Feminist Sport Media Studies in SSJ: Mapping Theoretical Frameworks and Geographies of Knowledge Production

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This conceptual review identifies the contributions of the Sociology of Sport Journal to the subfield of feminist sport media studies. Since the first issue of Sociology of Sport Journal, over 60 articles addressed primarily the media representations research area of feminist sport media studies, using a range of theoretical frameworks that mirrored theoretical shifts in the field. An empirical analysis of geographical knowledge production indicates that the scholarship in Sociology of Sport Journal in this subfield is primarily based in the United States and focuses on Western contexts. The article concludes with a reflection on the importance of special issues and interdisciplinary collaborations in feminist sport media studies.

In a brief “state of play” commentary on gender equality and the media published in Communication & Sport, Billings and Hardin (2022) observed that the “fight for gender equity is global and yet profoundly nuanced” (p. 591). In terms of media coverage, the Olympics and soccer World Cup illustrate movement toward gender equality, yet based on data points in some contexts “progress can be dubbed specious at best” (Billings & Hardin, 2022, p. 591). Indeed, empirical evidence on media coverage of women’s sport points to persistent inconsistencies between the long-standing patterns of marginalization on “traditional media” to seemingly equitable representations during international events, but only in some geographic contexts and only when fueled by nationalism (e.g., Antunovic & Bartolucci, 2023; Billings & Angelini, 2019; Bruce, 2016; Cooky et al., 2021; Delorme, 2014). Social media create spaces for complex articulations of “new femininities,” as athletes use their voices to challenge hegemonic constructions of athleticism (Thorpe et al., 2017; Toffoletti et al., 2018). The campaigns in professionalization of women’s sports take on feminist discourses that connect sport to broader women’s rights movements (e.g., Szo et al., 2020).

Feminist discourses, after decades of fruitless calls to practitioners, seem to have reached the media industries—and sport industries. In the United States, for instance, feminist and social justice-informed discourses are now visible in journalists’ event coverage, in advertisements, promotional materials, films, and in athlete advocacy and fan engagement (Cooky & Antunovic, 2022). Women’s sports and coverage of women’s sport have become an important site for cultural struggle over feminist politics in ways that were perhaps unimaginable in the 1990s or early 2000s “girl power” environments. However, the growing financial investment in (some) women’s sports and corresponding visibility are occurring within social context(s) where structural misogyny, systemic racism, and anti-LGBTQ policies rule in the legal and political realms (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). These issues require sociology of sport to continue critical feminist analyses, yet also raise numerous challenges for evaluating the implications of neoliberal logics in relation to structural changes toward justice.

This commentary provides a conceptual review of scholarship in “feminist sport media studies” in the Sociology of Sport Journal (SSJ) over the last 40 years with three primary purposes. First, I situate the studies in SSJ in relation to research trajectories in the broader “feminist sport media studies” subfield at the intersection of sociology of sport, feminist media studies, and sport communication (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018; McClearen, 2018; Toffoletti, 2016). Then, I identify patterns and changes in theoretical directions in feminist sport media studies articles in the journal over time. Finally, I critically analyze the geopolitics of knowledge production in the field. To that end, this paper responds to the SSJ special issue call to go through the archival histories of the journal and examine how publications in the specific area of “feminist sport media studies” have changed in who produces knowledge and which geographic contexts dominate methodological decisions.

In this commentary, I argue that SSJ has served a central role in the theoretical and empirical contributions to the research in two primary areas: (a) representations of sportswomen and women’s sports in the media and (b) gendered dynamics of the sport industry. SSJ has featured feminist sport media studies scholarship primarily authored based in the United States, studying the U.S. context, with a few exceptions from and focus on Canada, Australia, and several Western European countries. As such, I caution against the undertones of geopolitical hegemonies in Western, Euro-American scholarship to call for a transnational feminist sensibility to knowledge production. The commentary concludes with central questions for the field of feminist sport media studies within SSJ and in sociology of sport more broadly. Systemic change in women’s sports demands nuanced, theoretically informed solutions. To that end, SSJ’s role continues to be an integral space for critical scholarship and foundation for public sociology.

Research Trajectories in Feminist Sport Media Studies

Feminist sport media studies have become a well-established research trajectory at the intersection of sociology of sport, feminist media studies, and sport communication. Early research on women in sport media in the 1970s emerged primarily in two areas: sport studies within a broader focus on theorizing on women’s place in sport (e.g., Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983) and in mass communication in the context of women’s role and representation in newsrooms and media coverage (e.g., Creedon, 1994). The significance of this research area remains pertinent in multiple fields as inequalities.

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The challenge of how to best theorize issues related to media representation of female athletes has long occupied feminist researchers. The ongoing challenges of this project are evident in the size of the research corpus, which includes many thousands of published articles dating back to the 1970s. (pp. 359–360)

The attention on women’s sport in the media seems to grow as evidenced by new books (Cooky & Antunovic, 2022; Harrison, 2021; McClearen, 2021), thematic collections in journals (Billings & Hardin, 2022; McClearen, 2018), and a steady stream of submissions on this topic at conferences, such as the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the International Communication Association, and the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, among others. Feminist sport media studies scholarship is published in numerous journals in sociology of sport (e.g., International Review for the Sociology of Sport, and European Journal for Sport and Society), media studies (e.g., Feminist Media Studies), sociology (e.g., Gender & Society), and in recent decades sport communication (e.g., International Journal of Sport Communication and Communication & Sport). While synthesizing this body of work is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to situate the analysis of SSJ’s contributions within the larger subfield.

Feminist sport media studies refer broadly to scholarship that takes a feminist perspective on sports media representations, industry norms, and fandom. Most typically, these studies focus on the quantity and quality of coverage of women’s sports, constructions of femininity and athleticism, and status of women in the sports media industry (Bruce, 2016; Creedon, 1994). Beyond these modalities, Toffoletti (2016), writing in SSJ, observed that “Feminist sport media analysis has been at the forefront of interrogating the gendered, racialized, heteronormative and classed dimensions of global media sport that sustain hierarchies of domination and privilege” (p. 206). In a synthesis of scholarship in an edited book on feminist media theory, Antunovic and Whiteside (2018) identified the central issues of feminist sport media studies as “representation of female athletes” (p. 113), “women, sports, and the workplace” (p. 116), and “consumption/fandom” (p. 119), but argued for a more specific engagement with critical feminist media studies frameworks to examine changing cultural conditions. In Feminist Media Studies journal’s introduction to a collection of commentaries, McClearen (2018), likewise, argued that scholars ought to “push scholarly boundaries” to examine the following research areas: “(a) the resurgence of feminism, (b) sports media industry studies, and (c) a focus beyond (White) femininity” (p. 942). Indeed, a common theme among these “state of the field” pieces is that sports scholars need to engage more explicitly with the range of frameworks in feminist media studies to interrogate cultural conditions in sports media.

Feminist theory in media studies has made an important contribution to the sociological study of the relationship between gender, sport, and media. In fact, feminist media studies books include sport as a site of analysis to interrogate the ways in which the masculinist culture of the newsroom intersects with the masculinist cultures of sport (e.g., Chambers et al., 2004; Harp et al., 2018; van Zoonen, 1994). Further, scholars situated in journalism, mass communication, and communication more broadly have significantly contributed to the theoretical and empirical study of gender, sport, and media in production, content, and consumption, with particular attention to strategies for change in the industry (e.g., Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018; Hardin, 2013; Harrison, 2021; McClearen, 2021). The applied implications of media practice—as implemented also in educational settings—are particularly important in challenging structural barriers. Through the analysis of studies in SSJ over the last 40 years, I analyze the theoretical directions identified in this section.

Methodology

To respond to the call of this special issue, I analyzed the corpus of research in the SSJ from the first issue in 1984 until issue 39, Volume 3 in 2022. As SSJ is published four times a year, a total of 153 issues were included in the analysis. To locate the articles, I used the EBSCOhost database specifically searching within the SSJ with multiple rounds of search with different terms, including “women” and “media” or “feminism” or “feminist” or “gender roles” or “feminist theory.” The search term of media was also extended to include “journalism” or “television” or “internet” or “social media” or “advertising” or “magazines” with the search term “gender.” In addition, I searched for the names of authors whose work is in this area. This commentary focused on research articles only, eliminating annotated bibliographies and book reviews. Excluded were also articles that only marginally addressed the media. Articles pertaining to men’s sports without references to women’s sports were excluded except in cases when the subject matter was pertaining to violence against women. In those articles, the authors critiqued male dominance and masculinist newsroom cultures, which are a central issue of concern in feminist media studies (van Zoonen, 1994). I also reviewed the SSJ database in case search terms missed some relevant articles.

This search generated a total of 62 articles. Dividing the publication cycles into 5-year increments, the journal typically published several articles per time period, except between 2014 and 2018 when the journal published 12 articles (Figure 1). The highest number of articles on the topic was published in 2016 (n = 5). Articles available on the journal Website “ahead of print” were not included. As such, the last 5-year period will need to be updated with the subsequent issues in 2022 and all 2023 issues to produce an equivalent time period.

Despite the attempt at a comprehensive approach to the relevant literature search process in SSJ, I write this article as a commentary, rather than a systematic conceptual review. This commentary identified articles in SSJ that inform—and in some cases, serve a foundational role—in feminist sport media research. However, I do not synthesize the theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and findings of this body of work. Rather, the purpose of this article is to provide insight into how central questions, assumptions, and arguments have become taken up in SSJ over time and then utilized in aligned scholarly spaces with particular attention to the interconnectedness of thought. The analysis loosely follows a chronological storytelling of SSJ’s theoretical directions, but also makes connections between frameworks, citation practices, and research foci across years.

Analyzing Feminist Sport Media Studies Scholarship in SSJ

“Denial of Power” and “Contested Terrain” in the 1980s and 1990s

The first articles on media representations published in the journal’s first year focused on representations of female athletes in magazines. The theoretical approaches and methods of analysis serve as a precursor to current approaches as well. In sociology of sport research, the importance of media analysis was connected to the “to be her, you have to see her” logic—namely, that media are a
socializing force in girls and women’s participation in sport. Rintala and Birrell (1984) articulate this argument as follows:

Appropriate role models might be found in a girl’s immediate environment where people she knows personally can be seen participating in and enjoying sport [ . . . ] But in fact a cast of potential role models or socializing agents extends well beyond the immediate familiar world into the symbolic world of media. Whenever she reads a magazine or watches television, a young girl may be exposed to the media image of women in sport. (p. 231–232)

This particular study draws on research of Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, and Gitlin, whose work is also foundational in mass communication theory (McQuail, 2010).

In the same issue of the journal, another article also analyzed media representations of male and female athletes in magazines, but with a primary concern about the commercial pressures on gender stereotypes. Hilliard (1984) examined the treatment of tennis players in U.S. magazines, focusing on “whether female athletes are given more negative treatment in the media than male athletes” (p. 252). For this article—and others published later—Boutilier and SanGiovanni (1983) served as a key text both for empirical findings and for the theoretical frameworks that identified masculinist sports media practices and representations.

Indeed, the problems around gendered constructions of “socially acceptable” sports perpetuated by media coverage (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983) served as a point of entry for Duncan and Hasbrook’s (1988) study on televised women’s sports. Informed by Gitlin, Gramsci, and also Kanter and Metheny, this study applied a hermeneutic analysis to examine themes in the text by focusing on “ideological threads” of “not only what is being said but on how it is said” (p. 7; emphasis original). The authors identify problems in representation to ultimately argue that “this denial of power to women in the sporting world is harmful and wrong-headed on multiple grounds, including “health, personal, developmental, and moral” (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988, p. 19). Notable in this article is the call to action, namely:

We can never be content with the way things are, nor can we lay the blame on society or the mass media for the exclusionary and discriminatory policies of sport. That would be missing the point. When we discover the kinds of great inequities that our study has revealed, we as sport and leisure educators have an ethical obligation to try to change the structures of sport—to strongly encourage female participation in team sports, to petition the media to present sporting women as athletes and not as objects of sexual gratification. (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988, p. 20; emphasis added)

The call for change and specific identification of “we” as “scholars” reflect a sociology of sport oriented toward transformation. This study merits further individualized attention for setting the stage for a broader research agenda on gender constructions in televised sport: studies by Messner, Duncan, and co-authors in the 1990s and early 2000s (e.g., Messner et al., 1993, 2003), and today the longitudinal study of televised sport news in Los Angeles and on ESPN today continues with Cooky (now at Purdue) and Messner’s collaboration with co-authors from the University of Southern California (see Cooky et al., 2021). Still in the 1980s, Messner’s (1988) article on “The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain” provides a historical analysis of gender ideologies in sport, specifically pertaining to the ways in which “female athleticism” challenged “male domination” in the 20th century (p. 197). The sheer volume of studies that built upon this research group’s work in SSJ, Journal of Sport and Social Issues, Communication & Sport, and notably in “nonsport” sociology journals such as Gender & Society reflects the multidisciplinary potential of feminist sports media scholarship. In this way, SSJ’s role—both in the past and currently—is invaluable in creating space for such work.

In the early 1990s, scholarships on gender, sport, and media constructions were visibly building upon each other in their citation practices, conceptual frameworks, and methodologies, to a certain extent. To create a perhaps oversimplified narrative of this work would sound something like this: Sport and—by extension—sport media construct “sexual difference” in ways that perpetuate male dominance (Duncan, 1990, p. 25). Women’s participation in sport and sporting places challenges masculinist constructions of sport,
which makes sport a “contested [ideological] terrain” (Messner, 1988; Kane & Disch, 1993). Mass media, in this view, are a “powerful site for fashioning hegemony” and marginalizing female athletes (Daddario, 1994, p. 278). While the theoretical and methodological approaches vary to some extent, evident is an influence of critical and cultural studies that focus on interpretations of text vis-a-vis dominant ideologies (Davis & Delano, 1992). The central focus here is on power—or the ways in which sports media coverage discursively denies female athletes power (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988).

SSJ articles published in the mid-1990s also start with another narrative that prevails for decades: the disconnect between the rise of participation numbers and the stagnating media coverage. The issue that sports media representations do not “keep up” is identified in several other articles (e.g., Daddario, 1994; Halbert & Latimer, 1994; Kane & Buyssse, 2005; Pedersen, 2002; Sagas et al., 2000). During these early decades, one set of studies use quantitative content analysis to provide descriptive percentages of differences between representation of male and female athletes, while another set of studies use qualitative analyses (e.g., textual, rhetorical, and linguistic) that emphasize the subjective meanings of texts. Trivialization, marginalization, sexualization, and “ambivalence” emerge as central representation strategies during this time. Broadly, the foundational literature of this work builds on cultural studies (e.g., Stuart Hall), feminist media studies frameworks (e.g., Lisbet van Zoonen), and/or feminist sport sociology scholarship (e.g., Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Kane & Parks, 1992; Messner, 1988). Studies in SSJ continue to examine representations of women in sports media outlets and other publications, such as women’s magazines (e.g., Kissling, 1999; Pirinen, 1997) and, later, internet-based platforms (e.g., Khomutova & Channon, 2015; Sanderson & Gramlich, 2016). These “rules of representation” serve as central concepts feminist sports media scholarship well into the 2010s (Bruce, 2016).

Measuring “Gender Equality” in International Sport

Starting also in the 1990s, a substantial focus of research in SSJ centers on the print, televised, and digital media coverage of international sport, especially the Olympic Games. These articles focus on constructions of femininity (e.g., Christopherson et al. [2002]; Daddario, 1994; Duncan, 1990), constructions of the “feminine narrative form” (Daddario, 1997, p. 103), and racialization and sexualization of female athletes (Vincent, 2004). Christopherson et al.’s (2002) article about the 1999 FIFA Women’s World Cup becomes a starting point for a later article in SSJ by Christopherson in collaboration with other authors (Díaz McConnel et al., 2022) to track how themes regarding to description of players, stereotypes, and tone have changed in relation to the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup media coverage. This article and many others in this research area focused on newspaper coverage.

A substantial area of research on the Olympics that examines quantitative and qualitative differences based on gender emerges in the 2000s, and I would argue, becomes one of the most robust and most consistent areas of research in feminist sport media studies. Informed by sociology of sport scholarship, but primarily situated in relation to media study frameworks of “framing” and “agenda setting,” the studies published in SSJ build upon the work of Billings (2008) and later, Billings et al. (2017), which “clocks” gender differences in prime-time coverage to provide insightful longitudinal patterns as to whether Olympic media coverage by rights-holding broadcasters in the United States is truly “equal.” None of the articles by Billings and co-authors in this specific research area are published in SSJ (except for a paper on masculinity in narratives of male figure skaters that was not captured by the search terms, MacArthur et al., 2017). Nevertheless, this work informs other articles in the journal. In SSJ, a study on Olympic media guides (Carter et al., 2015) follows this approach most closely. Xu and Billings (2021) extend the media representation literature (Bruce, 2016; Musto et al., 2017), including some articles published in SSJ (Cooky, 2017; Duncan, 1990), to apply the “framing male and female athletes” literature to the Olympic Channel’s news site (Xu & Billings, 2021, p. 413). This work is a part of Xu and co-authors’ larger research agenda on gender equality in the context of the Olympic Channel to focus on content produced not only by journalists but also international governing bodies.

An article that examines “gender equality” in Olympic coverage with additional methodological complexity merits further attention. Delorme and Pressland (2016) extend the focus of analysis to newspapers in France, Great Britain, and Spain to consider specific “modalities” to assess equality in coverage. These four modalities entail (a) “the global representation of each sex in the considered Olympic Games,” (b) “the representation of each sex in the considered Olympic team,” (c) “the percentage of available events for each sex in the considered Olympic Games,” and (d) “the representation of each sex in the number of events for which a given country fields a team/athlete” (p. 320). These modalities build upon Delorme’s (2014) earlier theoretical work in Mass Communication and Society, which challenges the assertion that women were “really underrepresented” in Olympic media coverage (p. 121). In other words, Delorme’s broader argument is that participation numbers matter in evaluating quantitative “equality,” though the author urges for “caution” in interpreting fairness, considering the persistent biases and gender stereotypes documented in qualitative analyses. Importantly, this study provides findings beyond North America, though still focuses on the Western (European) context. As discussed later, subsequently published articles in SSJ provide further theoretical and methodological nuance in analyzing and interpreting the coverage of women’s sport in an international context.

Intersectionality and Reading Sport Critically

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, most of the articles in this research area still focus on the United States, but the analysis examines intersections of gender with race, sexuality, and disability. Several studies focus on the coverage of individual athletes to build upon previous studies and also expand the range of theoretical frameworks. For instance, Jamieson (1998) examines media coverage of golfer Nancy Lopez by citing the concept of “matrix of domination” by Hill Collins and drawing also on the work of Anzaldúa and Baca Zinn. Jamieson (1998) argues:

Multiracial feminism offers the analytical rigor needed to comprehend Lopez’s varied subordinated and dominant statuses and makes room for multiple standpoints and varied histories in making sense of the Lopez texts. (p. 347)

Another valuable contribution of this article is that the media analysis goes beyond “mainstream” sports media outlets (e.g., Sports Illustrated) to include Latino media.

A focus on an individual athlete is also apparent in an article by Schell and Rodriguez (2001), which examines the “ambivalent”
representations of Paralympian Hope Lewellen. In addition to citing feminist sport sociology literature (e.g., Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Messner, 1988; Pirinen, 1997), this article also brings in DePauw’s work on disability to the conversation to argue that “experiences of women athletes with disabilities are often theorized through ableist or sexist lenses whereby disability and/or gender are erased from the analysis” (p. 128). That said, based on the review, no other article in the data set examined media coverage of Paralympian women.

In 1999, McDonald and Birrell (1999) published an influential methodological article, upon which they expanded in a book titled Reading sport: Critical essays on power and representation (Birrell & McDonald, 2000). “Reading sport critically” becomes an influential theoretical and methodological foundation for subsequent feminist sport media studies. While outlining the complexities of their approach is beyond the scope of this review, the purpose of “reading sport critically” is to explore the ontological and epistemological statuses of texts, in ways that “transcend the individual” and become a “site for reading broader social relations” (p. 292). More specifically, this analytical approach allows for a “complex interrelationship of the producer of the text and the reader of text rather than the text itself or the self as a text” with the following implications:

This move opens up other opposing, resistant versions and readings, and it acknowledges the particular social and historical contexts within which the text is constructed and/or consumed. (p. 292)

These ontological and epistemological notions of reading text draw upon Geertz, Barthes, Foucault, and Fiske, as well as Hall, to assert that texts have material consequences.

In several articles, scholars—who studied at the University of Iowa—“critically read” media constructions of violence against women (Walton, 2001) and representations of sports bras (Schultz, 2004). Later, Cooky et al. (2010) use this framework to examine how “mediated ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, and class are articulated” in the case when a sports commentator made derogatory comments about the Rutgers University women’s basketball team (p. 141). Indeed, these analyses of media texts illustrate that sport texts “provide relatively open vantage points from which to observe, critique, and intervene in the complex and contradictory interactions of the power lines of ability, age, race, class, nationality, gender, and sexuality” (McDonald & Birrell, 1999, p. 296).

By the mid-2000s, articles published in SSJ in previous decades became integrated into citation practices to provide empirical evidence for literature reviews about contemporary media representations of women’s sports. Building upon Gramsci’s theorizing about power and hegemony, scholars use Connell’s conceptualizations of hegemonic masculinity and masculine hegemony building (e.g., in Cooky et al., 2010; Kian et al., 2008; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009). Patricia Hill Collins’ conceptualization of intersectionality likewise serves as a theoretical foundation (Apostolis & Giles, 2011; Cooky et al., 2010). In some cases, scholars use the term “frames” informed by critical sociological research—not by mass communication research rooted in media psychology that examines “framing” in the context of agenda setting (McQuail, 2010). Regardless of theoretical framework, the majority articles center representations (or portrayals) in text with only a few exceptions that draw on interviews with athletes (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009). Content analysis, thematic analysis, and discourse analysis of media texts using both quantitative and qualitative approaches continue to build upon the previously published studies in SSJ, expanding the analysis to newly emergent digital media platforms (e.g., Sanderson & Gramlich, 2016; Wells & Darnell, 2014). At the same time, the 2010s represent a theoretical and methodological shift in the journals’ scope in feminist sport media studies.

Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Self-Representation

While the frameworks outlined in the previous sections still provide foundations for research (e.g., hegemonic masculinity is still widely used), scholars have also examined the discursive constructions of gender in ways that complicate the empowerment/oppression dichotomies toward a focus on women’s subjective experiences. Several articles in SSJ over the years exemplify this approach. Markula’s (1995) research is situated “within the postmodern cultural condition” (p. 429) to draw on Susan Bordo’s work on the relationship between power and femininity and Carol Spitzack’s aim to examine “how the discursive dialogue of the public arena materializes in the women’s everyday experiences” (p. 431). Markula’s research remains influential in expanding the theoretical boundaries of sociology of sport broadly. In the media study area specifically, a later study draws on Deleuze and Guattari and moves away from identity as a starting point to analyze “assemblage formation” (Liao & Markula, 2016, 171). A Deleuzian approach has not gained popularity in feminist sport media studies, but Foucauldian conceptualizations of power, discipline of the body, and discourses did.

In the early 2010s, feminist scholars engaged with Foucauldian perspectives to examine digital media platforms. The central question of this area of research becomes whether and how these new sites, which essentially remove “gatekeepers” of legacy media, have a “transformative potential” to challenge power dynamics and engage in feminist advocacy (Antunovic, 2017, p. 43). In SSJ, MacKay and Dallaire’s (2013) article exemplifies a Foucauldian approach. The authors conducted interviews with female skateboarders who created a blog project to examine women’s reflexivity, self-presentation, and cultural production through digital platforms (p. 192). Building upon this study, poststructuralist approaches to power also informed subsequent research. For instance, McCormack’s (2017) study on women in mountain biking started with an epistemic assumption that “new media can create space for more voices in the conversation, allowing for a wider representation of athletes or participants in a given field” (p. 118–119). New media, in this context, are not necessarily solutions to broader structural problems, but still become sites of self-expression, community building, and alternative narratives. Important to note that several studies from these theoretical assumptions focused on action sports.

These examples might not reflect an altogether “shift” in feminist sports (media) research, but do indicate a distinct direction whereby scholars—at least in SSJ—moved away from hegemonic masculinity to disrupt the associations between masculinity and athleticism, calling for a more nuanced and complex interpretation of media representations, self-representations, and constructions of identity. These articles exemplify a broader moment of reflection among feminist sports media scholars, as evidenced in Bruce’s
(2016) synthesis in Sex Roles to disrupt the “almost obligatory recitation of marginalization, trivialization, ambivalence and sexualization of sportswomen” and utilize theoretical frameworks that provide different interpretation (p. 376). The next section discusses notable theoretical directions that engage specifically with feminist media studies frameworks.

**Third-Wave Feminism, Transnational Feminism, and Postcolonial Theory**

Feminist media studies frameworks, notably the theorizing of Gill, McRobbie, Rottenberg, and Banet-Weiser, become a foundation for the complex theorizing on the conceptual distinctions between third-wave feminism, postfeminism, and neoliberal feminism (e.g., Heywood, 2018; Thorpe et al., 2017; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). In SSJ, this tradition is advanced primarily (though not exclusively) by scholars based in Australia and New Zealand, including Toffoletti and Thorpe, respectively. Indeed, Toffoletti’s (2016) conceptual article in SSJ outlines a direction for feminist sport media studies research on media representations of sportswomen. Responding to Bruce’s (2015) commentary in the International Review for the Sociology of Sport that questions whether the established theories within the boundaries of the discipline can sufficiently explain recent phenomena, Toffoletti’s (2016) article in SSJ specifically makes the case for the following ways to engage with feminist media studies:

- greater critical engagement with postfeminism by feminist sports scholars, not only as a period after feminism or a context in which new sexualized feminine subjectivities manifest, but as a set of characteristics through which patriarchal and capitalist logics operate. (p. 206; emphasis added)

This direction connects sportswomen and women’s sports to the broader “gendered neoliberalism in popular culture” as observed in the United Kingdom and the United States (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020).

Neoliberal feminism and postfeminist discourses become a center of critique in a special issue on the Global South that centers postcolonial and transnational feminist frameworks (Toffoletti et al., 2018). Focusing on media coverage about Muslim women during the Olympics, Stevenson (2018) makes a case that “the globalization of women’s sports requires a critical transnational feminist lens to interrogate and theorize how empowerment discourse are networked, circulated, and dispersed in a global sport economy” (p. 239). Thorpe et al. (2018) conducted research in Afghanistan to examine a skateboarding sport for development program to argue that, in the case of their particular study, “increased coverage of physically active girls and women from the Global South does not necessarily yield better results” (p. 229). The authors emphasize the importance of the specific cultural and political contexts to critique postfeminist discourses and assumptions that inform feminist analyses of sports media in the Global North (Thorpe et al., 2018).

Beyond the special issue on the Global South, several more recent studies continued to build upon the works of Bruce, Toffoletti, Thorpe, and others to challenge neoliberal feminist discourses. The central arguments problematize the individualistic notions of “choice,” “freedom,” and “empowerment,” whereby sport and media organizations celebrate achievements in “gender equality,” while relying on sportswomen’s athletic labor to address inequalities (Pavlidis et al., 2020; Rahikainen & Toffoletti, 2021). Further, gendered neoliberalism is also pertinent in the work of women who work in sports journalism, as evidenced in Coche’s (2021) study with Ghanian journalists covering international sport in ways that challenge Western feminist logics. In these articles, transnational and postcolonial feminist theories inform the analysis, but the central theoretical frameworks are still based on Western literature on neoliberal feminism. Nevertheless, it appears that scholars are bridging sport sociology studies (including those previously published in SSJ) with feminist media and broader feminist theoretical approaches. Further, these articles appear to be moving away from an attempt to “measure” difference in media representations of men’s versus women’s sport and instead rely on qualitative, critical approaches centered on discourses and articulations (Bruce, 2016). A more detailed analysis of author location and sites of analysis reveals additional patterns in knowledge production.

**The Geographies of Knowledge Production in Feminist Sport Media Studies**

The 40th anniversary special issue call proposed a reflection on Euro-American centrism and the politics of knowledge production in the sociology of sport. Indeed, these conversations are relevant for feminist sport media studies work, which is at the intersection of multiple fields. A recent article in Journalism Studies pointed to the global inequalities in knowledge production broadly and journalism studies specifically where most of the authors are based in North America or Europe—and even special issues that focus on the Global South are “not sufficient” (Ekdale et al., 2022, p. 17). For the purposes of this commentary, I provide empirical insight into the geographies of knowledge production of feminist sport media studies articles in SSJ. This analysis included two “variables”: (a) geographic focus of analysis in each article and (b) the country of the authors’ institutional affiliations. The purpose of this analysis was to inquire into the politics of knowledge production in SSJ to respond to the special issue theme. The empirical analysis of the 62 articles in the “data set” for this commentary indicates U.S. centrimb both in geographic focus of analysis and authors’ institutional affiliation.

Geographic focus of analysis refers to the scope of the analysis in terms of data collection. In feminist sport media studies, articles typically analyze media texts produced in a particular country (e.g., newspapers, television broadcasts, and magazines) or interview journalists or fans from that country. Some articles included data sets from multiple countries (e.g., Delorme & Pressland, 2016), but these were rare. The United States was the sole focus of 40 of the 62 articles and was also included in two additional articles. Overall, 67.7% (n = 42) of all articles included U.S. media in the data set. Canada appeared in five (8.1%) articles total, four of which focused solely on that context, and Australia was included in four (6.5%) articles total, but appeared as a sole country of analysis in only two articles. Media texts, journalists, and/or fans in all other countries appeared only in one or two articles. Some geographic regions, such as South America, are completely absent. One article focused broadly on the “Global North” (Stevenson, 2018), while another article examined the Olympic Channel content (Xu & Billings, 2021), which is international in focus. Overall, North American, to some extent European, and certainly Anglophone hegemony are prevalent in knowledge production.

It is relevant to note that a drastic shift occurred in the focus of analysis after the first 25 years of the journal. Prior to 2009, 91.2% (n = 31) out of the 34 articles were solely on the U.S. context. After
2010, 39.3% (n = 11) of the 28 articles were published on the U.S. context. An institutional history SSJ could provide insight into why this shift might have occurred.

In terms of author affiliations, U.S. dominance is once again evident (Table 1). Notably, 66.7% (n = 72) of all authors and 66.1% (n = 41) of first authors were at institutions in the United States at the time of publication. Canadian institutions are also represented in 13.9% (n = 15) of all authors and 12.9% (n = 8) first authors. Authors based in New Zealand, Australia, and Switzerland also contributed with a few publications, while authors at institutions in Finland, Norway, Germany, France, Sweden, England, and the Czech Republic contributed to the journal with one or two articles. Overall, institutions in only 12 countries are represented in “feminist sport media studies” publications in SSJ (Table 1). A shift similar to geographic location of focus occurred in terms of authors’ institutional affiliations, especially after 2011.

The institutional affiliation of the authors, in some cases, obscures the cultural diversity of the researchers’ positionalities and cross-cultural research. Several authors earned their undergraduate degrees outside of the United States (e.g., China and France) but hold academic appointments in the United States. While not reflected in their SSJ publications, these authors often publish on media in multiple contexts. For example, in the SSJ article, Coche (2021) interviewed journalists from Ghana who covered the 2018 Men’s FIFA World Cup. Previously, Coche has published on televised Olympic broadcasts in the United States (e.g., Coche & Tuggle, 2018), but also conducted a comparative analysis of media coverage of women’s sports in Canada, France, Great Britain, and the United States (Coche, 2015). In the SSJ article, Xu and Billings (2021) analyzed the content of the Olympic Channel, but in other publications, Xu and co-authors also analyzed sports coverage in China (e.g., Xu et al., 2018, 2020) and Australia (Xu et al., 2019). As such, individual publications in SSJ might not reflect the scope of the authors’ work. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that even authors who write about non-U.S. contexts might not be publishing those papers in SSJ.

Anglophone hegemony, likewise, merits further attention in feminist sport media studies from several perspectives. For feminist sport media studies, which is inherently rooted in communication practices, working with media texts raises particular challenges of translation. Publishing in SSJ, Kim (2013) addressed this tension through a “methodology of decolonizing translation” as applied to analyzing media texts about women golfers on the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) tour in Korean newspapers (p. 345). Kim (2013) argued for attentiveness to “cultural asymmetries in sport, especially when translating from the geographically local and linguistically marginal to hegemonic English” (p. 354). Such nuances might be valuable for any studies that engage in the process of translation.

Another point of consideration is whether the authors’ institutional affiliations align with the context that they analyze. In most cases, there is a consistency (authors based in the United States analyze U.S. media, authors based in Canada analyze Canadian media, and authors based in Switzerland analyze Swiss media). However, in some cases, the scope of the analysis is broader or different than the country of the author’s institutional affiliation. Are authors then conducting research on a context outside of their own cultural spaces? Or are (some) authors, so to speak, returning “home”? How do multilingual authors and authors who have lived in multiple countries make decisions about their scope of the analysis? And, when they analyze the U.S. context, do they use “hegemonic,” Western frameworks or do they challenge U.S. hegemony in their research process? Admittedly, I struggle with these questions in relation to my own work from a U.S.-based institution yet with knowledge of a (non-Western) region that, thus far, has received no attention in SSJ. (To be transparent, I have also not submitted manuscripts on that region to SSJ, but published in other outlets). Interviews with authors about their decision making regarding the context of analysis vis-a-vis their own identity would provide insight into epistemological and methodological consideration for specific studies, as well as reveal the complex dynamics of their journal selection process.

Overall, these patterns raise several questions regarding SSJ’s role in perpetuating and/or challenging (Western) Euro-American centrism in sociology of sport—and in this case feminist sport media studies—scholarship. SSJ’s initial focus on the United States—and Canada—is perhaps a reflection journal’s affiliation with the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport. As discussed in the “Research Trajectories” section, SSJ is only one of the many spaces where authors submit feminist sport media studies scholarship. Other journals, such as the International Review for Sociology of Sport or more recently Communication & Sport, which are associated with international conferences often held outside of the United States, might draw a broader scope. Thus, a central question for future analyses is to interrogate the role of each journal in the theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions of feminist sport media studies.

More specifically to SSJ, this analysis can be a starting point for the following questions for the journal’s future: Do the articles included in this commentary mirror broader patterns in SSJ? In other words, is the U.S. hegemony in feminist sport media studies a function of the journal’s scope, a function of the subfield, or an intersection of both? After all, the articles analyzed here are only a small percentage of the total publications over the 40 years of the journal. Perhaps the other articles in this special issue provide insight into broader patterns.

If these limitations are consistent across SSJ, then the editorial board would be advised to consider whether SSJ intends to remain focused on primarily the U.S. and Western contexts or whether expanding the geographic, national, and cultural scope is a priority for the journal. If, however, feminist sport media studies are less

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Conclusions

For 40 years, SSJ has been an important space for the development and growth of feminist sport media studies as an emerging area of research. The studies published in SSJ might not be representative of the theoretical, methodological, and geographic versatility of this subfield. It is also important to acknowledge that not all authors cited here might consider themselves “feminist sport media studies” scholars. My intent here was not to assume a scholarly identity, but to identify the theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions of these studies to the subfield. Clearly, SSJ plays a central role in the development of feminist sport media studies. Based on this review, the SSJ articles contribute significantly to the media representations’ tenet of feminist sport media studies (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018), while also expanding resurgence of feminism and critiques of (White) femininity (McClearen, 2018). The journal has published quantitative content analyses, but prominent are also qualitative methodologies, informed by a range of feminist theoretical approaches that recognize the researchers’ positionality in knowledge production. Notable is the epistemic approach that centers participants’ perspectives in relation to media representation. Few articles focus on gendered industry norms from the perspectives of practitioners (Coche, 2021; Schoch & Ohl, 2011). This absence indicates that substantial body of scholarship on journalists’ attitudes and experiences is published in mass communication—rather than sociology of sport—journals (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018). Fan-dom and consumption of mediated women’s sport are generally an underresearched area in feminist sport media studies, as also indicated in the scarcity of articles specifically on that aspect. Overall, I concur with Toffoletti’s (2016) assessment that feminist sport media analysis has been at the “forefront of interrogating ... hierarchies of domination of privilege” (p. 206), but as illustrated in the geopolitics of knowledge analysis, the scope has hardly been “global.” The asymmetries in knowledge production in SSJ and in feminist sport media studies need to be examined more closely.

Theoretical approaches across SSJ’s issues are not replacing “old” theories to make room for “new.” Rather, feminist frameworks exist in parallel, in conversation, and in continuity. Some theoretical directions are apparent at various times, such as the utilization of hegemonic masculinity in the late 1990s and early 2000s or the move toward third-wave feminism in the 2010s. However, establishing a clear chronological segmentation of theoretical directions would be challenging because the articles draw on multiple theoretical foundations—and implicit assumptions—of previously published sociology of sport research, while also engaging with concepts from media studies, gender studies, and other fields.

Certainly, feminist sport media studies scholars need to be more attentive as to negotiating feminist frameworks that derive from the U.S. and Western context vis-à-vis analysis of media outside of geopolitical hegemonies. To that end, reading research by scholars who are situated in the contexts of analysis and from scholars working in the regions would be essential—even though such intellectual work requires significant linguistic and cultural knowledge. A deeper reflection on citation practices is beyond the scope of this commentary, but postcolonial and transnational feminist theories offer valuable frameworks for epistemological and methodological questions in feminist sport media studies, as well as for future analyses of knowledge production dynamics. Further, a more comprehensive review that includes multiple journals in this multidisciplinary area would provide valuable insight into how SSJ mirrors or disrupts broader patterns.

Inevitably, this commentary emphasized some trends, while omitting others—leaving space for a thorough “state of the field” review article in feminist sport media studies. For instance, scholars could examine: What are the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the research in this field? How do dominant stories about feminism appear in sociology of sport and in feminist sport media studies specifically? How do interdisciplinary, multinational, and/or cross-generational networks shape the research trajectories in feminist sport media studies? How does feminist sports media scholarship inform education, practice, and advocacy? The institutional and disciplinary position of feminist sport media studies is complex and distinct, likely depending on the cultural context. As such, the practices of “public sociology” and the role of research and education toward social change require a consideration of local, national, and global dynamics.

This commentary makes the glaring omissions abundantly clear but also reveals moments of continuity in feminist sports media research in SSJ. As sport communication expands as a subfield (e.g., interest groups at conferences, standalone conferences, and journals), I anticipate that the network of scholars writing in feminist sport media studies will grow and the volume publications (or at least submissions) in relevant journals will increase. However, I am concerned that—due to this fragmentation—bridging sport sociology, feminism media studies, and sport communication in terms of collaborations, citation practices, and research traditions will become increasingly difficult. Building bridges across these disciplines is essential for feminist sport media studies to remain theoretically grounded, methodologically diverse, relevant for media practice, and social justice oriented. SSJ is a foundational journal for the development of feminist sport media studies—at least in the U.S. research and educational contexts. As we reflect on the journal’s 40 years, the question becomes whether and to what extent SSJ can retain its central role in the theoretical development of feminist sport media studies. In other words, what will be the role of SSJ amid the proliferating spaces that draw feminist sport media scholarship? In order for the journal to become a “go-to” space for emerging scholars in this research area beyond the United States, a special issue that specifically addresses the theoretical, methodological, empirical, and geographical gaps identified in this commentary would be one starting point. In the meantime, researchers who intend to submit their work to SSJ need to be familiar the long history of feminist research on women’s sports and the media to make meaningful assertions. Likewise, authors—and reviewers—ought to be attentive to the contextual limitations of the frameworks and findings in SSJ. I hope that this commentary can serve as a starting point and an invitation for both emerging scholars and scholars who are new to feminist sport media studies.

References


Thorpe, H., Hayhurst, L., & Chawansky, M. (2018). ‘Once my relatives see me on social media . . . it will be something very bad for my


