lower assessments of female athletic competence,

with implications for the long-term development of audience attitudes toward women's sports as these boys grow into the adult consumers and decision-makers who shape the commercial and institutional landscape of sport (Daniels & Wartena, 2011). The finding that the framing of female athletes, whether as athletes or as sex symbols, significantly predicted boys' evaluations of athletic credibility represents one of the clearest demonstrations in the included literature of a direct pathway from media representation to audience perception.

The gender socialisation process documented in this review, however, is not unidirectional. A significant body of qualitative evidence documents audience resistance, critical awareness, and counter-reading of gendered sports media representations. In an audience reception study of mediated football, some audience members actively contested the racialised and gendered representations they encountered, drawing on their own cultural knowledge, personal experiences, and critical frameworks to negotiate meanings that differed from those embedded in the media texts (van Sterkenburg & Spaaij, 2014). This finding is consistent with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which posits that audiences do not passively receive the preferred meanings of media texts but actively interpret them, reproducing, negotiating, or opposing those meanings depending on the social positions and interpretive resources they bring to the encounter.

Audience Agency, Resistance and Critical Awareness

A particularly sophisticated form of critical audience engagement is documented in focus groups with college female athletes, where participants demonstrated a nuanced and articulate understanding of the mechanisms through which sexualisation and trivialisation functioned in sports media, recognising specific techniques, including camera angles, commentary language, and image selection, through which female athletes were systematically diminished (Everbach & Mumah, 2014). This critical awareness, however, did not automatically translate into resistance to those representations' effects. Despite their ability to identify and critique sexualised media portrayals, participants continued to internalise the beauty and femininity standards those portrayals implied, suggesting that critical media literacy and susceptibility to media influence are not mutually exclusive.

The role of gender as a moderating variable in audience perception is a recurring finding across the included literature. Male and female audiences have been found to respond differently to objectified representations of female athletes, with female audiences

demonstrating greater awareness of and resistance to sexualised framing (Darvin & Sagas, 2017). Gender differences in audience engagement with women's Olympic television coverage have also been identified, with female audiences showing greater interest in and identification with female athletes than male audiences (Capranica et al., 2008). An online survey of audience viewing behaviour during the 2008 Beijing Olympics extended this line of evidence, finding that gender alongside prior interest in specific sports was a significant predictor of which Olympic events audiences chose to follow across new and traditional media, lending further support to the argument that audience gender shapes engagement with women's sports coverage rather than merely responding to it (Tang & Cooper, 2012). Experimental confirmation of the underlying mechanism at the level of social perception was provided by a study finding that both the gender of the athlete depicted and the gender of the perceiver influenced how viewers evaluated athlete portraits in news media, with female athletes evaluated less favourably on dimensions of competence when the accompanying coverage emphasised appearance over performance (Herrera et al., 2024). These findings collectively suggest that the relationship between media representation and audience perception is not uniform but is mediated by the gender of the audience member, a finding with important implications for how sports organisations and media producers think about the audiences they are addressing and the representational choices most likely to shape their attitudes.

Across the literature, audience perceptions appear to develop through repeated encounters with gendered representations rather than through isolated instances of media exposure. Underrepresentation, sexualisation, trivialisation and asymmetric framing can contribute to assumptions about the relative importance, competence and legitimacy of male and female athletes, particularly when these patterns are encountered across different stages of development and media platforms (Metcalf, 2019; Daniels & Wartena, 2011). The evidence also highlights the role of audience agency. Gender, prior interests, personal experience and critical media literacy can influence how individuals interpret, negotiate and resist the meanings presented through sports media (van Sterkenburg & Spaaij, 2014; Everbach & Mumah, 2014). Media representation, therefore, contributes to the formation of audience perceptions without uniformly determining them, as individuals bring different social and interpretive resources to their engagement with sports media.

Digital Media as a Site of Contestation

The fifth and final theme addresses the transformative potential and ongoing tensions of digital and social media as spaces in which the gendered representational practices of traditional sports media are simultaneously reproduced and challenged. This theme is the most forward-looking of the five, drawing predominantly on studies published after 2015 and reflecting the rapid evolution of the sports media landscape over the latter half of the review period. It is also the most ambivalent, resisting any simple narrative of either digital liberation or digital reproduction of existing gender hierarchies and insisting instead on the complexity of a media environment that contains genuine possibilities for change alongside powerful pressures toward continuity.

The liberatory narrative of digital media and female athletic visibility begins with a genuine insight. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube have created new channels through which female athletes can represent themselves directly, constructing and distributing their own narratives without the mediating influence of institutional gatekeepers whose editorial decisions have historically disadvantaged women's sports (Sherwood, 2019; Antunovic et al., 2021). This capacity for athlete-controlled self-representation is not trivial; it represents a structural shift in the media ecosystem, a new distribution of representational power that did not exist in the broadcast and print-dominated media environment of the pre-digital era. Social media has been argued to offer a genuine opportunity to improve gender equality in Olympic media coverage, and with more balanced representations of male and female athletes identified in athlete-generated content compared to broadcaster-generated content, it evidences that the platform's affordances can support more equitable visibility, when used on female athletes' own terms (Grabmüllerová, 2022).

Alternative Representation and Audience Engagement

The growth of female independent sports media producers, journalists, bloggers, podcasters, and digital content creators who have built audiences for women's sports outside the institutional structures of mainstream sports media has been documented as a significant structural development (Sherwood, 2019). This is significant not only because it creates new channels of visibility for female athletes but also because it represents a direct challenge to the gatekeeping practices that have historically determined what sports content audiences can access. The motivations of these independent producers were found to be a complex mixture

of fan advocacy, journalistic purpose, and feminist commitment, suggesting that the growth of independent women's sports media reflects a broader cultural shift in which audiences are increasingly unwilling to accept the representational limitations of mainstream sports journalism (Sherwood, 2019).

The contesting narrative, however, is equally well-supported in the included literature. Content analysis of ESPN's and espnW's Instagram accounts found that female athletes were still represented in more appearance-focused and less athletically centred ways than male athletes, even on a platform theoretically suited to more equitable representation (Fraidenburg & Backstrom, 2021). The persistence of these patterns on a platform controlled by the same institutional actors as broadcast and print media is unsurprising. The problem was never the platform itself but the editorial cultures, institutional practices, and audience assumptions that travel with those actors across platforms.

An analysis of how North American Olympic broadcasters framed gender on Instagram offered a particularly nuanced account of digital media as a site of contestation (Johnson et al., 2020). While Instagram's affordances, including the ability to post unlimited content, engage directly with audiences, and present athletes in contexts outside formal competition, theoretically permitted more equitable and multidimensional representations of male and female athletes, broadcasters were found to largely replicate the framing asymmetries of their television coverage in their Instagram content. Male athletes were presented in action contexts, while female athletes appeared in posed or emotionally expressive contexts, indicating that the platform's potential for representational equity was not realised, as the migration to a new platform did not transform the institutional practices and assumptions that generated asymmetric framing on television. The analysis of contestation has been extended beyond conventional news and social media to popular film through the examination of the Indian sports film *Rashmi Rocket*, which explicitly engaged with gender sustainability and the identity challenges faced by female athletes (Koley & Banerjee, 2025). Although the film ultimately reproduced some conventional narrative tropes, it was found to create an alternative representational space in which the gendered scrutiny female athletes face, including invasive gender verification testing, was foregrounded as a subject of critique rather than treated as an unremarkable backdrop, indicating that popular media beyond the conventional news ecosystem can serve as an additional, if imperfect, site for contesting established gendered framings of women's sports.

The Limits of Digital Transformation

A gender analysis of Olympic Twitter coverage reached similar conclusions, finding persistent disparities in the volume and quality of coverage afforded to male and female athletes despite the platform's capacity for democratised content production (Adá-Lameiras & Rodríguez-Castro, 2021). The tension these findings identify between digital media's genuine representational possibilities, and its reproduction of existing gender hierarchies is the defining feature of this theme and suggests that technological change alone is insufficient to produce representational equity in sports media. The structural, institutional, and attitudinal conditions that generate gendered representation in traditional media do not dissolve when those practices migrate to new platforms; they migrate with them, adapting to the conventions of new environments while preserving their fundamental dynamics.

The audience dimension of digital media contestation adds a further layer of complexity to this picture. Several studies in the review document the emergence of new forms of audience engagement with women's sports through digital platforms that did not exist in the broadcast era. The growth of online communities dedicated to women's sports, the use of social media to organise collective advocacy for more equitable media coverage and the direct engagement between female athletes and their audiences through athlete-controlled platforms all represent genuine developments in the relationship between sports media and its audiences that carry implications for the long-term dynamics of gender representation. Whether these developments will ultimately produce structural change in how mainstream sports media represent female athletes or whether they will remain parallel and alternative spaces without a transformative impact on the dominant media system is a question the current evidence base cannot definitively answer. It is, however, one of the most important questions facing scholars and practitioners in this field in the coming decade.

Digital media adds another dimension to the relationship between sports representation and audience perceptions by creating opportunities for audiences to encounter alternative narratives about female athletes. Athlete-controlled content, independent women's sports media and online communities can increase visibility, encourage engagement and provide spaces in which established representations of women's sport can be questioned. However, these possibilities have not removed the influence of institutional media practices, with gendered framing and appearance-focused representation continuing across digital platforms (Johnson et al., 2020; Fraidenburg & Backstrom, 2021; Adá-Lameiras & Rodríguez-

Castro, 2021). Digital media can therefore provide audiences with greater access to alternative representations and opportunities for critical engagement. However, its capacity to reshape perceptions remains closely tied to the types of content audiences encounter and the broader institutional and cultural conditions under which that content is produced.

Conclusions

The five themes presented in this chapter collectively provide a comprehensive and empirically grounded response to the research question. Underrepresentation and marginalisation indicate that female athletes receive substantially less media coverage than male athletes across all platforms and contexts, and that this quantitative disparity is experienced as symbolic marginalisation by the affected athletes and shapes the attitudes of audiences exposed to it. Sexualisation and Trivialisation documents that the coverage female athletes receive is frequently focused on their appearance and femininity rather than their athletic performance, with measurable negative consequences for audience perceptions of female athletic credibility. Framing asymmetry reveals the structural narrative frameworks through which sports media constructs different meanings about male and female athletic achievement, priming audiences to evaluate female athletes through standards and assumptions that systematically disadvantage them. Audience Perception and Gender Socialisation demonstrates that these representational patterns are not merely symbolic but actively shape the cognitive schemas through which audiences understand gender and sport. This socialisation process is deeply embedded and not easily disrupted by critical awareness alone. Digital Media as a Site of Contestation acknowledges the genuine possibilities that digital and social media platforms have created for more equitable female athletic representation while documenting the powerful institutional and cultural forces that have thus far prevented those possibilities from being fully realised.

Together, these five themes paint a picture of a media system in which gender inequality is not incidental but structural, embedded in the editorial practices, framing conventions, and audience expectations that constitute sports media as a cultural institution. They also, however, point to sites of resistance, agency, and change in the critical media literacy of female athletes and audiences, in the work of independent women's sports media producers, and in the representational possibilities of athlete-controlled digital platforms. The implications of these findings for theory, practice, and future research are addressed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

This dissertation set out to address a single, overarching research question: What evidence exists regarding the portrayal of gender in sports media and its influence on public perceptions of male and female athletes? The preceding chapters have established the methodological framework for investigating this question and presented findings from a systematic analysis of studies spanning two decades of scholarship across sport sociology, communication studies, media studies, gender studies, and sport management.

This chapter now turns to the task of interpretation, making sense of what those findings mean, individually and collectively, in relation to the research question and in light of the broader body of literature within which this review is situated. The five themes that were developed from the reflexive thematic analysis, Underrepresentation and Marginalisation, Sexualisation and Trivialisation, Framing Asymmetry, Audience Perception and Gender Socialisation, and Digital Media as a Site of Contestation, do not exist in isolation from one another. They are, as this chapter will argue, dimensions of a single, interconnected system through which gender inequality is produced, reproduced, and experienced in contemporary sports media.

Understanding each theme individually is necessary but not sufficient. It is only when the themes are read in relation to one another that their interconnections and mutual dependencies are made visible, and the full scope of their implications for the research question becomes clear.

This chapter proceeds as follows. Each of the five themes is discussed in turn, with reference to how its findings compare with previous research, what it adds to or challenges the existing literature, and what it specifically means for the research question. This is followed by an overall synthesis that examines how the themes collectively answer the research question and highlights their relationships. The chapter concludes with a direct answer to the research question, a summary of the study's main contributions, and a discussion of its limitations and recommendations for future research.

The Interconnected System of Gendered Sports Media Representation

The five themes presented in this review are not independent phenomena. They are dimensions of a single, integrated system through which gender inequality is produced, reproduced, and experienced in contemporary sports media, a system whose components are

mutually reinforcing, making it considerably more resilient than any single component considered in isolation would suggest.

Underrepresentation and Marginalisation, establishes the foundational condition; female athletes are structurally absent from, or peripheral within, the sports media landscape that shapes public perception. This absence is not simply a quantitative disparity in coverage volume; it is, as the qualitative evidence demonstrates, a form of symbolic marginalisation that communicates to audiences the message that women's sports is less important and less valuable than men's sport. This message is not delivered through any explicit argument but through the accumulated weight of editorial decisions about what to cover and what to ignore, decisions that, as Organista and Mazur (2020a) document, are experienced by their makers as natural reflections of audience demand rather than as choices with ideological consequences.

Sexualisation and Trivialisation adds a second mechanism to this system. Where underrepresentation functions through absence, sexualisation and trivialisation function through a particular kind of presence, one that acknowledges female athletes while simultaneously reducing their athletic identities to their physical appearance, their competitive achievements to novelties, and their sporting excellence to something less serious and less worthy of sustained attention than its male equivalent. The audience effects of these representational practices are documented in multiple studies within this review, demonstrating that sexualisation reduces perceptions of female athletic credibility, diminishes consumer engagement with women's sports, and shapes the attitudes of younger audiences in ways likely to persist across the life course.

Framing Asymmetry operates at a deeper and more pervasive level than either underrepresentation or sexualisation, working through the interpretive frameworks that audiences bring to media content rather than through the content itself. By consistently applying different narrative frames to male and female athletes, frames that associate male athleticism with heroism, dominance, and competitive intelligence, and female athleticism with appearance, emotionality, and relationship, sports media primes audiences to evaluate athletic achievement through cognitive schemas that systematically disadvantage female athletes. The automaticity of schema-based processing, documented in gender schema theory and demonstrated in the experimental studies of Jones and Greer (2012) and Daniels and Wartena (2011), means that these effects operate largely outside conscious awareness, making them particularly difficult to challenge through critical media literacy alone.

Audience Perception and Gender Socialisation connect the representational practices documented in the first three themes to the attitudinal outcomes that the research question is centrally concerned with. It demonstrates that the impact of sports media on public perceptions of male and female athletes is cumulative and developmental, that it operates not through discrete acts of media consumption but through a lifelong process of socialisation in which patterns of representation encountered across multiple platforms and contexts gradually shape the cognitive frameworks and attitudinal landscapes within which audiences encounter sport. The evidence for audience resistance and critical engagement provides important qualifications but not a fundamental challenge to this argument: critical awareness of gendered representational practices does not automatically produce attitudinal change, particularly when those practices are embedded in the deep cognitive structures of gender schemas acquired through years of socialisation.

Digital Media as a Site of Contestation introduces a dynamic and unresolved dimension to this picture. It demonstrates that the system of gendered sports media representation documented in the first four themes is not static or monolithic; it contains genuine sites of contestation where alternative representational practices are being developed, alternative audiences are being built, and alternative narratives of female athletic achievement are being told. Nevertheless, it also demonstrates that these sites of contestation have not yet produced the structural transformation of the dominant media landscape required to change the public perceptions shaped by it substantially.

Read together, these five themes provide a comprehensive, empirically grounded answer to the research question: "*What evidence exists regarding the portrayal of gender in sports media and its influence on public perceptions of male and female athletes?*" The answer that emerges from this synthesis is that the portrayal of gender in sports media has a substantial, cumulative, and multidimensional impact on public perceptions of male and female athletes. This impact operates through multiple mechanisms simultaneously, and that is deeply embedded in the cognitive, attitudinal, and institutional landscape of contemporary western societies.

The quantitative underrepresentation of female athletes in sports media shapes public perceptions by communicating, through the logic of media attention itself, that women's sports is less important and less worthy of attention than men's sport. This perception is reinforced by the qualitative marginalisation of female athletes within the coverage they do receive, and by

the editorial cultures that naturalise both forms of marginalisation as reflections of audience demand. The sexualisation produced trivialisation of female athletes in sports media reduces public perceptions of their athletic credibility, diminishes audience engagement with women's sports, and shapes the attitudes of younger audiences in ways that are likely to persist across the life course and compound over time into deeply entrenched patterns of gendered perception. The systematic application of asymmetric narrative frames to male and female athletes in sports media primes audiences to evaluate athletic achievement through cognitive schemas that associate athleticism with masculinity and subordinate female athletic excellence to a secondary and derivative status, shaping perceptions not through explicit argument but through the accumulated influence of representational choices encountered across thousands of acts of media consumption. The cumulative effect of these representational patterns is a process of gender socialisation through which audiences perpetuate and internalise attitudes toward male and female athletes that reflect and reproduce the gender hierarchies embedded in sports media, a socialisation process that begins in childhood, is reinforced throughout the life course, and is particularly resistant to change because it operates through pre-reflective cognitive schemas rather than through conscious beliefs. Digital media has created genuine new possibilities for more equitable representation of female athletes but has not yet produced the structural transformation of institutional sports media practices required to change the public perceptions shaped by those practices substantially. The impact of digital media on public perceptions of gender equality in sport remains limited by the continuing dominance of institutional media in shaping the representational landscape encountered by the majority of audiences.

The overall picture that emerges is one in which the portrayal of gender in sports media has a profound and pervasive impact on public perceptions of male and female athletes, an impact that is not reducible to any single mechanism or representational practice but that reflects the combined and mutually reinforcing effects of a system of representational inequality that has proven remarkably resilient across two decades of technological change, institutional reform, and advocacy for gender equity in sport.

Implications

This dissertation makes several contributions to the existing body of knowledge on gender representation in sports media and audience perception.

First, it provides a comprehensive scoping review that integrates evidence from qualitative analysis, content analysis, and framing analysis traditions within a single synthesis,

addressing the relationship between gendered sports media portrayal and audience perception. By bringing these three analytical traditions into dialogue rather than treating them as separate bodies of evidence, the review produces a more complete and theoretically coherent account of the mechanisms through which sports media representation shapes public perception than prior single-tradition reviews have achieved.

Second, the review's temporal scope of 2005–2025 enables a longitudinal perspective on the dynamics of gendered sports media representation that is not possible in single studies or shorter reviews. The finding that the core patterns of underrepresentation, sexualisation, and framing asymmetry have persisted across two decades of profound technological transformation from broadcast-dominated to digitally saturated media environments is itself a significant contribution, demonstrating the structural resilience of gendered representational practices in ways that have important implications for how the problem should be approached.

Third, the synthesis of evidence across 54 studies and multiple national contexts demonstrates that gendered sports media representation is not a peculiarity of any single national media culture or sporting tradition but a feature of the global sports media landscape. While the specific forms and intensities of gendered representation vary across contexts, as demonstrated by Xu and Kreshel's (2021) analysis of Chinese digital media and Organista et al.'s (2019) investigation of Polish sports journalism, the fundamental dynamics of underrepresentation, trivialisation, and framing asymmetry appear across all the national contexts represented in the included literature.

Fourth, the review's explicit attention to the audience dimension of the research question, to how gendered representational practices are received, interpreted, and internalised by audiences, addresses a gap in the prior literature that has tended to treat the representational and reception dimensions of the problem separately. By synthesising evidence from audience reception and media effects studies alongside content analysis and framing analysis studies, this review produces a more complete account of the pathway from media representation to public perception than either tradition alone could provide. Kassing (2025) frames this pathway in explicitly normative terms, arguing in a conceptual treatment of empowerment in the global sport community that meaningful progress toward gender equality in sports media requires moving beyond the documentation of representational deficits toward a positive account of what empowering coverage of female athletes would actually look like. This review's [analysis](#) across five themes provides much of the descriptive and explanatory groundwork that such an

empowerment-oriented agenda would need, by specifying precisely which representational mechanisms, underrepresentation, sexualisation, and framing asymmetry, would need to be reversed for coverage of women's sports to function as a genuine source of empowerment rather than a site of diminishment.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this review that should be acknowledged. First, the restriction to English-language studies introduces a language bias and may have excluded research from non-English-speaking contexts that offers different perspectives on gendered sports media representation. This is particularly relevant given the geographical concentration of the included literature, which was predominantly drawn from Western and Anglophone contexts, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Europe. As a result, the findings may not fully reflect how gendered sports media representation and audience perceptions operate within different cultural, media, and sporting environments. Future research should therefore incorporate non-English-language scholarship and extend its geographical scope to contexts such as East Asia, Latin America, Africa, and other underrepresented regions.

Second, the absence of formal quality appraisal is a limitation of the review. This is consistent with the scoping review methodology, which prioritises mapping the breadth and characteristics of available evidence rather than evaluating study quality. However, this means that findings from studies with varying levels of methodological strength were included in the same synthesis. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as establishing causal relationships between media representation and audience perceptions, particularly where the underlying studies were observational or exploratory in design.

Third, the evidence base was limited to studies using three broad analytical approaches: content analysis, framing analysis, and qualitative analysis. While these approaches provided complementary perspectives on the nature of gendered representation and its relationship with audience perceptions, their predominance also shaped the type of evidence available for synthesis. The review therefore provides stronger evidence about patterns, meanings, representations, and reported audience responses than about causal effects or changes in audience perceptions over time. The reliance on these approaches also means that experimental, longitudinal, survey-based, and other quantitative approaches that could provide more direct evidence of media effects or changes in audience attitudes were not represented to

the same extent. This methodological concentration should be considered when interpreting the review's conclusions about the influence of sports media representation on public perceptions.

Future Research

Several directions for future research emerge from the findings and limitations of this review. Future research should examine the impact of athlete-controlled digital content production on audience perceptions of female athletic credibility, specifically, whether audiences who consume significant amounts of athlete-generated social media content develop more equitable perceptions of female athletes than audiences whose sports media diet is dominated by institutional media. The evidence from this review suggests that this is a theoretically plausible but empirically untested hypothesis with important implications for how athletes and sports organisations should think about digital media strategy.

Longitudinal studies of the relationship between changes in sports media representation and changes in audience attitudes are needed to test the socialisation argument developed in Theme Four. Much of the existing evidence is cross-sectional, demonstrating relationships between media exposure and attitude at a single point in time rather than longitudinal. Studies that track the same audiences over time as media representation changes would provide much stronger evidence for the causal claims implied by this review's synthesis.

Research that examines the intersection of gender with race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, and other dimensions of social identity in sports media representation and audience perception is needed. Several studies in this review, particularly van Sterkenburg and Spaaij (2014), Seo et al. (2019), Xu and Kreshel (2021), and Wrench and Garrett (2018), pointed to the importance of these intersectional dynamics. However, they remain relatively underexplored in the sports media and gender literature compared with gender as a standalone analytical dimension.

The effectiveness of specific interventions, such as media literacy education, institutional diversity and inclusion policies, changes in broadcast rights structures, and athlete advocacy campaigns in producing measurable changes in audience perceptions of female athletes, is needed. The evidence in this review makes a strong case that the current representational landscape has substantial negative consequences for public perceptions of gender equality in sport. However, it is less informative about which interventions are most

effective in changing that landscape. Answering this question is practically important for further research in this area.

Finally, future research should extend the geographical scope of the literature on gendered sports media representation and audience perception to non-Western and non-Anglophone contexts. As women's sports continues to develop globally, and as sports media systems in East Asia, Latin America, and Africa become increasingly significant, understanding the dynamics of gendered representation in those contexts and their implications for audience perception will become increasingly important for both scholars and practitioners. The momentum behind this future research agenda is itself already visible in the field. Renfree (2023), reporting on the proceedings of the Women in Sport and Exercise Academic Network conference, documented a marked expansion in the volume and diversity of scholarship being presented on gender and sports media in recent years, suggesting that the academic infrastructure required to pursue the directions identified above, dedicated conferences, specialist networks, and a growing community of researchers, is increasingly well established.

Conclusion

The evidence synthesised in this review supports a clear and direct answer, the portrayal of gender in sports media has a substantial, cumulative, and deeply consequential impact on public perceptions of male and female athletes.

Through the interconnected mechanisms of underrepresentation, sexualisation and trivialisation, and framing asymmetry, sports media consistently communicate to audiences that male athletes and men's sport are more important, more credible, and more worthy of sustained attention than female athletes and women's sports. These messages are not delivered through explicit argument but through the accumulated weight of editorial decisions, representational choices, and narrative frameworks that audiences encounter across multiple platforms and contexts throughout their lives. The result is a process of gender socialisation that shapes public perceptions of athletic identity, competence, and worth in ways that systematically disadvantage female athletes' perceptions that are reinforced by the institutional practices and professional assumptions that reproduce gendered representational patterns, even as the media landscape through which sports content is delivered continues to change.

The evidence of this review also supports a more qualified and forward-looking element of the answer: that the relationship between sports media portrayal and public perception is not fixed or deterministic. There are genuine sites of contestation within the

contemporary sports media landscape in athlete-controlled content production, in independent women's sports media, in the critical media literacy of engaged audiences, where alternative representational practices are being developed, and alternative perceptions are being formed. These sites of contestation represent genuine possibilities for change. However, they have not yet produced the structural transformation of the dominant media landscape required to substantially shift the broad patterns of public perception documented by this review.

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Appendix

Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) Checklist

SECTION	ITEM	PRISMA-ScR CHECKLIST ITEM	REPORTED ON PAGE #
TITLE			
Title	1	Identify the report as a scoping review.	Title Page
ABSTRACT			
Structured summary	2	Provide a structured summary that includes (as applicable): background, objectives, eligibility criteria, sources of evidence, charting methods, results, and conclusions that relate to the review questions and objectives.	i
INTRODUCTION			
Rationale	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of what is already known. Explain why the review questions/objectives lend themselves to a scoping review approach.	10-14, 15-17
Objectives	4	Provide an explicit statement of the questions and objectives being addressed with reference to their key elements (e.g., population or participants, concepts, and context) or other relevant key elements used to conceptualize the review questions and/or objectives.	10
METHODS			
Protocol and registration	5	Indicate whether a review protocol exists; state if and where it can be accessed (e.g., a Web address); and if available, provide registration information, including the registration number.	-
Eligibility criteria	6	Specify characteristics of the sources of evidence used as eligibility criteria (e.g., years considered, language, and publication status), and provide a rationale.	25-27
Information sources*	7	Describe all information sources in the search (e.g., databases with dates of coverage and contact with authors to identify additional sources), as well as the date the most recent search was executed.	17-19
Search	8	Present the full electronic search strategy for at least 1 database, including any limits used, such that it could be repeated.	19-24
Selection of sources of evidence†	9	State the process for selecting sources of evidence (i.e., screening and eligibility) included in the scoping review.	28-29
Data charting process‡	10	Describe the methods of charting data from the included sources of evidence (e.g., calibrated forms or forms that have been tested by the team before their use, and whether data charting was done independently or in duplicate) and any processes for obtaining and confirming data from investigators.	35
Data items	11	List and define all variables for which data were sought and any assumptions and simplifications made.	35-36
Critical appraisal of individual	12	If done, provide a rationale for conducting a critical appraisal of included sources of evidence; describe	-

SECTION	ITEM	PRISMA-ScR CHECKLIST ITEM	REPORTED ON PAGE #
sources of evidence§		the methods used and how this information was used in any data synthesis (if appropriate).	
Synthesis of results	13	Describe the methods of handling and summarizing the data that were charted.	38-43
RESULTS			
Selection of sources of evidence	14	Give numbers of sources of evidence screened, assessed for eligibility, and included in the review, with reasons for exclusions at each stage, ideally using a flow diagram.	28-29
Characteristics of sources of evidence	15	For each source of evidence, present characteristics for which data were charted and provide the citations.	30-38
Critical appraisal within sources of evidence	16	If done, present data on critical appraisal of included sources of evidence (see item 12).	-
Results of individual sources of evidence	17	For each included source of evidence, present the relevant data that were charted that relate to the review questions and objectives.	30-34 & 45-49
Synthesis of results	18	Summarize and/or present the charting results as they relate to the review questions and objectives.	49-66
DISCUSSION			
Summary of evidence	19	Summarize the main results (including an overview of concepts, themes, and types of evidence available), link to the review questions and objectives, and consider the relevance to key groups.	67-71
Limitations	20	Discuss the limitations of the scoping review process.	72
Conclusions	21	Provide a general interpretation of the results with respect to the review questions and objectives, as well as potential implications and/or next steps.	74-75
FUNDING			
Funding	22	Describe sources of funding for the included sources of evidence, as well as sources of funding for the scoping review. Describe the role of the funders of the scoping review.	-

JBI = Joanna Briggs Institute; PRISMA-ScR = Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews.

* Where *sources of evidence* (see second footnote) are compiled from, such as bibliographic databases, social media platforms, and Web sites.

† A more inclusive/heterogeneous term used to account for the different types of evidence or data sources (e.g., quantitative and/or qualitative research, expert opinion, and policy documents) that may be eligible in a scoping review as opposed to only studies. This is not to be confused with *information sources* (see first footnote).

‡ The frameworks by Arksey and O'Malley (6) and Levac and colleagues (7) and the JBI guidance (4, 5) refer to the process of data extraction in a scoping review as data charting.

§ The process of systematically examining research evidence to assess its validity, results, and relevance before using it to inform a decision. This term is used for items 12 and 19 instead of "risk of bias" (which is more applicable to systematic reviews of interventions) to include and acknowledge the various sources of evidence that may be used in a scoping review (e.g., quantitative and/or qualitative research, expert opinion, and policy document).

From: Tricco AC, Lillie E, Zarin W, O'Brien KK, Colquhoun H, Levac D, et al. PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR): Checklist and Explanation. *Ann Intern Med.* 2018;169:467–473. doi: [10.7326/M18-0850](https://doi.org/10.7326/M18-0850).

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1	Canada 2015: perceptions and experiences of the organisation and governance of the Women's World Cup	2018	Sport in Society	1743-0437	21	5	788-799	Carrie Dunn	https://doi.org/10.1080/017430437.2018.1440719	en	10.1080/17430437.2018.1440719					
2	Gender and politics at the 2012 Olympics: media coverage and its implications	2013	Sport in Society	1743-0437	18	2	219-233	Jules Boykoff and Matthew Yasuoka	https://doi.org/10.1080/017430437.2013.854481	en	10.1080/17430437.2013.854481					
3	Gender Equality in the "Next Stage" of the "New Age" Content and Fan Perceptions of English Media Coverage of the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup	2024	Sociology of Sport Journal	0741-1235	41	1	27-38	Stacey Pope and Rachel Allison and Kate Petty	https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2022-0195	en	10.1123/ssj.2022-0195					
4	Messing in Action The Portrayal of Women in Sport in the Print Media	2011	Loyola Journal of Social Sciences		25	2		Veena P. Rawjee Nisha Ramlutchman Nereshee Govender		en						
5	Constructions of Australia's sportswomen: 'Race', 'whiteness' and contemporary media	2018	Sport, Education and Society	1357-3322	23	8	748-760	Alison Wrench and Robyne Garrett	https://doi.org/10.1080/013573322.2018.1495575	en	10.1080/13573322.2018.1495575					
6	The development of an adolescent sporting gendered habitus: young people's interpretation of UK sports-media coverage of Rio 2016 Olympic Games	2019	European Journal for Sport and Society	1613-8171	16	4	361-378	Sarah Nicola Metcalfe	https://doi.org/10.1080/016138171.2019.1693145	en	10.1080/16138171.2019.1693145					
7	playing but losing women's sports after title ix	2012	American Sociological Association	1536-5042	11	1		Cheryl Cooky and Nicole M. Lavoi	https://www.jstor.org/stable/41960748	en						
8	Beyond Figure Skating and Hockey How U.S. Audiences Gender Type Winter Olympic Sports	2013	The International Journal of Sport and Society	2152-7857	3			Jennifer D. Greer and Amy H. Jones		en						
9	Mediated football: representations and audience receptions of race/ethnicity, gender and nation	2014	Soccer & Society	1466-0970	16	5	593-603	Jacco van Sterkenburga and Ramón Spaaij	https://doi.org/10.1080/014660970.2014.963317	en	10.1080/14660970.2014.963317					
10	State Versus Professional: A Case Study of How Chinese New Media Construct Elite Female Athletes	2021	International Journal of Sport Communication	1936-3915	14	1	131-150	Qingru Xu and Peggy J. Kreshel	https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2020-0264	en	10.1123/ijsc.2020-0264					
11	Objectification in Sport Media: Influences on a Future Women's Sporting Event	2017	International Journal of Sport Communication	1936-3915	10	2	178-195	Lindsay Darwin and Michael Sages	https://doi.org/10.1123/ijsc.2017-0022	en	10.1123/ijsc.2017-0022					
12	Adventure and the Gender Gap: Acknowledging Diversity of Experience	2005	Loisir et Société / Society and Leisure	0705-3436	28	1	185-208	Donna E. Little and Erica Wilson	https://doi.org/10.1080/07053436.2005.10707676	en	10.1080/07053436.2005.10707676					
13	Redressing the Balance: Women in Sport and Exercise Academic Network Conference, University of Worcester, United Kingdom, April 19-22, 2021	2023	Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal	1063-6161	31	2	147-168	Gillian Renfree	https://doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.2023-0009	en	10.1123/wspaj.2023-0009					
14	The Olympic Games in London 2012 from a Swedish Media Perspective	2013	The International Journal of the History of Sport	0952-3367	30	7	789-804	Susanna Hedenborg	https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2013.773889	en	10.1080/09523367.2013.773889					
15	Sexist Acts in Sports Media Reactions and Forms of Apologia.	2010	International Journal of Sport Communication	198-216	3		198-216	Janet S. Fink and John F. Borland and Sarah K. Fields		en	3889					
16	Reading Tiffany Chin: The Birth of the Oriental Female Skater on White Ice	2019	The International Journal of the History of Sport	0952-3367	36	7	660-680	Jae Chul Seo and Robert Turick and Daehwan Kim	https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2019.1626831	en	10.1080/09523367.2019.1626831					
17	Kicking goals: Exploring the experiences of girls who play Australian Rules football	2021	Health Promotion Journal of Australia	1036-1073	33	3	880-890	Paige N. Kernebone and Amie O'Shea and Alethea Jerebine and Lisa M. Barnett	https://doi.org/10.1002/hpja.536	en	10.1002/hpja.536					
18	Getting Noticed, Respected, and Supported: Mediated (In)Visibilities of Women's American Football in the United States	2021	The Professionalisation of Women's Sport				123-139	Dunja Antunovic and Katie Taylor and Macauley Watt and Andrew D.	https://doi.org/10.1108/8978-1-80043-196-620211008	en	10.1108/8978-1-80043-196-620211008					
19	Athlete or Sex Symbol: What Boys Think of Media Representations of Female Athletes	2011	Sex Roles	0360-0025	65	7	566-579	Elizabeth A. Daniels and Heidi Wartena	https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-9959-7	en	10.1007/s11199-011-9959-7					
20	"Naturally" Less Exciting? Visual Production of Men's and Women's Track and Field Coverage During the 2004	2009	Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media	0883-8151	53	2	173-189	Jennifer D. Greer and Marie Hardin and Casey Homan	https://doi.org/10.1080/08838150902907595	en	10.1080/08838150902907595					
21	From "hollow-eyed pines" to team of adults: media portrayals of Olympic women's gymnastics before and after an increased minimum age policy	2014	Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health	2159-676X	6	3	401-421	Andreas N. Eagleman and Ryan M. Rodenberg and Soonhwan Lee	https://doi.org/10.1080/02159676x.2013.7961	en	10.1080/02159676x.2013.7961					
22	Athlete Portraits in News: Influence of Media Representation and Gender on Social Perception	2024	The Spanish Journal of Psychology	1138-7416	27		e26-e26	Antonio Herrera and M. Dolores Sánchez-Hernández and M. Carmen Herrera and Francisca Expósito	https://doi.org/10.1017/sjp.2024.21	en	10.1017/sjp.2024.21					
23	"They Never Do This to Men": College Women Athlete's Responses to Sexualized Images of Professional Women Athletes	2014	Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal	1063-6161	22	2	92-99	Tracy Everbach and Jenny Mumah	https://doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.2014-0020	en	10.1123/wspaj.2014-0020					
24	Citizen journalists, sports fans or advocates? The motivations of female independent sports media producers in Women, Sport, and the Press in Twentieth-Century Mexico	2019	Australian Journalism Review	0810-2686	41	2	183-196	Merryn Sherwood	https://doi.org/10.1386/ajr_00005_1	en	10.1386/ajr_00005_1					
25	Analysis from a gender perspective of the Olympic Games on Twitter	2018	The International Journal of the History of Sport	0952-3367	35	10	965-984	Claire Brewster and Keith Brewster	https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2019.1575816	en	10.1080/09523367.2019.1575816					
26	An xG of Their Own: Using Expected Goals to Explore the Analytical Shortcomings of Misapplied Gender Schemas in Football	2024	Journal of Sport Management	0888-4773	38	2	92-109	Alba Adá-Lameiras and Yolanda Rodríguez-Castro Sachin Narayanan and N. David Pifer	https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2023-0022	en	10.1123/jsm.2023-0022					

Reflexive thematic analysis process and analytical audit trail

Purpose. This appendix documents how reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was operationalised in the analysis of the 54 studies included in the scoping review. It provides an audit trail from familiarisation and initial coding through theme construction, review, definition and reporting. The process was iterative and recursive rather than strictly linear.

Table X.1. Six-phase RTA process used in the review

Phase	Analytical activity	Output
1. Familiarisation	All 54 studies were read in full. Notes were made on key arguments, theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, methodological approaches, recurring patterns and tensions.	Structured familiarisation notes and initial reflections.
2. Generating initial codes	Relevant passages, arguments and findings were identified and labelled with descriptive codes. Coding addressed both media representation and audience responses to those representations.	Initial code list with provisional labels.
3. Constructing themes	Related codes were compared and grouped according to shared underlying meanings. Interpretation moved beyond description to consider what groups of codes collectively revealed about the research question.	Candidate themes and supporting code clusters.
4. Reviewing themes	Candidate themes were checked against the wider dataset for coherence, distinctiveness and relevance. Codes and candidate themes were refined, merged or	Refined themes with clearer boundaries.

	reconceptualised where necessary.	
5. Defining and naming themes	Each theme was defined in terms of its central organising concept, scope and analytical relevance. Names were refined to capture the underlying pattern rather than simply the topic.	Five finalised themes with definitions and names.
6. Producing the report	Evidence from the three analytical traditions was integrated and interpreted through the five themes. The themes were used to construct the findings narrative and address the research question.	Chapter 3 findings and thematic interpretation.

Table X.2. Phase 2: Generation of initial codes

The following examples document the types of initial codes identified during engagement with the included literature. Codes were provisional analytical labels and were not treated as predetermined themes.

Area of analysis	Example initial code	What the code captured
Media representation	Quantitative underrepresentation of female athletes	Differences in the volume or visibility of coverage afforded to female athletes.
Media representation	Trivialisation of women's sports	Coverage that positioned women's sport as less important, serious or significant.
Media representation	Sexualisation and appearance focus	Emphasis on appearance, femininity or sexuality rather than sporting performance.
Media representation	Heroism and athleticism framing for male athletes	Narrative emphasis on achievement, competence, strength or sporting identity.

Audience perception	Audience acceptance of gender hierarchy	Audience responses that reproduced or accepted gendered assumptions about sport.
Audience perception	Critical audience awareness	Evidence of audiences recognising, questioning or challenging gendered representation.
Media/platforms	Social media as alternative representation space	Digital platforms providing opportunities for alternative or athlete-controlled representation.
Intersectionality	Intersectionality of race and gender in media	Intersections between gender and other identity or representational dimensions.
Media institutions	Institutional gatekeeping in sports journalism	Editorial and organisational practices influencing which athletes and stories receive visibility.

Table X.3. Phase 3: From initial codes to candidate themes

Phase 3 involved interpreting relationships among codes and considering their shared underlying meaning. The examples below illustrate the analytical logic used to move from descriptive codes toward broader interpretive patterns.

Related codes	Interpretive pattern considered	Candidate thematic direction
Quantitative underrepresentation; limited visibility; marginal positioning	These codes collectively pointed to unequal visibility and the positioning of female athletes at the margins of sports media.	Unequal representation and visibility
Sexualisation and appearance focus; trivialisation of women's sports	These codes indicated a displacement of sporting achievement by appearance, femininity and non-athletic characteristics.	Sexualised and trivialised representation

Heroism and athleticism framing for male athletes; gendered framing differences	These codes indicated systematic differences in the narrative meanings attached to male and female athletic achievement.	Framing asymmetry
Audience acceptance of gender hierarchy; critical audience awareness; gendered assumptions	These codes suggested that media representation could interact with audience schemas, socialisation and perceptions of athletic credibility.	Audience perception and gender socialisation
Social media as alternative representation space; athlete-controlled representation; institutional gatekeeping	These codes highlighted digital media as both an alternative space for representation and a site where existing institutional constraints could be challenged.	Digital media as a site of contestation

Table X.4. Phase 4–6: Review, definition and final reporting

Final theme	Analytical focus	Role in findings
Underrepresentation and Marginalisation	Unequal visibility and marginal positioning of female athletes in sports media.	Establishes the structural visibility dimension of gendered representation.
Sexualisation and Trivialisation	Appearance, femininity and non-athletic characteristics displacing attention from sporting achievement.	Examines the qualitative nature of representation.
Framing Asymmetry	Different narrative frameworks used to construct male and female athletic achievement.	Examines how meaning is attached to athletic performance.
Audience Perception and Gender Socialisation	Relationships between representation, audience interpretation and gendered perceptions.	Connects media representation to audience-level consequences.
Digital Media as a Site of Contestation	Alternative representational possibilities and continuing	Identifies both resistance and reproduction within

	institutional or cultural constraints in digital spaces.	contemporary media environments.
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Analytical process summary

54 INCLUDED STUDIES

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FAMILIARISATION + REFLECTIVE NOTES

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INITIAL CODING

Media representation | Audience responses | Platforms | Intersectionality | Institutions

↓

COMPARISON AND GROUPING OF RELATED CODES

↓

INTERPRETATION OF SHARED UNDERLYING MEANINGS

↓

CANDIDATE THEMES

↓

REVIEW AGAINST THE FULL DATASET

↓

DEFINE + NAME THEMES

↓

FIVE FINALISED THEMES

↓

CHAPTER 3: THEMATIC FINDINGS

Note: The coding examples in Tables X.2 and X.3 are an audit-trail illustration of the analytical process and are not frequency counts. In keeping with reflexive thematic analysis, the movement between coding, theme construction and review was iterative and recursive.