

New Rules for New Times: Sportswomen and Media Representation in the Third Wave

Toni Bruce¹

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Abstract Leading up to the early 2000s, feminist researchers identified numerous representational practices through which the sports media ignored, trivialized and sexualized sportswomen. At that time, a distillation of the research into a set of six unwritten media ‘rules’ concluded that, at best, the traditional media approached women’s sport ambivalently within an *either/or* discourse of pretty *or* powerful that constructed femininity and athleticism as incompatible. In the past decade, the rise of Internet-based news and social media has dramatically changed the field of representation, including an explosion in public voice and information sharing on social networking sites. In this changed media landscape, I synthesize U.S. and global research into 15 historical and emerging rules of media representation, in order to extend researchers’ understandings of the current status and range of representational practices. In addition, I employ the theoretical lenses of third-wave feminism and cultural studies to advance the ways in which feminist researchers can conceptualize and understand historical and emerging trends in how sportswomen are imagined in popular culture. In particular, I consider the implications of third wave feminism for understanding the emergence of a pretty *and* powerful discourse in the U.S. that challenges dominant interpretations of sports media coverage and points to the value for feminist sport media researchers of expanding their interpretive frameworks for making sense of media coverage.

Keywords Third wave · Media rules · Sport · Female athletes · Sexualization

Introduction

In this article, my intention is to advance empirical analysis and theoretical discussion of media representations of sportswomen. I approach this aim in two ways. The first is through distilling the findings of a burgeoning research corpus into a heuristic set of 15 ‘rules’ representing the breadth of historical, current and emerging trends in media representation. The second is through employing the theoretical lenses of cultural studies and third wave feminism to challenge researchers’ existing interpretations of the meanings of these forms of representation, especially the ‘rule’ of sexualization. I argue that although the bulk of existing research suggests that sportswomen are represented as either pretty *or* powerful, new forms of representation emerging in some online and social media suggest ways in which sportswomen can be imagined as pretty *and* powerful within discourses of femininity and sport.

The focus is the United States, in large part because U.S. studies dominate published research. However, there is robust evidence that many of the rules are replicated in media across Western Europe, Australasia, Canada and parts of Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe (Bruce et al. 2010; Horky and Nieland 2013; Jorgensen 2005; Markula 2009b; Tolvhed 2010; Von der Lippe 2002; Wu 2010). The inclusion of international research thus allows me to include rules of representation seldom discussed in U.S. studies, which may reflect different cultural values and theoretical emphases (e.g., Hua and Tan 2012). In addition, it must be noted that although U.S. sites dominate the online sports environment (Alexa 2015), the global accessibility of such material means that their messages effloresce well beyond national boundaries.

✉ Toni Bruce
t.bruce@auckland.ac.nz

¹ Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, 74 Epsom Ave, Epsom, Auckland 1023, New Zealand

As the thousands of published studies attest, investigations of media coverage of sportswomen exert an enduring attraction globally, in large part because so little appears to have changed in the 35 years since such research began. Yet, in the same period, cultural expectations and the lives of women in many nations have changed dramatically. In sport, participation is now an expected and valued activity for females in many countries, and few accept the view expressed by modern Olympic Games founder Baron de Coubertin that “women should not soil the Olympic Games with their sweat” (Pfister et al. 2004, p. 5). In 2012, for the first time, sportswomen took part in every Olympic sport and comprised over 44 % of participants (International Olympic Committee 2014), although not every country sent a female participant (SHARP Center 2013). In the United States, sports participation has increased ten-fold since the early 1970s, with the latest data reporting 3 million high school participants, and over 200,000 intercollegiate female athletes (Acosta and Carpenter 2014; Cooky and LaVoi 2012). Despite significant growth in women’s sport performance and participation, researchers identify globally persistent patterns and strikingly disproportionate levels of traditional media coverage between male and female athletes (e.g., Horkey and Nieland 2013; Jorgensen 2005; Messner et al. 2010). For example, in content analyses from a wide range of countries, and of time-frames ranging from 1 week to 1 year, women’s sport averages approximately 10 % of print media and 5 % of television news coverage, rising somewhat for short periods during major events such as the Olympics or tennis Grand Slams (Bruce et al. 2010). Comparing across countries remains a challenge, due to variability in cultural contexts, languages, theoretical orientations, methods, and analysis (c.f., Bruce et al. 2010; Horkey and Nieland 2013; Jorgensen 2005). However, although I make no claim that every rule represents a universal truth independent of culture or context, the remarkable consistency in broad patterns has allowed researchers to make some claims that extend beyond the boundaries of any specific nation. For example, writing in the U.S., Kane (2011) contended that,

Over the past three decades we have amassed a large body of empirical evidence demonstrating that sportswomen are significantly more likely to be portrayed in ways that emphasize their femininity and heterosexuality rather than their athletic prowess. Study after study has revealed that newspaper and TV coverage *around the globe* [emphasis added] routinely and systematically focuses on the athletic exploits of male athletes while offering hypersexualized images of their female counterparts. (p. 28)

A decade ago, a distillation of existing research from the U.K., Australia, North America and Europe into a set of 6 unwritten rules of media coverage concluded that, at best, the media approached women’s sport ambivalently, meaning

that coverage simultaneously accepted *and* undercut sportswomen’s status as legitimate athletes (Wensing and Bruce 2003). At that time, newspaper stories appeared primarily in print form, Wikipedia was in its infancy, neither Youtube nor Facebook existed, and the explosion of global sites for information sharing (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest) were still on the horizon. However, despite pronounced changes in the sports mediascape, recent summaries of both traditional and social media draw similar conclusions, which point to “a critical marking of sport as male territory” (Bruce 2013, p. 128; Fink 2014; LaVoi and Calhoun 2014; Meân 2014). For example, LaVoi and Calhoun conclude that “based on emerging data, old patterns of media representations that symbolically annihilate female athletes are being reproduced” (2014, p. 328). The patterns identified in media analyses are also supported by ethnographic and interview research with sports journalists, (Lowes 1999; Theberge and Cronk 1986), which have identified “macho” (Claringbould et al. 2004, p. 715) working environments in New Zealand, France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Canada and the U.S., in which male media workers struggle to negotiate contradictory discourses of heterosexuality, femininity and sport (Scott-Chapman 2012), and female journalists experience the “subtle feeling, both with athletes and colleagues, that they are not in the right place” (Schoch and Ohl 2011, p. 204; Hardin and Shain 2006; Lowes 1999; Theberge and Cronk 1986).

In the remainder of the article, I first introduce key concepts from cultural studies, before discussing the impact of liberal feminism on U.S. researchers’ tendencies to focus on rules that highlight gender differences while overlooking or sidelining other forms of representation. Next I present my distillation of the existing research into 13 rules that have substantive empirical support. I then introduce key concepts from third wave feminism that challenge currently dominant understandings of media representation, and explore two emerging rules in online media that enable new voices on women’s sport, and celebrate some sportswomen as pretty *and* powerful, connecting this second form of representation to the rise in popular culture of “feisty and feminine” female heroes who “kick ass” (Stasia 2004, p. 178). The discussion aims to advance our theoretical understanding of these emerging trends, through considering the impacts of taking seriously a third wave feminist perspective. Throughout, the dominating presence of U.S. research must be acknowledged, particularly in terms of the influence of the theoretical and empirical preoccupations of U.S. researchers on how the research agenda has developed.

Cultural Studies Concepts in the Interpretation of Sports Media Coverage

The value of a cultural studies theoretical lens is that it directs researchers to think through “relations of difference”

(McRobbie 1997, p. 175) out of which the meanings of sport emerge. Hall (1997a) argues that “‘difference’ matters because it is essential to meaning; without it, meaning could not exist”: thus, we know what men or masculinity means “because we can contrast it with its opposite” (p. 234). Nevertheless, the meanings of masculinity or femininity are not static, nor are the relations between them, which differ by historical, cultural and national context. Nor is deriving the meaning of any specific form of representation a simple matter. As Hall (1997a) argues, “Representation is a complex business and especially when dealing with ‘difference’, it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way” (p. 226). In addition, all representations are polysemic; that is, they carry layers of meaning and can be interpreted in multiple ways. Indeed, not only can the meaning of media stories and images never be “finally fixed” – although the practice of representation is an attempt to privilege a “preferred meaning” – but their intertextual nature results in meanings that accumulate as each media text is inserted into a much larger matrix of images and texts from all areas of popular culture (Hall 1997a, p. 228). Finally, the concept of articulation is particularly relevant to any discussion of representation of sportswomen. Articulation is the process by which different discourses are conjoined, often to the point where they become so taken-for-granted that the joining itself never comes into question. One example is the current articulation of sport and masculinity, which emerged in the nineteenth century (Montez de Oca 2013) and has historically positioned women of all nations, races and ethnicities, sexual orientations and levels of able-bodiedness as ‘Other’ within the realm of mediated sport. Conceptually, this leads us to ask questions about the conditions under which articulations can be made or unmade, because no matter how strong they appear to be, articulations are always “connected through a specific linkage, that can be broken” (Grossberg 1996, p. 141).

The feminist theorizing that has underpinned much of the published media representation research begins from the position that sportswomen are constrained within a narrow range of discursive possibilities, predicated on an articulation of sport and masculinity that plays “a decisive role” in producing media coverage that “privileges men’s sports” and creates an environment in which traditional sports media have struggled to represent sportswomen within the norms of sports coverage (Scott-Chapman 2012, p. 204; Claringbould et al. 2004; Hills and Kennedy 2009; Lowes 1999; Theberge and Cronk 1986). For example, after the fifth iteration of a regular 6-week analysis of ESPN and sports news on three Los Angeles television network affiliates, the researchers concluded that the sports news producers in 2009 appeared to hold a “foundational assumption” that “men want to think of women as sexual objects of desire, or perhaps as mothers, but not as powerful,

competitive athletes” (Messner et al. 2010, p. 24; Duncan and Hasbrook 1988). After reviewing predominantly U.S. websites, Meân (2014) concluded that online media sports workers similarly contribute to the “problematic” reproduction of “traditional gendered discourses”, including “asymmetry in production values and provision that frames women as feminized and outside the main category of sport, re/producing women’s sport as substantively less action-packed and newsworthy than men’s sport, and women sport fans as less sophisticated than men” (p. 339).

An important limitation of the research corpus results from privileging gender identity at the expense of its *intersections* with race or ethnicity, sexuality, age, class or sporting ableness. Because gender is privileged as *the* defining difference, other axes of identity are not always acknowledged as relevant. For example, when ‘race’ enters the U.S. research agenda, it tends to involve quantitative comparisons between ‘races’ or focus on Black or Brown sportswomen, thus reifying Whiteness as the unmarked norm. McDonald (2010) makes the point strongly that research “frequently fails to illuminate the construction of whiteness vis-à-vis other ‘races’ and in relation to media coverage of women’s sports” (p. 169). In terms of sexuality, Kian (2014) identifies the minimal media coverage of, or research on, U.S. LGBTQI athletes and the implicit reaffirmation of heteronormativity in the coverage that does exist. There is some evidence that these absences flow through to online and social media. Lisee and McDonald (2012) note “an absence of blog entries and discussion board responses in which the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, race, age, and social class is explicitly discussed” (p. 173). Yet, as Hills and Kennedy clearly state, “sporting bodies... are never only gendered, they are infused with meanings relating to multiple intersecting relations of power” (2009, p. 117). Sportswomen of color, who are working class, or whose body shape, size or sexual orientation deviates notably from White heterosexual femininity or “normative embodiment” tend to be represented in terms of their non-normative identity (Hills and Kennedy 2009, p. 126) and may be constructed as outside the boundaries of idealized femininity, such as African-American tennis players Serena and Venus Williams (Douglas 2002, 2005; Schultz 2005; Spencer 2001, 2004) or constrained within an ideal of individualized, assimilated, heterosexual middle-classness that suits the needs of White audiences but obfuscates the realities of racial inequality, such as Latina golfer Nancy Lopez (Jamieson 1998). Indeed, Jamieson asserts that “gender is never the only appropriate category of analysis, nor can it be the most significant, because it is always mediated by other systems of inequality” (p. 355). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that in the U.S. especially, access to public acceptance and visibility favors elite sportswomen who embody a femininity that appeals to White, male, heterosexual media producers and audiences. As a result, the ‘sportswoman’ discussed in much of the

research that follows is most likely to be White, elite, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class and from the United States.

The Subtle Influence of Liberal Feminism

In this section, I argue that liberal feminism, with its emphasis on gender equality *with men within* existing societal structures (hooks 1984; Pirinen 1997a; van Zoonen 1994), has had a profound effect upon how researchers have interpreted media coverage. By this, I mean that much of the research implicitly normalizes coverage of culturally valued men's sport as the ideal against which women's representation should be judged, emphasizes coverage that appears to marginalize sports-women, and focuses on *differences* rather than *similarities* between women and men (see also Markula 2009a). As a result, although this work has exhaustively documented some of the main default settings of mediasport, it has barely acknowledged others. Within a liberal feminist focus on equality, and a context in which sportswomen were (and remain) disproportionately invisible (see Horky and Nieland 2013; Messner et al. 2010), gender differences appeared more salient to researchers, while similarities were obscured, even though there is growing evidence that when traditional media actually pay attention to sportswomen, their participation is taken seriously with an emphasis on performance (e.g., Caple 2013; MacKay and Dallaire 2009; Wolter 2013). Therefore, it is the most visible *differences* in representation that have attracted attention, all of which have been interpreted as negatively marking women's sport or sportswomen as Other. This tendency is perhaps most evident in an early analysis of Olympic images in U.S. and Canadian magazines. From a sample of 1369 images, Duncan (1990) focused on 186 (14 %) that showed gender difference, and concluded that the media emphasized "the most glamorous female athletes" and sometimes represented sportswomen in poses that replicated "soft-core pornography" (p. 29). Yet, although Duncan's conclusions continue to be referenced widely (e.g., Birrell and Theberge 1994; Choi 2000; Clavio and Eagleman 2011; Dworkin and Wachs 2009), almost ignored is her finding that 86 % of the images showed no gender differences at all.

A second subtle influence of the field's roots in liberal feminism is a focus on the apparently irreconcilable contradiction between femininity and athleticism, which emerges from the powerful articulation of sport with masculinity. Although often wishing to challenge this contradiction, much of the U.S. research implicitly reifies historical understandings that sportswomen can be pretty *or* powerful but not both. Examples of this *either/or* reification are evident in research titles such as "Sexy versus Strong" (Daniels 2012), "Pretty versus Powerful" (Jones et al. 1999), "Athlete or Sex Symbol" (Daniels and Wartena 2011), "Athletic or Sexy?" (Kim and Sagas 2014), and news articles such as "Athlete or

Sexual Plaything?" (O'Connor 2004). As Kian et al. (2013) point out,

the mismatch between femininity and athleticism has been well rehearsed in the literature since attributes associated with sport – physical strength, mental toughness, speed and muscle – are also signifiers of masculinity, so much so that the concept of the female athlete can in itself be viewed as an oxymoron. (p. 146)

This focus is evident in recent U.S. research attempting to assess the effects on audiences of different kinds of images of female athletes (e.g., Daniels 2012; Daniels and Wartena 2011; Kane et al. 2013) that have selected images that implicitly support an either/or binary. Daniels (2012), for example, sought females' reactions to selected photographs of athletes from popular U.S. sport and women's magazines that reflect how "that athlete is typically portrayed in the media, that is, *either* as an athlete *or* as a sex object" (p. 82). Such an approach ignores the intertextuality and multiplicity of images of any single athlete or sport that circulate for public consumption, and reinforces rather than challenges binary understandings of sport and gender.

Thus, the majority of the identified rules emerge from a focus on the powerful articulation that constitutes sport "as a masculinizing activity" (Knoppers and McDonald 2010, p. 315) and identifies mediasport "as site of culture thoroughly saturated in ideologies of gender that privilege men while sidelining women (whether as journalists, subjects of coverage, or audience members)" (Bruce 2013, p. 129).

Pretty or Powerful: 13 Rules of Traditional Media Coverage

The rules that follow represent a summary of the main patterns identified in research to date, along with my assessment of their current status. The thousands of published articles on media representation of female athletes mean that only a small sample of representative studies can be cited here. As a result, the focus is on those that best support each rule, including edited books that bring together research from a range of contexts. Extending previous summaries of media representation, I first identify nine rules that emerge from the main research focus on *difference*, beginning with five Older Rules that research suggests are on the wane, although echoes of their influence can still be seen. Next I discuss four Persistent Rules for which evidence has been found in many studies, and that continue to be identified as problematic. Building on this section, I then introduce four Current Rules that emphasize *similarities* between coverage of men and women but that are frequently ignored in the majority of literature reviews and research publications. The consistency of evidence for many of these rules, across a range of nations, time frames

and traditional media contexts, supports Hall's argument that when we consider how difference and Otherness are represented, "we can see similar representational practices and figures being repeated, with variations, from one text or site of representation to another" (1997b, p. 232).

Difference: Five Older Rules

1. Lower Broadcast Production Values

These were identified in U.S. studies of televised college basketball throughout the 1980s and 1990s, which found fewer cameras, statistics, graphics, replays or close-ups, lower sound quality, shorter and lower quality pre-game, halftime and post-game shows, and more mistakes (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988; Higgs and Weiller 1994; Messner et al. 1993). Overall, the research concluded that lower production values left viewers with an impression they were seeing "not a dramatic, historical spectacle, but rather, a less-than-dramatic game" (Duncan et al. 1990, p. 24). Women's basketball fans in the early 1990s were scathing about low production values, arguing "it's like they *have* to put them on. They don't [do] close-ups, they don't try to get the public really involved, to catch the eye of the viewers or anything" (Bruce 1998, p. 381). However, more recent research concluded that although some asymmetries remained, the "huge gaps" between men's and women's NCAA Final Four coverage in the late 1980s had notably improved (Duncan et al. 2000, p. 21; Hallmark and Armstrong 1999).

2. Gender Marking

This practice has been critiqued for adding a gender modifier only to women's sport (e.g., NCAA Women's Finals or Women's World Cup), while leaving the men's event unmarked (NCAA Finals or World Cup). In the 1970s, Oglesby (1978a, p. vii) pointed out that "no one thought it an aberration" that U.S. local newspapers "symbolized and verbalized" male teams as *the* team while females played on the *girls'* team. Current evidence is mixed, and includes findings that men's rather than women's events may be gender marked. One U.S. study of 17 transcripts of ESPN SportsCenter supported historical practice, reporting that women's events in 2011 were overwhelmingly and disproportionately gender marked (Tanner 2011). Others have identified patterns that disrupt the Othering of sportswomen. A 2008 study of U.K., Australian and Canadian television Olympic websites reported that men's and women's events were gender marked in relatively equal proportion (Jones 2012). In some cases, men's rather than women's events were gender marked, such as the 2000 Olympic 400 m in Australian television and print coverage (Wensing and Bruce 2003), and the female-identified sport of netball in New Zealand (Tagg 2008).

3. Infantilization

Researchers describe infantilization as a marginalizing practice of describing adult sportswomen as girls, young ladies or only by their first names. While a staple of media coverage in the twentieth century, recent research suggests that this pattern may be on the wane in countries such as the U.S., Canada, Australia and the UK (Jones 2012; Tanner 2011). However, it remained visible in 2004 Spanish newspaper coverage, which almost always referred to female Olympians as girls (*chicas*) or young girls (*niñas*) (Crolley and Teso 2007).

4. Non-Sport-Related Aspects

The practice of highlighting areas of sportswomen's lives such as family, personal life, their appearance and personality at the expense of attention to their sporting performance is another form of coverage that appears less evident today (Jones 2012), except in the genre of women's magazines where a focus on personal lives and "the heterosexual family woman" is the standard narrative form (e.g., Pirinen 1997b, p. 298). However, a 2000 NCAA basketball Final Four study found that although men (61 %) and women (22 %) were most often discussed in terms of physicality or athleticism, much of the commentary about women was "completely unrelated" to athletic performance, focusing instead on their backgrounds, looks and appearance, personality and success factors outside their control (Billings et al. 2002, p. 308).

5. Comparisons to Men's Sport

This practice involves statements intended to flatter female athletes, such as "She's been called the 'Female Michael Jordan'" (Murphy 1997, p. B7). Instead, researchers have argued this practice reinforces the superiority of male athletes and reifies men's sport as the norm against which women's sport is judged, usually as inferior. For example, although female hockey players were often favorably compared to men in television coverage of 2010 U.S. and Canadian Olympic hockey games, Poniatowski and Hardin (2012) concluded that such comparisons reinforce "male heroism [and] sexual difference" and imply that "that male players are the standard for women" (p. 633). At the same time, they found that younger female athletes were more likely to look to elite female players as role models, which suggests that comparisons to men's sport may decline over time.

Difference: Four Persistent Rules

6. Sportswomen Don't Matter

The dominant rule in everyday news coverage, *sportswomen don't matter* is a form of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman

1978) that has shown remarkable persistence across time, media form and geographical location. Internationally, surveys in many countries reveal that sportswomen languish at about 10 % of everyday newspaper coverage (Horky and Nieland 2013; Jorgensen 2002, 2005; Lumby et al. 2014), although their visibility rises during global events, such as the Olympics, where they compete in the same stadia as male athletes (Bruce et al. 2010). For example, female athletes averaged only 11 % of newspaper coverage in a 2011 survey of 20 countries representing Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australasia and Europe (Horky and Nieland 2013). In the U.S., a longitudinal study of Los Angeles television sports news found women have averaged approximately 5 % since 1989, a proportion that appears to be decreasing rather than rising (Cooky et al. 2013). Sportswomen's public irrelevance appears to extend to online media, especially sites targeted at males or with large male audiences (Fink 2014; LaVoi and Calhoun 2014; Lisec and McDonald 2012). For example, ESPN SportsCenter's 2011 twitter feed contained almost no tweets about women's sport in 3.5 months (Tanner 2011). The marginalization of sportswomen has been found even in the online LGBTQI community, where U.S.-based Outsports.com overwhelmingly focused on gay White males (Brody 2014). This is not to deny that some sports played by women – basketball in the United States, netball in New Zealand, handball in Norway and Denmark, and tennis globally – have garnered regular broadcast and print media attention that reflects the norms of men's sports coverage, nor that some female athletes and teams have become highly visible through judicious use of social media and/or strategic cooperation with traditional media (Crossman et al. 2007; Henley 2012). But examples of this kind remain rare. Such success appears as the exception rather than the norm. It is also important to note that U.S. men's sports outside of football, basketball and baseball are also “pushed to the margins” along with women's sports (Messner et al. 2010, p. 4).

7. Compulsory Heterosexuality and Appropriate Femininity

Although these practices are separately discussed in some research, I propose that their overlapping nature constructs them as oscillations around a theme rather than separate rules. Compulsory heterosexuality is evident in a media preference for, and highlighting of, sportswomen with sexual or emotional relationships with men. This focus is argued to obscure lesbian relationships and identities, despite a persistent assumption that females who play sports associated with physical strength, bodily contact or aggression may be lesbians, and a fear that playing sport may (inappropriately) masculinize females (Cahn 1995; Messner et al. 2010; Pirinen 1997b). Closely linked to compulsory heterosexuality is the practice of emphasizing physical or emotional characteristics that reflect ideals of White, middle-class femininity, such as smallness,

physical weakness, concern for others and emotionality such as crying (Wensing and Bruce 2003). For example, in 2004, *USA Today* focused on female Olympians whose diminutive size or appearance supported dominant discourses of femininity: “she has hazel eyes, blonde hair and a smile that make her look more like a runway model than a runaway Olympic gold candidate” (Spencer 2010, p. 190). In these practices, femininity and physical strength (“the masculine-looking female body”) are represented as incompatible, and heterosexuality and homophobia are both reinforced (Pirinen 1997b, p. 296; Knoppers and McDonald 2010). Although research investigating popular online sports news sites ESPN.com and SportsLine.com found no evidence of this rule (Kian et al. 2013), a more recent study supported its continued visibility, concluding that ESPN *SportsCenter* in 2009 was more likely to “package” sportswomen as mothers, girlfriends or wives rather than sexualizing them as it had done in the past (Messner et al. 2010, p. 25).

8. Sexualization

Defined by Gerd von der Lippe (2002) as a media focus on females during participation that is “not on their athletic abilities but on the titillating potential of their female bodies” (p. 380), sexualization or “sexploitation” (Australian Sports Commission, para. 12) is argued to represent sportswomen through patriarchal discourses of idealized sexual attractiveness, prompting questions about objectification and whether the media focuses on them as athletes or sex objects (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988; Pirinen 1997a). The increasing trend in the 2000s of predominantly young, White sportswomen posing nude, in bikinis or in “sexually provocative” poses (Daniels and Wartena 2011, p. 568) in magazines is often interpreted as sexualization or even “soft pornography” (Kane et al. 2013, p. 280; see also Daniels 2012; Daniels and Wartena 2011).

9. Ambivalence

First identified in the late 1980s, ambivalence may remain the most common form of representation. Ambivalent coverage juxtaposes representations of sportswomen's physical skill, strength or competence against traditional femininity, weakness, incapacity and the inferior quality of women's sport (Duncan and Hasbrook 1988; Pirinen 1997a; Poniatowski and Hardin 2012). Examples include sport-focused headlines accompanied by non-competition or sexualized images, or images of sport performance with patronizing or infantilizing headlines or text. Even in the 2000s, the challenges faced by mainstream media in representing women's sport remained evident. For example, after analysing a 2005 U.S. roller derby television show, Kearney (2011) described as “disheartening” the producers' apparent “ambivalence about the unruly female

athletes of contemporary roller derby” (p. 296). She found that the show simultaneously included disruptive visions of a physically aggressive, female-run contact sport with a long history, alongside more traditional attempts to contain the women within White, heterosexual femininity through representing them “as a disconnected group of passive hot babes” (Kearney 2011, p. 298).

Similarity: Four Current Rules

10. *Athletes in Action*

Although rarely included in the almost obligatory recitation of marginalization, trivialization, ambivalence and sexualization of sportswomen, a wide range of international studies report that newspaper photographs represent sportswomen and sportsmen in substantially similar ways. Studies from nations as diverse as South Africa, the U.K., Norway, South Korea, Spain, Czech Republic, Canada and New Zealand reported few gender differences in sports photographs. Instead, newspaper images emphasized both female and male athletes in action or competitive settings (Alexander 1994; Bruce and Scott-Chapman 2010; Crolley and Teso 2007; Hartmann-Tews and Ruloffs 2010; Hovden and Hindenes 2010; Klein 1988; Koh 2010; Lee 1992; Martin 2010; Redman et al. 2010; Scott-Chapman 2010; Slepíčková 2010; Vincent et al. 2002; Wensing and MacNeill 2010). Although much less evident in U.S. research, some studies have reported a similar trend (e.g., Hardin et al. 2002; Pedersen 2002; Pemberton et al. 2004; Spencer 2010; Wolter 2013). Overall, these patterns are reported most frequently in studies of international competitions that pit nations against each other.

11. *Serious Athletes*

There is increasing evidence, in all media forms, of sportswomen being “portrayed as legitimate and serious athletes” (MacKay and Dallaire 2009, p. 35; Bruce et al. 2010; Duncan et al. 2005; Markula 2009b; Wolter 2013). A recent Australian study reported that, “sportswomen are now treated both verbally and visually as serious athletes who are very much in control of their emotions” (Caple 2013, p. 127). In Canadian university newspapers, the serious athlete was by far the most common story (Mackay and Dallaire 2009). A recent study of online sports news websites, owned by or associated with U.S. television broadcasters, reported that online writers not only “recognize female basketball players for their athleticism and skill level at least as much as they do for male players” but allocated a significantly higher proportion of positive descriptions of skill, accomplishments, and psychological and emotional strengths to the women (Kian et al. 2009, p. 492). In such cases, however, it is not discourses of sport that change to accommodate sportswomen. Instead sportswomen are

represented within existing discourses of sport and masculinity in ways that make gender difference disappear. Thus, serious female athlete stories read much like men’s sport stories, with a focus on tough, physically skilled, successful, focused, determined women who are legitimately striving for athletic success (Bruce 2009). In such coverage, there is little evidence of sexualization or differentiation based on the ‘gender-appropriateness’ of sports, except in the United States where an analysis of 2004 Olympic coverage found that discourses of femininity played a big role in which sportswomen were featured (Spencer 2010). This divergent U.S. pattern may be explained by the sheer number of U.S. female medals in 2004 – comprising 30 individual, three pairs and 11 team medals (United States 2015) – which necessitated choices between them, given the constraints of limited print media space. As a result, it appears that traditional discourses based on gender difference resumed their ‘normal’ importance.

12. *Model Citizens*

Overlapping somewhat with the serious athlete discourse, researchers outside the U.S. find that sportswomen who win on the international, and especially Olympic, stage are often represented as successful national citizens rather than female athletes. As a result, gendered and/or racialized media conventions are ‘bent’ in order to incorporate sportswomen whose performances bring glory to the nation (Wensing and Bruce 2003; von der Lippe 2002). In France, for example, discourses of nationalism dominate in such events, with the effect that “journalistic discourse tends to erase gender with its insistence on national success” (Quin et al. 2010, p. 112). A New Zealand analysis concluded that “in order for female success to be articulated to nationalism, the more common forms of female representation must be set aside in favour of descriptions that are more usually associated with male athletes” (Bruce 2009, p. 157). In Canada, “sport stars – whether male or female – were valued for the reflected glory they were predicted to bring to the nation” (Wensing and MacNeill 2010, p. 179). During the 2004 Olympics for example, there was almost no sexualization of sportswomen in Turkey, Japan, the Czech Republic, Canada and New Zealand; instead they were linked to personality traits understood to be valued national characteristics (Bruce 2009; Koca and Arslan 2010; Iida 2010; Slepíčková 2010; Wensing and MacNeill 2010). In the Czech Republic, there was “no stress on femininity nor were women presented like sexual symbols. In general, all athletes, female as well as male, were presented as symbols of health, having a nice body and being socially successful” (Slepíčková 2010, p. 164).

13. *Us and Them*

However, the model citizen pattern may also produce a bifurcated form of coverage where home-nation sportswomen are

presented as serious athletes and model citizens but sportswomen from other nations are subject to sexualization or other feminizing discourses, as has been found in Turkey, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand (Bruce and Scott-Chapman 2010; Koca and Arslan 2010; Iida 2010). In Korea, for example, Koh (2010) noted that “marginalization and sexualization of female athletes” was “restricted to Western women” while Korean sportswomen were “regarded as national icons” (p. 252). As a result, images of White Western sportswomen included “‘soft-porn’ pictures from adult magazines and the highly sexualised picture of a beach volleyball player” (Koh 2009, p. 180).

New Rules for New Times: Third Wave Feminism and Social Media Enter the Fray

Feminists have long asked questions about how to “explode and shatter” ideas that have “crippled our ability” to perceive representation and practice outside culturally-defined gender binaries (Oglesby 1978b, p. 85). Among recent examples are Martin’s (2009) use of Irigaray’s concepts to analyze representations of an elite Spanish sportswoman who was “portrayed as masculine and feminine at the same time or... as neither one nor the other” (p. 200). Martin concluded that “male and female stereotypes...are no longer contradictory terms but merely interchangeable, interconnected” (2009, p. 208). Markula (2009a), drawing on Derrida, asked, “what it might mean to think ‘outside’ of a category of feminine/masculine and reach beyond the hierarchical binary structure?”, concluding that “this remains a very difficult task” and wondering “if feminist theory, albeit unwittingly, endorses the polarisation of sexual difference” (pp. 103–104). Oglesby, Martin and Markula were all seeking ways to remain open to theoretical possibilities that could help capture sportswomen’s experiences that feminist analysis seemed unable to detect; views that I suggest resonate with a third wave theoretical lens, and have become increasingly available through online and social media.

Third wave feminism has proposed an alternative conceptual framework that challenges feminist positions that implicitly accept the determining effects of the articulation of sport and masculinity. Baumgardner and Richards (2000) argue for a way of seeing the world “where our standard of measurement doesn’t start with a White-male heterosexual nucleus” (p. 134). Simultaneously, the ability to access, create and exchange ideas and cultural artifacts outside the gatekeeping function of traditional media has exploded in the wake of Web 2.0 technologies that enable relatively cheap and easy sharing. Indeed, for Cocca, in “the Third Wave, pop culture is critical, not just for deconstruction but also for production, which tonally is often playful, campy, and ironic” (2004, p. 100). Although there is considerable debate about what third wave feminism is, who can do it, and to whom it belongs, it incorporates a set of generally accepted ideas (Gillis et al. 2004).

Cocca (2014) describes it as striving “to be antiessentialist and nonjudgmental, welcoming a variety of identities both across and within people” (p. 98). Chananie-Hill et al. (2012) propose that third wave feminism embodies “contradiction, contrast, paradox, and an aversion to labeling” (p. 46).

In sport participation, third wave feminism recognises, plays with, and examines the simultaneously empowering and problematic elements of sport practice (Chananie-Hill et al. 2012) and popular cultural representations (Beaver 2014; Cocca 2014; Kearney 2011). Within this feminist sensibility, “the sexy uniform on the strong body can be disarming in its familiarity, but it can also be burlesque and in that way can disrupt gendered assumptions” (Cocca 2014; p. 100). This perspective is demonstrated in women’s sporting cultures such as roller derby, which Kearney (2011) argues could be seen as “*the* third-wave feminist sport” in that it “explode[s] the conventionally polarized world of gender by combining brute strength, strategic smarts, feisty aggression, confident sexuality, bawdy humor, and whimsical creativity in each skater’s body” (p. 286, emphasis added). At the same, although roller derby may evince a third wave perspective that sees the sport “as an alternative site for women’s athleticism and empowerment” (Kearney 2011, p. 285), the sport is overwhelmingly White in its racialization (Beaver 2014; Kearney 2011). Beaver (2014) argues that “rollergirls attempt to ‘undo gender’ by actively resisting the gender binary that equates athleticism and toughness with masculinity” (p. 1). He concludes that many rollergirls,

view sexualized feminine attire as a playful and pleasurable expression of their sexual agency. They do not see any contradiction between their emphasized feminine appearance and their athletic prowess. By combining the sexualized, feminine uniforms with a full-contact sport, rollergirls reject the notion that athleticism and toughness are masculine traits (Beaver 2014, p. 16).

Yet he concludes, in a way that reinforces a third wave perspective while not espousing one, that viewing roller derby uniforms as “*either* empowering *or* oppressive ... fails to capture the complexity of rollergirls’ experiences” in which “wearing short skirts, fishnets, and halter-tops can be *both* empowering *and* oppressive” (Beaver 2014, p. 16). Thus, rather than accepting *either/or* discourses, third wave feminists tend to embrace a *both/and* perspective that creates space for a ruptural discourse that sees no incompatibility between athleticism and femininity.

Equally pertinent is the argument that third wave feminist activism embraces a “messy multiplicity” (Hewitt 2010, p. 7), a phrase that could equally be applied to the plethora of discourses available on the Internet. Third wave feminism proposes that young women, no longer reliant on traditional media, understand the pleasure and power of popular culture, are telling their own multiple truths, and creating Internet-based sites and media that tell stories traditional media have ignored

(Budgeon 2011; Garrison 2010; Heywood and Drake 1997; Thorpe 2008). This shift in the production and circulation of information leads to two new rules that highlight female agency.

Agency: Two New Rules

14. *Our Voices*

In this form of representation, sportswomen and their fans are in control of what is written or broadcast. Females speaking their own sporting truths, and being able to communicate them widely, is a result of the exponential growth of Internet use for communication and sharing in the last decade. This shift has “essentially changed the ways in which sport media is produced, distributed, and consumed” (Mahan and McDaniel 2006, p. 409), including diverting some control of representation from traditional sports media to fans and athletes. This is not to suggest that the Internet is a feminist nirvana. Clearly it is not, as much online sports discourse, particularly that produced by men, is sexist, belittling and even cruel (Bruce and Hardin 2014). Yet the Internet’s openness and accessibility provides spaces where new discourses can emerge. Thus, although the online sports media ‘space’ remains dominated by males and men’s sport, pockets of disruption exist where sportswomen, women’s sport organisations, fans and advocates share, debate, discuss and build community (Antunovic and Hardin 2012; Chanie-Hill et al. 2012). Social media are argued to offer the potential to transform how women’s sport is represented, by enabling female athletes and fans of women’s sport to introduce new forms of imagery and storytelling, to contest discourses that devalue sportswomen and form communities to debate and discuss women’s sport (Bruce and Hardin 2014; LaVoi and Calhoun 2014; Meân 2014). Although women’s sport organisations and sportswomen remain less visible online than their male equivalents, there is still evidence that some of these voices are being heard by mainstream media (Hardin 2011).

15. *Pretty and Powerful*

In stark contrast to sexualization, where a female athlete’s body is valued “at the expense of her sporting achievements” (Australian Sports Commission 2000, para. 3), the discourse of pretty *and* powerful values both. This rule reflects the third wave “embrace of the messiness and complexities of lived experience” that includes “the reclamation of signs of femininity as empowering” (Cocca 2014, p. 98; Budgeon 2011). For Baumgardner and Richards (2000), “it is a feminist statement to proudly claim things that are feminine ... *You were raised on Barbie and soccer? That’s cool*” (p. 135). Indeed, it is athletic performance that appears fundamental in most cases, enabling successful, world-class sportswomen to use their ‘femininity’ as a resource to continue competing and

maintain a public profile. For example, in 2012, all but two of the 17 most-followed sportswomen on Facebook and Twitter were Olympians, many of them medallists, current or former world champions or world #1s in their sports and who were already in the public eye through mainstream media coverage (Bruce and Hardin 2014).

Demonstrating sport’s broader connections with shifting images of beauty and strength in popular culture, comments by men about elite female athletes on U.S.-based Internet sites not only support the pretty and powerful discourse, but also share a discursive repertoire with fans of some versions of Wonder Woman who are argued to have “embraced the Third Wave idea that there’s more than one way to enact woman warrior, or superhero, unbound by traditional norms” (Cocca 2014, p. 99). For example, fan responses to a Wonder Woman forum in 2009 embraced the juxtaposition of strength and femininity: “As long as they portray WW as being strong and smart, the eye candy is just a bonus” and “Wonder Woman is supposed to be feminine. That’s what’s so amazing about her. She is ‘girly.’ And can kick your ass when diplomacy fails” (Cocca 2014, p. 100). A remarkably similar discourse is evident on both popular and less-well known sports websites that are produced by and for an overwhelmingly male and U.S.-based audience – such as bleacherreport.com (ranked #89 of U.S. websites and in the top five sports websites, with over 30 million U.S. visitors monthly) and Totalprosports.com (ranked #10,203 in the U.S., with almost 100,000 monthly U.S. visitors) (Alexa 2015; Quantcast 2015). For example: “...while her body type might not be for everyone, she’s got an inordinate number of admirers...Some guys just like a girl that can kick their ass” (Cosmell 2011, para. 9); “...can cause damage in two ways, both with her looks and her fists. She is one sexy combination of intimidation” (Star 2010, para. 17); and

I find this Olympic gold medalist-turned-MMA star quite fascinating. When she’s in the ring, with her hair pulled back tightly, she looks like such a badass. When she’s out of the ring, she looks like your typical girly girl. There’s something about that juxtaposition that is just awesome. (Esteban 2012, para. 15)

There seems little doubt that elite sportswomen have gained visibility and popularity online. In November 2014, U.S.-based online social media aggregator Fan Page List showed 22 sportswomen with more than 1 million Facebook fans: U.S.-based Maria Sharapova led the overall tennis rankings (at #1) and was the top-ranked female athlete on Facebook (at #18) with over 15 million Facebook fans and more than 1.3 million Twitter followers. U.S. tennis player Serena Williams was the top sportswoman on Twitter (at #26) with more than 4.4 million followers, and over 2.6

million Facebook fans (Fan Page List 2014), and led the list of the most-Google'd female athlete of 2013 with 44.8 million searches (Esteban 2014b).

In terms of sportswomen who pose nude or semi-nude for men's or sports magazines, "These women proclaim to be aware of their commodity value and have no qualms about marketing their sexuality to boost their public profile and image and reap the financial benefits" (Thorpe 2008, p. 211). A key element here is their embrace of femininity and physical competence as complementary, and the resultant images as empowering rather than sexually objectifying (Heywood and Dworkin 2003). The implications of this emerging articulation are addressed in the next section.

Discussion: From Sexualization to Pretty and Powerful

From a cultural studies perspective, the effectiveness of any new articulation requires two elements: the first is "the extent to which traditional articulations have become increasingly weakened" and the second is "the extent to which new articulations borrow from and rework various traditional frameworks so that they already appear somewhat familiar" (Smith, 1994, p. 6, cited in Cocca 2014, p. 100). It seems evident that both these elements are in play in the emergence of the discourse of pretty and powerful. The traditional unquestioned articulation of sport and masculinity has been weakened by the sheer numbers of girls and women participating in sport (Acosta and Carpenter 2014), visible increases in female performance and, in the case of media representation, the actions of researchers and women's sport activists in bringing research results to media and public attention. In addition, the new articulation of pretty and powerful is connected to familiar cultural frameworks linked to femininity, such as lingerie advertising, the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue (that now regularly features elite female athletes), and the rise of "feisty and feminine" female heroes who 'kick ass', such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Katniss Everdeen, Wonder Woman, Lara Croft, Charlie's Angels, Xena Princess Warrior, and even pre-teen Hit-Girl (Stasia 2004, p. 178; Cocca 2014; Munford 2004; Pender 2004). Across a wide range of cultural sites, images of masculinity and femininity are now combined and recombined in different configurations that challenge traditional notions of gender difference. The intersections of these different discourses – some articulated to sport and some to broader representations of femininity – create the space for the pretty and powerful articulation to emerge and become accepted. Heywood and Dworkin, for example, make the case that "suddenly the athletic body has become an ideal for both sexes, problematizing traditional gender codes in the popular imagination" (2003, p. 81). Indeed, a recent study found that boys valued "sexualized athletes" above "sexualized models" as

"the ideal standard for female beauty" (Daniels and Wartena 2011, p. 576).

Within research on media representations of sportswomen, one of the most polarized debates centers on the interpretation of female athletes posing nude or semi-nude for calendars, pre-Olympic photo spreads or men's lifestyle or sports magazines. One side argues that the visibility of sportswomen in such images is a form of exploitation and sometimes interprets the women as suffering from false consciousness. For example, Weaving (2012) discussed images from nude calendars, *Playboy* or *FHM* that involved individual women or teams from six sports and four nations, but refused to accept the sportswomen's own interpretations of their actions, describing them as "unconvincing" and proposing that "the empowerment athletes might claim to have experienced is a false sense of empowerment" (p. 246). Conclusions like this neither recognize female athletes' agency nor fully reflect the current, commodified, mediascape in which the bodies of both male and female athletes are re-presented as sexy and attractive. In contrast, researchers who draw upon third wave feminist theorizing argue that female athletes' interpretations of their choices, and the resulting images, need to be taken seriously. As Heywood and Dworkin point out, "it is no longer simply the case of naïve women who buy into a false sense of power when they pose for the camera and we need to educate them about their mistake":

Instead, athletes already know the criticisms and reject them. They know exactly what they are doing. They know, and they do it all the same, both because they do not experience themselves as manipulated and powerless, and because like many others in the MTV generation...they see rightly visibility in the media as the only 'real' outlet for the achievement of selfhood this culture offers. (p. 85)

Indeed, athletes like then-WNBA star Lauren Jackson, who posed naked for a special Olympic issue of Australian art photography magazine *Black+White*, did not feel objectified, citing the gender balance of half the nude images being male athletes, and reporting that she was "really happy" with the resulting images, over which she had complete control: "This celebrates the athletic body and how much work you put in. We do it the right way; we don't starve ourselves" (Evans 2004, para. 16). Jackson's view of athletic female bodies providing alternative role models is common. For example, U.S. swimmer Amanda Beard, world record-holder and 7-time Olympian, who also had complete control over the choice of her images in *Playboy*, said about her earlier *FHM* photos that "I've had so many women approach me and say, 'We love seeing a good, healthy body being portrayed as beauty'" ("Thorpe's former" 2007, para. 21). Australian world champion surfer Stephanie Gilmour has posed naked for an ESPN

photo shoot and, aged 25, appeared semi-nude for a Roxy web commercial; a choice supported by her parents who described the commercial as “cheeky but tasteful” (Stolz 2013, para. 9). Reflecting the cultural studies contention that new articulations borrow from and rework existing discourses, Gilmour’s father was quoted as seeing the Roxy commercial as similar to the “bare bums” visible daily on Australian beaches or “lingerie ads” that fill mainstream clothing catalogues (Stolz 2013, para. 13).

In contrast, researchers in several recent studies asking females to interpret different images of sportswomen categorized semi-nude photographs as representing “soft pornography” (Kane et al. 2013) or “sexualized athletes” (Daniels 2012), and presented them for interpretation as either/or rather than both/and options. However, this approach was subverted by some female athletes in ways that may reflect a third wave feminist perspective. For example, some elite sportswomen refused to select only one image to represent them or their sport: instead, half “spontaneously” requested to choose two images, which were almost always a sport-action and an off-court feminine image (Kane et al. 2013, p. 282). The athletes’ usual rationale was explained by Kane et al. (2013) as either embracing “being both an athlete and a ‘girly’ girl” (p. 288) or “being (and being seen as) well rounded and balanced” (p. 287). The researchers interpreted this choice as a reflection of a “dual identity” reflecting the athlete’s “desire to be seen as a serious athlete ... while simultaneously wanting to be portrayed in a more feminine manner” (Kane et al. 2013, p. 283). However, I suggest that these views could also be read as reflecting a third wave sensibility in which physical competence and femininity are combined into a coherent whole, rather than Kane et al.’s implicitly separated dual identity. Ultimately, Kane et al. express concern that no matter what their sexual orientation, many sportswomen “feel compelled to overtly exhibit qualities considered traditionally feminine” (p. 289), and conclude that, in line with the bulk of published research, “as long as sportswomen are portrayed in ways that sexually objectify them, they will not be given the respect they deserve” (2013, p. 293).

However, a third wave theoretical lens leads to potentially different interpretations, such as Heywood and Dworkin’s contention that the extension of “the ideal image repertoire” to incorporate “male femininity and female masculinity” is “rewriting the symbology of the female body” away from (hetero)sexual objectification to an “active, self-present sexuality of a body that signifies power and achievement” (2003, p. 82). Thus, without overstating the case, they propose that athletic female bodies, “when coded as athletic, can redeem female sexuality and make it visible as an assertion of female presence, and make that presence amenable to a range of sexualities” (Heywood and Dworkin 2003, p. 83). This is not to argue that all sexy, or sexualized, images of

sportswomen ‘redeem’ female sexuality in empowering ways, or that all sportswomen want or have access to the pretty and powerful discourse. Indeed, 20 % of the female athletes in Kane et al.’s study rejected it, with one saying “we’re not sex symbols and I’m not going to stand for being ... the sexy athlete” (2013, p. 288). However, given the increasingly sexualized and commodified media landscape for both men and women, I agree with Heywood and Dworkin that the sexualization critique “no longer seems to wholly describe what is happening” (2003, p. 85).

Some of the current complexity in representation is evident on Totalprosports.com, which regularly publishes ‘lists’ related to sportswomen. Some, such as 21 Female Sports Firsts, 11 Female Sports Pioneers and annual Most Googled lists tend to highlight sportswomen’s athletic competencies, in both descriptions and images. Other lists focus more directly on (hetero)sexuality, such as 25 Insanely Hot Female Athletes You Should Be Following on Instagram, The 50 Hottest Female Athletes of the 2014 Winter Games, 15 Female Athletes We’re Thankful For in 2013, 35 Female Athletes Rocking Bikinis, 15 Female Athletes Who Were Born to Wear Spandex and 15 Female Athletes Who Belong in the *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue (e.g., Esteban 2014a). The content of these lists strongly reflects third wave feminist theorizing that images and narratives “can be both empowering and oppressive” (Beaver 2014, p. 16). While some images and descriptions fit neatly into definitions of sexualization, others are more complexly located in the interstices of athleticism and idealized femininities. Consider the introduction to the 2013 most-Googled female athletes list (Esteban 2014b, para. 1), which simultaneously acknowledged the popularity of athletes (“at the forefront of public consciousness”), the multiple discourses that inform who might become important enough to search for (“some...are here for their achievements...some...because they’re extremely easy on the eyes”) and, in the closing statement (“Often, both”) the cultural value of sporting excellence aligned with dominant ideals of beauty.

Heywood and Dworkin remind us that it is the context of the image, not whether or not it contains nudity or overt sexuality, that is important, arguing that different images “occupy different registers informed by different codes” (2003, p. 88). As a result, some images that would historically have been considered sexualization may instead communicate “power, self-possession, and beauty, not sexual access” (Heywood and Dworkin 2003, p. 80). One description on Totalprosports.com explicitly addressed this issue, while noting that “the end result is the same – you end up on a magazine cover in a bikini” (Cosmell 2010, para. 16):

When a men’s magazine wants you to appear on the cover in a bikini, it’s sketchy. But when a fitness mag wants you on its cover in a bikini, it’s a testament to the hard work and healthy lifestyle that embodies your outlook on your athletic training. (Cosmell 2010, para. 16)

Yet, at the same time, this new rule of representation is not open to all. The pretty and powerful rule reinforces and normalizes Whiteness, heterosexuality and an exceptionally narrow range of body types as representing ‘ideal’ femininity. As a result, sportswomen represented within this discourse (who are invited to pose for men’s and sports magazines, particularly in the United States, or included in hottest female athlete lists) most often represent the most elite athletes in the world who are young, White, explicitly or implicitly heterosexual, and with lean, toned body types that reflect idealized femininity.

Conclusions

More than 30 years after media representation of sportswomen made its way onto the research agenda, a new generation of female athletes is charting their course through an increasingly open and complex media landscape. This review of the existing research on media coverage of sportswomen identifies a far greater diversity of representations than has been acknowledged in most published work, including the need for more exploration of different cultural contexts. Rules of representation such as Model Citizen, Us and Them, and even Serious Athlete are reported more often outside the United States where research focuses more on discourses linked to femininity and gender difference. In contrast, in nations with fewer female athletes achieving on the world stage, researchers have identified the ways in which discourses of nationalism often outweigh discourses of femininity, creating space for both the Serious Athlete and Model Citizen.

In identifying the similarities between the rise in cultural visibility of strong, tough and beautiful female movie heroes and strong, tough and beautiful female athletes I suggest that we are seeing the emergence of a potentially new form of femininity that refuses to cede physical strength and sporting excellence to men and thus represents an important rupture in the articulation of sport and masculinity (see also Heywood and Dworkin 2003; Thorpe 2007, 2011).

Calls for a greater focus on intersectionality, and particularly the intersections of race, gender and sexual orientation, direct our attention to the undeniable evidence of Whiteness and heteronormativity that defines most popular female sport heroes, sportswomen asked to pose for men’s magazines, and who have attracted large followings on Facebook and Twitter. Very little research to date has explored alternative sites of media representation where non-normative or non-dominant femininities, sexualities and body types might prevail, although Kearney’s (2011) study of a roller derby TV show reported that non-normative roller derby identities were obscured in favour of White, feminine and heterosexualized representations.

However, even as new rules emerge in the context of third wave feminism and Internet sharing technologies, the echoes of former rules and cultural discourses continue to reverberate (Hall 1981). I argue that we are in the mediated version of Hewitt’s (2010) ‘messy multiplicity’, as contradictory discourses play out in a increasingly globalised and unbounded media landscape. The intertextuality and ever-multiplying spaces (virtual and real) of women’s sport are such that audience and researcher interpretations take place in a matrix of constantly shifting representations. The old rules of media coverage are changing, and the rise of the pretty and powerful sportswoman as a cultural icon presents theoretical challenges with which feminist scholars are still grappling. However, if sport feminists truly embrace the concept that there is no necessary belongingness between sport and masculinity, then the focus must become the reflective exploration of conditions under which this articulation is weakened, disrupted or ignored completely.

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