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Gender Representation in BBC: A Discourse Analysis of Media Coverage at the Olympics 2024

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Abstract
Media representation is crucial in the construction and dissemination of gender ideologies. Global events such as the Olympics and their coverage in the media have a significant influence, hence the need to study them. Recent studies on the Olympics have focused on economic, ecological and political impacts but no book length study is found on gender representation in Olympics media coverage. Thereby, using van Dijk's model under the broader umbrella of Feminist Theory, the current study aims to qualitatively uncover the underlying gender ideologies in news articles on the recent global event of the Olympics 2024.

Keywords: Media Representation; Feminist Theory; Discourse Analysis; Gender Ideology; Gender Representation; Olympics; Gender.

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1. Introduction:

The study of gender constructs has long been an important topic in the field of Gender Studies as they display the cultural and historical norms that society places on being masculine and feminine. Representations of these constructions in media are vital in the studies of gender as media plays a crucial role in the

construction and dissemination of gender ideologies. It is important as it is not only a reflection of existing societal views but is also involved in their construction. These include ideas about gender that are prevalent in a culture, such as the idea of masculinity and femininity, understanding of the norms associated with genders as well as the way genders are represented in discourse. Hence, global events such as the Olympics and their coverage in the media have a significant influence. This study analyses the discourse used in the media coverage of female athletes in selected news articles form BBC News for the Olympics 2024.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Gender ideologies are changed and effected by media representation, and that effect can move in the wrong direction as well. Despite that, representation of genders in the Olympics remains an understudied topic. Thereby, the current study aims to uncover the underlying gender ideologies in news articles from BBC News on the recent global event of Olympics 2024.

1.2. Research Aim

The current study aims to uncover the underlying gender ideologies in the news articles from BBC News on the recent global event of the Olympics 2024.

1.3. Research Gap:

There is much research on gender inequality in media representation as it often reflects societal views. In the context of the Olympics, the topic remains understudied as recent research has focused more towards the economic, ecological and political impacts of the games. Therefore, the current study aims to qualitatively uncover the underlying gender ideologies in news articles from BBC News in the recent global event of Olympics 2024.

1.4. Research Objectives

- To examine how the female athletes were represented in the media coverage of the Olympics 2024 by BBC News
- To compare BBC News' representation of female athletes with the ideological identities prevalent in the society

1.5. Research Questions

1) How were the female athletes represented in the BBC News' coverage of the Olympics 2024?
2) What is the comparison of the representation of the female athletes with the ideological identities prevalent in the society?

1.6. Significance of the Research

By uncovering gender ideologies in media representation, the study will contribute to existing discourses in feminism and gender studies. Furthermore, the findings of the study can be used to conduct workshops, seminars, conferences etc. for increased critical media literacy and media representation, as well as awareness about journalistic ethics and gender equity.

1.7. Scope and Limitations

Though the study looks rather extensively at language use, the generalizability of the study is not high due to the limited size of the sample. It would be difficult to conduct such an extensive and in-depth analysis on a larger sample size. However, as CADS studies have been conducted using Olympic news articles as discourses, studies like the current one may be helpful in filling the gap. Since CADS studies large look at corpus data and collocation, they overlook minute language use that can underpin ideologies and gender constructs, hence these studies may be more useful in conjunction.

Moreover, the study does not provide a broad, overarching perspective, but minutely focuses on language used in news articles published only during the Olympics. As the Olympics are a mega sport event, they have a very large

coverage and span at least a year and a half of reporting, including reports of venue, sponsors, themes, team information, preparations, Paralympics and coverage of issues that are resolved after the games, as well as future aspirations of outstanding athletes. By focusing only on the publications during the Olympics, the study takes a very limited view while delving very in-depth into language use via discourse analysis and its ties with gender construction.

2. Literature Review:

Gender constructs are specific social and cultural ideas and norms that shape the meaning and expectations of gender within a society. These constructions are based on gender ideologies of a society, are learnt and reinforced through socialization, education and cultural practices. It is gender constructions that determine what roles and identities are acceptable and/or appropriate for different genders in a society (Connell, 2002; Lorber, 1994). By the definitions stated, gender and gender constructs seem almost indistinguishable, however, gender is the umbrella term that refers to social identity as it is tied to biological sex. Meanwhile, gender constructs is a more specific term that refers to the gender expectations which are built around the ideas of gender. It includes specific socially and culturally defined ideas and norms that apply to the meaning and expectations of gender within a society that can vary across different cultures and historical periods.

Butler (1990) discusses how gender is a series of acts that are performed to represent a gendered identity. It rejects the idea of traditional gender norms and criticizes society's understanding of gender binaries. The study introduces the idea of gender performance, wherein genders becomes something produced through repeated acts such as behaviors and rituals rather than something that is inherent or instinctual to an individual. It even critiques feminism for a narrow understanding of gender as it groups all women under the same umbrella and does

not account for the diversity of gender identities and their individual experiences. Thus, the understanding of gender is reduced by a simplistic unification. The seminal text also discusses the possibilities of different forms of self-expression which can subvert normative understanding of gender constructs.

Gender identity dictates gender relations, and thus, gender constructions are built with pre-existing power imbalances that dictate social interactions, including those between opposite genders. Erving Goffman's (1977) intersectional analysis of gender discusses how all interactions are symbol of gender roles, and how these roles and identities are influenced by cultural norms, power structures and institutionalised practices. It links gender identity with gender performance and the performance of these roles according to societal expectations are in turn what reinforces them in daily life. Goffman argues that the arrangement between males and females represents larger power inequalities. The scale of power dynamics is tilted towards men as they are the one dictating the rules that shape culture, which gives them more social power. Overall, genders roles are reinforced through interactions and modified through feedback from social cues, hence identities closely conform to gender constructs. Similarly, R.W. Connell (2005) explored the concept of masculinity and the way it is constructed and influenced by social, cultural and historical context. The book introduces the idea of hegemonic masculinity which refers to the dominant form of masculinity at a given time, however, the concept can also be applied to gender constructs as the preferred form of masculinity is essentially a gender construct that any given society is idealising. The idea more complex than simply male dominance over females, as certain traits/behaviours like aggression and low emotionality give men power and privilege over other men. It sheds light on hierarchy perpetuated by society where masculinities are positioned as superior

or inferior in comparison with other masculinities, hence adding complexity to exiting power dynamics in society.

As gender constructs already exist in society, the addition of media only adds complexity to the matter as media representations reflect and validate existing stereotypes and societal norms. The media plays a significant role in constructing and perpetuating gender norms by portraying gendered behaviours, identities and roles in various ways through content such as reporting, advertising, entertainment etc. (Gill, 2007). Through repetition of gendered tropes and stereotypes, such as women being responsible for household chores and nurturing children while men are shown as strong and dominant, the media helps solidify and validate these roles as societal norms and expectations. These representations cannot be said to be neutral as, even if they reflect social views, they uphold power dynamics inequalities between genders and create barriers towards positive social change. For example, studies have shown that media often discriminates against non-binary, transgender ad gender non-conforming individuals, hence reinforcing a binary understanding of gender that excludes any identity other than masculine or feminine (Gauntlett, 2002). Thus, the media's role in shaping and reinforcing gender constructs is significant as it is exposed to very large audiences, it can drive public opinion and policy and also shape a society's expectation of what it means to be masculine or feminine at an individual level.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design:

Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, J.

W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). Consistent with qualitative research, the approach used in this study is inductive. It takes a bottom-up approach, whereby the data is observed and then conclusions are drawn about the text. Hence the research is exploratory as it does not have any underlying theories or hypothesis and any theories that emerge during the research have emerged from the data itself.

3.2. Data Collection:

For the purpose of this study, only secondary data sources were used in the form of news articles collected from the official website of BBC News. Firstly, data was delimited from web searches of the most recognised and popular channels in the world, one as selected for the purpose for this study. The channel was selected as it is watched by a significant audience from the Western hemisphere (especially USA and Europe). From this channels, further delimitation was done by purposive selection of 5 news articles. All data was collected between the duration of 26th July to 11th August 2024, the duration of which was decided by the official dates of the Paris Olympics 2024.

3.3. Analytical Framework:

The research questions in this study are addressed using ideological discourse discussed by van Dijk in his book Ideology and discourse: A multidisciplinary Introduction. The framework has been adapted to work as an analysis model for this study.

3.4. Theoretical Framework:

The study will use feminist theoretical perspective, and by utilizing it to examine the language used in news articles, the underlying gender constructs will be studied. Feminism aims to understand the nature of gender inequality so it will be useful in studying how society's gender ideologies influence the representation of men and women and makes it different from each other given that both are in a set of similar circumstances (i.e. the Olympics for the purpose of this study).

The feminist lens will be used in conjunction with van Dijk's ideology and discourse model to analyse gender ideologies reflected within the text.

Although the study has limited generalisability, the implications are largely global as the news channels and articles were also collected with the understanding that these three channels cover the audience inclinations of a large part of the Western hemisphere and the Middle East.

4. Data Analysis:

Article 1: Olympics win 'sends message to mums with dreams'

In response to question number one, linguistic analysis reveals that the topic and messaging of the article is explicit and overt. Even though it is talking about a feminist topic/topoi, the choice of diction is negative and creates negative associations by using *nouns* and *verbs* that diminish the purpose of the topic, such as the use of the noun "naysayers", the verb "impossible" and the phrase "all that time and effort", showcasing that Byrne's decision to continue her career is being evaluated. There is also a paradox/ lack of functional coherence in the rhetoric that it tries to build by saying that mothers pursuing their dreams must be proven to have value, thereby contradicting itself and implying that females focusing on things other than childrearing does not have inherent value in itself. Hedging has been used to make these statements as the article does not make these declarations directly or paraphrase them but instead quotes the athlete and her partner on it. However, no contrast or disclaimers are used in the article, even if the level of detail is low.

Article 2: Biles achieves 'more than wildest dreams' in Paris

In response to question number one, linguistic analysis shows that the champion female athlete is given a mostly negative representation. There is use of negative diction in association with her and the rhetoric built by the news channel is self-contradictory in some places. A stark contrast and comparison has been made

with the first place winner, Andrade, and it is implied as if Biles' making errors and having difficulty with the crowd is her own fault. Paradoxical statements have been made regarding Biles and they have affected the local coherence of the article as they leave a confusing impression on the reader. Details have also focused and emphasised on the errors Biles made, instead of her record making achievements, showing some underlying racism as well.

Article 3: Boxing controversy - what we know and what we don't

In response to question number one, linguistic analysis shows that negative diction has been used in association with the female athletes and it has added to the negative representation they got in the media. Although the article has taken a heteroglossic approach in approaching the issue, it has failed to clarify that it is providing multiple points of views. Instead, by selectively using disclaimers, the article builds a rhetoric against the female athletes and creates the implication that the rumours might be true about the genders of the athletes. Similarly, hedges have been used to state this stance against the female athletes, with biased evidentiality being selectively used against them as well. Judgements and evaluations have not been used while reporting on information from various authority figures and bodies, however, disclaimers have been used to distance the news channel from confirming that the female athletes are female.

Article 4: Asher-Smith & Neita miss out as Thomas takes 200m title

In response to question number one, linguistic analysis shows that the winner of the 200 meter sprint is given a very positive representation. Though literary language is used in association with her, it gives her a powerful framing and keeps the agency of her win towards herself. The diction and framing are consistent throughout the article towards Thomas. However, the same is not true for Neita, for whom the literary language and diction are used to emphasise and intensify failure. Sentence syntax and diction have been used to make dramatic contrasts

of her ambition against her failure and degrade her skills, creating the implication that females can only be appreciated if they are at the top, anything less is unacceptable.

Article 5: Keely Hodgkinson 'class of her own' says 1964 winner

In response to question number one, linguistic analysis shows that initially, Hodgkinson is given a very positive representation as she is the first British woman to ever win in that particular Olympic event. The diction and framing used in association with her is also positive and elevates her performance. However, further analysis reveals comparison with Packer, who won the same event half a century ago. The contrast is biased against both athletes as it downgrades both their skills and abilities and ultimately, follows the gender constructs of not praising females for their achievements or finding flaws in their achievements so it is never a win for the females themselves.

In response to question number two, it can be seen that the representation of female athletes by BBC News is in accordance with ideological identities prevalent in society, particularly archetypes such as Emphasized Femininity defined by Connell (2005). Analysis has shown that most female athletes have been represented negatively, often with contrasts and disclaimers that discredit and degrade the achievements of the females. The athletes are held up to exacting standards and are represented in such a way that emphasizes and intensify failure while contradicting the feminist rhetoric that the news channel seems to build. Although underlying racism can be seen, most female athletes seem to be represented in a biased manner. Traits such as reproduction of domestic and caregiving identities, nurturing roles, dependence and lack of individuality can be seen in the representation. Although Paechter (2018) revised the concept of hegemonic femininity and tried to unlink it from masculinity, the analysis of BBC

News articles shows that media representations from mainstream media news channels have not followed the trend.

5. Conclusion

Analysis of news articles from the duration of the Olympics found that female athletes are not given much positive representation, with only some exceptions. In topics chosen for reporting on athletes, other than events, female athletes with children are especially mentioned as feminists rhetoric is built around their participation. Moreover, even females with very high achievements have some negative representation, revealing gender norms of wanting women to be perfect and finding fault with their achievements in all cases. In cases where gender became a problem, as there were some gender controversies in the Olympics, the news channel chose to distance itself from the female athletes and reported biasedly against them while appearing to report neutrally. The representations are found to be consistent with female ideological identities prevalent in society, despite studies and feminist push towards more equitable representation and equality.

Recommendations

- Future research can conduct same studies at a larger scale with a larger sample
- The findings of the study can be made more generalizable by collecting data from multiple mainstream news channels to compare them against each other as well

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