

Group: 'Fempower'

Members: Beatrice Borrini, Aitana Francisca Lopez Cambra, Maria Francesca Folgieri, Katharina Handke

Course: Communication practices, diversity and inclusion

Professor: Prof. Claudia Padovani in collaboration with Dr. Alice Baroni

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Sport, women and media: A match against LGBTQIA+ stereotypes

Introduction

This project aims to contribute to the revision of Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action by examining LGBTQIA+ representation in sports media, focusing on how portrayals of queer female athletes either reinforce or challenge traditional gender and sexual norms. By analysing these depictions, we aim to understand their impact on societal attitudes toward sexuality, gender, and athleticism.

Research background

Some research has highlighted the long way to go in achieving inclusion within sports. For example, Denison and Kitchen (2015) found that only 1% of all participants in their study believed that LGBTQIA+ people were "completely accepted" in sports culture. Their research also revealed that team sports, in particular, were perceived as more homophobic than other areas of society. Given that sports often reproduce heteronormative spaces where individuals who do not adhere to the dominant gender and sexual "rules" are seen as deviant, it raises an important question: how are these inequalities reproduced in the media?

Connection to Section J

This project intends to propose itself as a necessary and additional action to strategic objective J2: "Promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media". In particular, we aim to integrate the actions to be taken by the media, non-governmental organizations and the private sector: "Promote extensive campaigns, making use of public and private educational programmes, to disseminate information about and increase awareness of the human rights of women".

Our Projects directly contributes to the revision of Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action, which aims to promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media. Our findings suggest that LGBTQIA+ women are often depicted in a way that emphasizes their identity rather than their athletic achievements, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting their visibility in sports media.

Methodology

The methodology involves a detailed, comparative analysis of the language and narrative structures used to represent LGBTQIA+ athletes in sports media across Spain, Italy, Germany and Iran. We analyze articles from national newspapers and sports media outlets, focusing on approximately eight articles per country, spanning from the 2020 Olympics to the present. The research employs the Media Monitoring Tool, modified to better suit our topic, to assess how media representations of LGBTQIA+ athletes influence societal perceptions of sexuality, gender, and athleticism.

A significant aspect of this study is the cross-country comparison, aimed at identifying both similarities and differences in how women athletes who identify as LGBTQIA+ are represented across different national media landscapes. With this research we aim to understand how media representations of LGBTQIA+ athletes influence societal attitudes toward sexuality, gender, and athleticism, and highlight areas where sports media can become more inclusive and supportive of diversity.

Results

In Spain, the main themes that emerged from the analysis are: focus on controversy, emphasis on biological factors, criticism from external public figures to fuel polarisation, limited exploration of transgender athletes' rights and inclusion, focus on resilience and achievement, recognition of criticism and need for a broader debate.

As for Italy, LGBTQIA+ athletes are primarily portrayed through their identity rather than their athletic achievements. Media often focus on personal struggles, such as coming out, and emphasize private life over sports performance. In some cases, inappropriate language is used, particularly when discussing transgender athletes, which can contribute to their marginalization.

In Germany, media coverage of LGBTQIA+ athletes often emphasizes their gender identity over athletic accomplishments. The focus is on their personal journeys and struggles rather than their performance in sports. This leads to tokenism, meaning that athletes are being celebrated as symbols of progress rather than having their achievements fully recognised. There is a lack of attention to the broader social factors, such as race or class, that affect these athletes.

Additionally in Iran, we unfortunately found no information about women athletes in the LGBTQIA+ community in any of the national newspapers that we analysed. Furthermore, there's not a lot of information about women in sports in general. In Iran, being part of the LGBTQIA+ community is considered a crime and has punishments. There's almost no evidence of women who define themselves as part of the LGBTQIA+ community and still can pursue their sports goals nationally.

Similarities: In Germany, Italy, and Spain, LGBTQIA+ athletes are often highlighted for their gender identity rather than athletic achievements, leading to tokenism. Media focus on eligibility and fairness issues, particularly around transgender athletes, sparks criticism. Additionally, there's limited coverage of broader social factors, creating a gap in intersectionality.

Differences: Italian media uses more inappropriate language, particularly for transgender athletes, while Spain and Germany maintain a more balanced tone. Unlike Germany, Italy, and Spain, Iran largely ignores LGBTQIA+ athletes, especially women. Furthermore, while Germany explores the cultural and societal factors influencing the perception of LGBTQIA+ athletes, Spain and Italy lack such broader discourse. Finally, in terms of media coverage, Italian media focuses more on queer athletes' private life and associates them with their romantic relationships, whereas Spanish and German media doesn't.

Conclusion

This project emphasizes the need for better representation of LGBTQIA+ athletes in sports media, aligning with Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action. Our findings show tokenism and a lack of intersectionality in portrayals, with countries like Italy, Spain, and Germany focusing more on identity than achievements. Iran largely ignores LGBTQIA+ athletes due to societal barriers. To improve, media should focus on balanced representation, considering factors like race and class. Our educational podcast will engage young audiences by presenting these issues in a conversational format, promoting a deeper understanding of LGBTQIA+ representation in sports media.

Output

The final output of our project includes an educational podcast episode on the purpose of our research. The podcast is designed to engage a younger audience, specifically those aged 14 to 19, with reliable content based on secondary sources and research findings from the project. This format allows for a conversational approach, making complex topics more accessible and engaging for the audience. The idea of the interview also helps to highlight the diverse perspectives surrounding LGBTQIA+ representation in sports, providing a balanced view of both the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ athletes and the progress being made in media coverage.

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