

## A Content Analysis of Micro Aggressions in News Stories about Female Athletes Participating in the 2012 and 2016 Summer Olympics

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### Abstract

According to research on the use of micro aggressions on female athletes in the United States, women are expected to fit a traditional feminine mold even when participating in physical competition. The purpose of this study is to determine how often and in what context micro aggressions were used in reporting on female Olympic athletes during the 2012 and 2016 Summer Olympic Games. Data obtained in the analysis show that, currently, many instances of sexism, racism, second class citizenship and restrictive gender roles are present in coverage of these elite female athletes. Micro aggressions were found in articles covering masculine and feminine sports, black and white athletes and features stories outside of results from the Games. Implications as well as future research directions are discussed.

**Keywords:** Female athletes; Framing of sports; Micro aggressions; Olympic news coverage; Sexism in athletics

### Introduction

An Olympic athlete's experience is a unique one. Not only is he or she considered to be one of the best in the world in a respective sport, but he or she is tasked with representing qualities of an entire country. He or she has likely been devoted to the sport since childhood, and it is a defining part of one's identity. Being atop this pedestal also subjects these men and women to the epitome of public discretion of appearance and ability. This paper focuses specifically on gender-based micro aggressions [1] as it is hypothesized that micro aggressions towards women are rampant and apparent in sports media. According to the theory of micro aggressions, media attention and coverage is often times give to the sexual objectification of women's bodies, their attractiveness, physical attractiveness and/or race [2]. Although research regarding gender disparities in sports exists for both males and females, this study will focus predominantly on female Olympic athletes.

Millions gather around the television every four years to witness the "best of the best" compete for pride, praise and a shiny medal to take home. If it cannot be watched live, supporters often read up on results via social media or Internet news sites. With ease of access to news, though, modern consumers may become numb or passive to the inherent problems present within sports coverage. Micro aggressions pervade reporting, but the knowledge and effects of these subtle biases often goes unnoticed as the public becomes accustomed to it. Micro aggressions slowly enter everyday conversation and become normalized.

It has been six months since the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and over five Women in the western culture are often dissuaded by subtle messages found in media from engaging in masculine-labeled sports, sports are actually becoming more popular among female athletes as time progresses. Despite the increase in women participating in sports, it has been argued that the increase is still not strong enough to change the strict traditional gender roles, objectification, and a preoccupation often associated with female athletes [3]. While women athletes are fully aware of the sexism and racism in sports, many beginning to challenge these views by reframing what it means to be feminine in society [4]. The purpose of the current research is to identify the types of gender biases and micro aggressions

printed in news stories about female athletes competing in the 2012 and 2016 Olympics. Summer Olympic sports and the female athletes participating in them will be examined to determine how these athletes are represented and portrayed in the news.

Analysis of journalistic shortcomings can provide better insight into how female athletes may be affected by micro aggressions. Cambridge University Press has been studying differences in the ways people speak about male and female Olympians for the past thirty years. They are studying the differences in the ways people speak about male and female Olympians and how those words might influence gender attitudes toward athletes.

This content analytic study seeks to examine coverage of female Olympic athletes in the 2012 and 2016 Games, looking at how micro aggressions are used in reporting on the women's performance, background and other areas. This study will also examine whether or not the sport is considered "masculine" or "feminine" in nature and if that shows any correlation to how female athletes within the sport are covered. The role of race and racial micro aggressions in covering women will also be studied to analyze the intersection of sexism and racism within Olympic coverage by news and magazine outlets.

### Background women as Olympians

Women's participation in sports is at an all-time high, as the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Olympics reported nearly 45 percent of all athletes to be female [5]. However, women are still viewed as women first and athletes second [6]. Similar too many progressive women's movements, access to equal sports training and participation were a 20<sup>th</sup> century battle not easily won.

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Throughout the 1800s women took part in sport for recreational purposes, beginning to form athletic clubs to play sports such as tennis, croquet, bowling and archery in the early 1900s. These groups were still for society's elite, though. It was not until the passing of Title IX in 1972 that women were allowed to participate in extracurricular athletics at school and college, thereby receiving better, earlier training and being more prepared for sports participation at higher levels. Title IX prohibits sex discrimination in any educational program or activity receiving any type of federal financial aid.

However, physical prowess and athletics have historically been associated as masculine traits; women are seen as anomalies in the sports world [7]. Taken together, this background helped to create the overall research question that guided our literature review, creation of our codes and categorical variables, as well as the appropriate theory and method to employ.

*Research Question: Does the data suggest that the female Olympic athletes are targets for discrimination and bias in national news stories?*

*Response Variable: Micro aggression themes found in news stories.*

## Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted that seek to understand how people rate sports as being more or less appropriate for a particular gender. Koivula [8] explored, for example how college men and women categorize a variety of sports. The participants rated the options as either female appropriate, male appropriate, or neutral, based on how they believed society would classify the activities. Koivula found that in this particular study both men and women thought that most sports were gender-neutral (i.e., cycling, jogging, and tennis). Koivula further observed that many of the participants found that 30% of the sports were thought to be more masculine (i.e., football, weightlifting, and boxing) while less than 10%, they felt were considered feminine (i.e., gymnastics, figure skating, and synchronized swimming). Findings obtained in Koivula's research tells us that classifying sports in terms of masculine and feminine greatly influences males' and females' choices in regard to sport type, as well as their levels of commitment. Other scholars have conducted similar studies in order to provide more understanding of these classifications. Previous research suggests that individuals often avoid sports that are deemed sex-inappropriate because of the negative thoughts, feelings, and stigmatizations often experienced, feelings like anxiety about not succumbing to traditional gender roles, body image insecurities, homophobic harassment, racial insults, and attacks based on physical attractiveness [9,10].

## Micro aggressions and female athletes

Micro aggressions "are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group." According to published research, micro aggressions in coverage of women's sports assist in creating a "dismissive, hostile and sexualized environment" for female athletes at all levels. The identifying characteristic of the athlete, then, is not her strength, dedication or performance; it is her gender.

Ho and Kaskan [11] applied the themes published in the Sue [2] research and broke those insults into seven distinct categories: sexual objectification, second-hand citizenship, use of racists/sexist language, restrictive gender roles, sexist/humor jokes, a focus on traditional feminine appearance and a focus on physical shape and body image.

These researchers felt these themes allowed more precision when examining how female athletes in the U.S. are framed in sports and/or news stories [11]. This study examines two international sports events; the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Summer Olympics. We applied the same themes as Ho and Kaskan [11] article with the distinct purpose of analyzing the frequency of these seven themes appearing in Olympic news coverage.

The present study hopes to fill a gap in the literature on female athletes by asking the question: Is there a relationship among ethnicity of female Olympians, the type of sport, and masculinity/femininity of the sport on the frequency of micro aggressions found in news stories? Scholars believe that micro aggressive messages are revealed by White individuals who may not be aware or recognize the bias and implications of their statements and/or behaviors. In other words, micro aggressions are pervasive statements and behaviors that happen automatically. According to Sue et al. [12], micro aggressions happen so often that they are often dismissed and interpreted as being innocent, harmless jokes [12].

According to Sue & Capodiluo, micro aggressions are revealed in three distinct forms micro assault, micro insult, and micro invalidation. A micro assault is an "explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions" [12]. Examples include referring to someone as "colored" or "Oriental," "girl," "lady" and other descriptions according to their group and stereotype.

A micro insult, according to Sue et al. [12], is characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's heritage or identity. This type of micro aggression represents subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly conveys a hidden insulting message to the recipient [12]. The context in which micro insults is made are very important. In addition, these can occur nonverbally by conveying the messages that women and people of color and their contributions are not important.

Micro aggressions are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of women or people of color [12]. For example, when Blacks are told that "I don't see color" or "We are all human beings," the effect is to negate their experiences as racial/cultural beings [12].

Kaskan and Ho found that female athletes experience micro aggressions as a result of being objectified, assumed to be inferior to men, and told to behave as their gender role demands.

In terms of the assumption of inferiority, this variable refers to the idea that victories involving female athletes will be attributed to the opponent's weaknesses rather than her abilities. According to the literature, this theme also includes the way journalists use language to describe female athletes. For example, Duncan et al. Found that when female athletes are referenced in media, "they are often referred to as 'girls'" (p. 277). According to literature, language that refers to grown women as "girls" often times implies that grown women are immature and childlike.

In a recent study, Taylor & Kennedy obtained evidence of inferiority in women's sports coverage when the commentator said; "Okay, ladies, where's that Olympic smile?" According to Taylor and Kennedy, the commentator reminds us that the athletes (and viewers) often first and that their performance was more "lady-like" than Olympic. Basically,

assumptions of inferiority reduce the physical accomplishments of female athletes, de-emphasize physical talents of female athletes, and focuses on more stereotypical behavior that we expect from females (i.e., smiling and being nice).

Sexual objectification of female athletes in the media, according to a review of the literature, is prominent and demonstrated in mediated messages that focus on the athlete's sexual desirability—even for elite athletes like Serena and Angelique. Daniels [13] found that female athletes are not taken as seriously as male athletes because of their portrayals in overtly sexual poses.

Another component of a micro aggression is the restrictive gender roles that define acceptable behaviors based on gender [2]. This particular micro aggression is demonstrated in an overemphasis on femininity and associated with the sports that are perceived to be “feminine” like figure skating and gymnastics. When female athletes participate in masculine sports like basketball, media often times will downplay any traits of the athlete that are considered to be masculine. For example, in an article about Britney Griner, we learn that the WNBA offers make up and wardrobe sessions for all female basketball players—an attempt to make sure to protect their femininity. This theme led to the development of the first hypothesis to be tested in the current study:

*H1: Microaggressions will be higher for female Olympians participating in sports perceived as more masculine than micro aggressions found in stories for female Olympians participating in sports perceived as more feminine.*

Framed as a joke, we often find pundits who will often criticize Serena Williams, a top elite female tennis player, as a humorless individual simply because she will not recognize racial “jokes” as being funny. Sexist and/or racist “jokes” in media are very subtle. For example, a top sports announcer made a so-called joke for example so-called ‘joke’ is an example of a micro aggression that women often experience. In October of 2014, Shamil Tarpishchev, the Russian Tennis Federation president criticized Serena Williams’ appearance, likening her to being a man. This micro aggression will be analyzed by counting the news stories that frame their references to race and body shape in terms of simply being a (racist/sexist) innocent joke.

In addition to racist jokes, one search of YouTube videos will yield a plethora of videos making fun of the WNBA. In western culture, it is believed that women who play rough and aggressive team sports are or must be men or lesbian. According to literature on micro aggressions, jokes are often directed at another race, gender, or individual, and almost always have an underlying element of hostility to them. In other words, sexist or racist jokes in the form of micro aggressions are often aimed at someone else's expense offer individuals a means to indirectly express their anger or resentment towards the race, gender, or individual. Micro aggressions in the form of jokes are also a subtle way for user to keep the marginalized group held down to the role of second-class citizen. As mentioned earlier, most people are not aware that they rely on micro aggressions in that those who hide their anger or hostility, especially in a culture of political correctness. Most people who hide their anger or hostility in humor are not always aware that they even have these biases and harbor these feelings. When challenged, we often hear: “Oh, I was only kidding! Don't be so sensitive? Can't you take a joke?” Taken together the literature on racist and sexist jokes led to the development of hypothesis two:

*H2: Black female Olympic athletes will be more likely to be the target of racist's jokes than White female Olympic athletes.*

Finally, we examined micro aggressions found those news stories in which the reporter equates athleticism to their natural ethnicity (eg. body shape), body feature and shape. In a recent study on micro aggressions found in news stories about Serena Williams and Angelique Kerber, Frisby found evidence suggesting that in lieu of reporting on the newsworthy item that Ms. Kerber wins at Wimbledon, the event that really matters—mediated messages in news centered on Ms. Williams’ muscle tone body shape, her blackness, and clothing. Serena Williams, a female athlete who has been breaking records in the tennis world since 1999. The recent Frisby study found a significant relationship showing that sport news stories, online commentators, and journalists often use “jokes” and racial insults that point Serena Williams as either a “gorilla,” as “manly,” focus on her skimpy outfits and refer to her as a “savage beast.” In fact, Frisby retrieved a story that was supposed to be a compliment to Serena Williams. In this article, Dr. Peter Larkins shared his opinion about Ms. Williams’ body and compared her fitness level her competitors. In the article, Dr. Larkins was quoted as saying “It is the African-American race [14]. “They just have this huge gluteal strength ... Jennifer Capriati was clearly out of shape and overweight. With Serena, that's her physique and genetics.” [15] Media as well as sports fans seem to have a very strange fascination with the size and shape of a female athlete's body. Reading some of the articles and comments online that have been made about body type, we believe that the comments expressed by journalists and sports commentators are directly related to the cultural norms concerning body image, physical attractiveness, and ethnicity. It should be noted that journalists and sports commentators are not immune to the influences these norms have on our attitudes, opinions, and behaviors.

One important point must be made: Research on this topic reveals that it is not just White male commentators and journalists who make these types of micro aggressive comments [16]. We found an instance when Jason Whitlock, a black sports writer, criticized Serena Williams in a 2009 Fox Sports column. He attacked Ms. Williams for what he called her “oversized back pack.” He went on to say that; “I am not fundamentally opposed to junk in the trunk, although my preference is a stuffed onion over an oozing pumpkin.” Another sports commentator wrote; “Generally, I'm all for chunky sports stars ...but tennis requires a mobility Serena cannot hope to achieve while lugging around breasts that are registered to vote in a different US state from the rest of her.” This literature led to the formulation of the last and final hypothesis:

*H3: Black female Olympic athletes are more likely than White female Olympic athletes to receive micro aggressions related to physical features and body shape.*

We test the hypotheses with a sample of 165 news stories with 69 articles collected covering the 2012 Summer Olympics and 96 stories covering the 2016 Summer Olympics.

## Method

### Sample

This study examined newspaper and magazine articles from the 2012 and 2016 Olympic Games. Articles were pulled from national, international and some local outlets. The main sports examined were weightlifting, swimming, gymnastics, tennis, track and basketball. We searched the 25 highest-circulating U.S. newspapers that provided full-text continuous coverage within database. A search was conducted using full-text continuous coverage that began in summer 2012 and summer 2016. Using search term validation procedures described by Stryker et al. the following search terms were entered into the database:



\*summer Olympics 2012, \*summer Olympics 2016, \*or female Olympic athletes \*or female Olympic summer sports, or \*masculine sports, \*or feminine sports, and \*elite female athletes. The asterisk option retrieves words containing the letter string with all possible endings. The search yielded 723 total articles, 165 of which were specifically about female athletes participating in the 2012 and 2016 summer Olympics.

To answer the test our hypotheses and answer our guiding research question, we conducted a content analysis concerning the relationship among ethnicity, sport and masculine/feminine sports, we conducted search methods that would maximize trustworthiness (i.e., validity) of this theory-generating, exploratory study. Content analysis is a research methodology used to focus on common verbal elements contained in media messages—words and ideas expressed in words: arguments, claims, and themes. Quantitative content analysis requires a set of categories that coders use to assign numeric values to dimensions of messages.

### Story selection

The unit of analysis for this study was the news story. For all the providers collected, news stories that were focused on Olympic events or broader issues with racial or gender element were included in the study. If 50% or more of the time or space of a story was focused on Olympic events the story was included in the study. Excluded stories were editorials, op-ed articles, website or online stories, and stories appearing in social media [17]. Basically, if content appeared on a website during the week but was originally produced prior to the start of our study, it was not included. Stories produced during the entire summer Olympic period were examined.

For print publications that also had websites, stories that appeared in both places were included in the study once, as long as the text of the article was identical in each media venue. Stories that appeared in more than one of the papers were counted once in our sample [18]. For online news, every story that appeared on the home page of the site was coded, along with the top three stories on the home page. All national sports stories that met the above criteria were captured and coded.

### Story codes

The data in this study were created by a team of three experienced coders under supervision by the principal investigator [19]. The method of coding was based on micro aggression theme counts. To determine the frequency of the themes for print and online stories, researchers determined which of the seven micro aggression themes were either present or not present in the story.

### Measures

The micro aggression themes (categories) were derived from theory as developed by Ho and Kaskan [11] which are relevant to the study at hand. For the data to be trustworthy and meaningful, we chose micro aggressions as the theoretical framework because it is believed that this theory will help us understand the results that will arise from application of the micro aggression themes to news stories.

The athletes were coded for race: white, black, other, categories included white unknown, black unknown, other unknown, black non-athlete, white non-athlete, and other non-athlete. The sport depicted was coded as masculine or feminine or neither. Feminine sports included gymnastics, volleyball, synchronized swimming; Masculine sports included basketball, baseball, weightlifting, boxing, golf, and rugby.

Once we developed the themes and a sample of stories, the actual analysis of content proceeded. It is important to develop a codebook, sometimes referred to as protocols, and to train coders in the process of coding the themes. The codebook specified key concepts, such as the coding unit of analysis, which specifies the part of the news story that is to be coded (e.g., words, sentences, paragraphs, entire story as well as the theme, which specified the larger part of the text that was to be used to interpret a given theme. The codebook described the process of coding, including the definitions and examples of each theme and coding rules needed to guide the application of themes to codes from the sample. The codebook was developed with the research question (How often are micro aggressions used in news stories about Olympic female athletes?) in mind. The point of developing the codebook was to specify procedures that will allow us to accomplish the objectives envisioned for the study.

The operational definitions of the micro aggression themes are:

The following themes were looked for within each media piece and noted in the number of times that each occurred in each article:

- Sexual objectification: Language reducing the athlete to her body or body parts; worth is determined and measured by her sexual desirability.
- Second-class citizenship: Language that places importance on the athlete's ethnicity and group membership; the athlete is only focused on part of a whole rather than an individual. "Team above self" is an accurate analogy for this variable.
- Use of racist/sexist language: Words that demean the athlete based on being a woman or being a woman of color; Micro aggressions based on racism and sexism that add no value to details of the event or athlete being covered.
- Restrictive gender role: Language that refers to acceptable behaviors associated with one's gender and shows an overemphasis on femininity.
- Sexist humor/jokes
- Focus on traditional feminine appearance: Language that focuses on hair, makeup, outfits or overall feminine composure.
- Focus on physical body shape/image

### Inter-coder training and reliability

Each coder trained with a senior researcher for approximately two weeks to learn the codebook for this project. All "housekeeping" variables (such as source, date, ethnicity of the athlete, type of sport, and identification of the sports masculine or feminine orientation) were tested on numerous occasions. Those variables each consistently reach a level of agreement of at least 80%, and often the agreement was much higher. To demonstrate the validity of the coding rules that were specific for this project, intercoder testing was conducted on all the complex variables.

Each coder was trained on how to use the content codebook, which described the themes that the content covered. Once trained, the three coders tested for reliability by comparing results of their separate analyses. After analyzing the same content, the coders met to discuss the coding of the themes to see if there were areas where the three did not agree. If it was determined that there was an error in the description of a theme within the content codebook, the category was edited so that both coders agreed on the terminology. The intercoder reliability was 86%.

Intracoder reliability was also tested for the three coders. To test for intracoder reliability both coders analyzed five news articles for content separately, and then a week later they analyzed the same magazines for content to see how consistent their coding methods were based on the content codebook. Coder one had 94% intracoder reliability while coder two had 92% intracoder reliability, and coder three had 96% intracoder reliability. All three intracoder reliabilities were well above the reliability need to conduct a valid and reliable analysis of content.

## Results

### Statistical models

The goal of this study was to examine coverage of female Olympic athletes in the 2012 and 2016 Games, looking at how micro aggressions are used in reporting on the women's performance, appearance and other areas. We explore four topics [20]. First, we sought to examine the relationship of micro aggressions by ethnicity of female Olympian. Second, we investigate overall associations between micro aggressions and type of Olympic sport reported. Third, we focus on the relationship between micro aggressions and reporting of feminine and masculine sports feature female athletes. And last, we compared Olympic coverage of the 2012 Summer Olympics compared to the 2016 Summer Olympics held in Rio. The total print story dataset included 165 news stories about female athletes participating in the 2012 and 2016 Summer Olympics.

*Research Question: Will data show that the female Olympic athletes are targets for discrimination and bias in national news stories?*

### Female athletes as targets of microaggressions

When looking at the data, the overall number of news stories about found instances of micro aggressions written about female athletes, with more micro aggressions targeting female athletes of color (Table 1). Data show that with regard to each of the seven types of micro aggressions aimed at female athletes, female athletes of color were more likely than white female athletes to receive micro aggressions related to objectification, second-class citizenship (inferiority), restrictive gender roles, and commentary that relates to their body shape and body image while white female athletes tend to receive micro aggressions related to sexism and jokes and themes focused on their physical appearance ( $\chi^2=18.2$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Thus, data show that micro aggressions addressed in the study were significantly related to ethnicity of the female.

*H2: Black female Olympic athletes will be more likely to be the target of racists/sexist jokes than White female Olympic athletes.*

Micro aggressions related to second-class citizen (inferiority) along with use of racist and sexist language, restrictive gender roles, and focus on body type and shape showed to be the most apparent theme among the 165 sports articles ( $\chi^2=18.2$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $*p < .001$ ). Results seem to imply that coverage of the female athletes focused on policing behaviors acceptable for the female gender and whether or not women were adhering to these expectations. Micro aggressions relating to this theme seem to primarily center around the limitations of being a female rather than respect for the skill and talent of the Olympian and/or her team ( $p<0.001$ ).

Racial differences were strongly apparent in the themes of restrictive gender roles, sexist humor and jokes and second-class citizenship [21]. These micro aggressions were used much more often against black female athletes and in tennis, track and weightlifting events. Serena Williams, Allyson Felix and Jenny Arthur were standout athletes in these events in 2012 in 2016 and women of color, so that may explain some of the skews in the data. Williams, specifically, has struggled with racial micro aggressions for her entire tennis career. Proven to be the world's best tennis athlete and perhaps the "winningest" athlete of all time, Williams still faces the detrimental backlash from being a woman of color [22].

### Bodies, objectification, and sports

Weightlifting is, historically, a male-dominated sport. Therefore, U.S. women who participate in Olympic weightlifting are often viewed as masculine. Data obtained and displayed in Table three clearly shows the relationship between type of micro aggression theme and the type of sport ( $p<0.0001$ ). Female athletes participating in weightlifting during the Olympics were the targets of more news stories that contained micro aggressions related to second-class citizenship, restrictive gender roles, and focus on physical body type ( $p<0.001$ ). For example, we located a news story about Morghan King, white female weightlifter who qualified for Rio 2016. Since the beginning of her professional lifting career, King has been described as "pint-sized" in many articles, focusing on her "105-pound frame" and blonde hair. Although King has achieved great feats and set an American record at 48 kg in the women's snatch, coverage around her often focuses on her body and size. Table 2 shows that female athletes can be the

Micro aggression themes	Ethnicity		Total number of micro aggressions
	White	Black	
Sexual objectification	1 (1.9%)	3 (2.7%)	4 (2.4%)
Second-class citizen	5 (9.6%)	21 (18.6%)	26 (15.8%)
Use of racist/sexist language	21 (40.4%)	16 (14.2)	37 (22.4%)
Restrictive gender role	17 (32.7%)	44 (38.9%)	61 (37.0%)
Sexist/Racist Humor/Jokes	3 (5.8%)	4 (3.5%)	7 (4.2%)
Traditional physical appearance	2 (3.8%)	3 (2.7%)	5 (3.0%)
Focus on physical body type, shape	3 (5.8%)	22 (19.5%)	25 (15.2%)
Totals	52 (100%)	113 (100%)	165 (100%)

$\chi^2=18.2$ ,  $df=6$ . Numbers in parentheses indicate column percentages.  
\* $p < .001$

**Table 1:** Results of Chi-Square Tests and Micro Aggression Themes by Ethnicity of Female Athlete.

Micro aggression themes	Type of sport							Totals
	Gymnastics	Tennis	Track	Weightlifting	Basketball	Swimming	Beach Volleyball	
Sexual objectification	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	4
	0%	-7.70%	-6.10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	-2.40%
Second-class citizen	11	0	4	5	6	0	0	26
	-20.80%	0%	-12.10%	(17.9.2%)	-30%	0%	0%	-15.80%
Use of racist/sexist language	20	7	9	1	0	0	0	37
	-37.70%	-26.90%	-27.30%	-3.60%	0%	0%	0%	-22.40%
Restrictive gender role	11	13	11	11	12	1	2	61
	-20.80%	-50.00%	-33.30%	-39.30%	-60%	-33.30%	-100%	-37.00%
Sexist/Racist Humor/Jokes	4	3	0	0	0	0	0	7
	-7.50%	-11.50%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	-4.20%
Traditional physical appearance	3	0	0	2	0	0	0	5
	-5.70%	0%	0%	-7.10%	0%	0%	0%	-3.50%
Focus on physical body type, shape	4	1	7	9	2	2	0	25
	-7.50%	-3.80%	-21.20%	-32.10%	-10.00%	-66.70%	0%	-15.20%
Totals	53	26	33	28	20	3	2	165
	-100%	-100%	-100%	-100%	-100%	-100%	-100%	-100%

$\chi^2=72.2$ ,  $df=36$ . Numbers in parentheses indicate column percentages.

\* $p < .0000$

**Table 2:** Results of Chi-square tests and micro aggression themes by type of Olympic sport.

Micro aggression themes	Gender role			Total Number of Microaggressions
	Masculine	Feminine	Gender-Neutral	
Sexual objectification	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (6.5%)	4 (2.4%)
Second-class citizen	11 (22.9%)	11 (20.0%)	4 (6.5%)	26 (15.8%)
Use of racist/sexist language	1 (2.1%)	20 (36.4%)	16 (25.8%)	37 (22.4%)
Restrictive gender role	23 (47.9%)	13 (23.6%)	25 (40.3%)	61 (37.0%)
Sexist/Racist Humor/Jokes	0 (0%)	4 (7.3%)	3 (4.8%)	7 (4.2%)
Traditional physical appearance	2 (4.2%)	3 (5.5%)	0 (0%)	5 (3.0%)
Focus on physical body type, shape	11 (22.9%)	4 (7.3%)	10 (16.1%)	25 (15.2%)
Totals	48 (100%)	5 (100%)	62 (100%)	165 (100%)

$\chi^2=41.2$ ,  $df=12$ . Numbers in parentheses indicate column percentages.

\* $p < .0000$

**Table 3:** Results of Chi-square Tests and Micro aggression Themes by Masculinity/Femininity.

target of micro aggressions related to their physical “development” and features, particularly as these physical features are found to be related to a female athlete’s performance. One news story from the 2012 Olympics included a quote by a coach which stated, “[her] body had changed, too, as she became a woman.” The purpose of this statement, we determined, was to compare the swimmer Missy Franklin’s performances in 2012 and 2016 and relate any changes to her physical body and female development [23]. It should not go unnoticed that often these micro aggression statements regarding female development are made by men.

### Masculine vs. feminine sport and micro aggressions

Regarding stories that report micro aggressions and the relationship to masculinity or femininity of the sport, we found a significant relationship between masculine sports and the occurrence of micro aggressions and female athletes [24]. In support, data in Table 3 show that the more micro aggressions were cited in a story, the more likely the sport that the female participated in would be a sport considered

by our culture to be masculine,  $\chi^2=41.2$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p<0.0000$ . Thus, we conclude that this means that female athletes participating in masculine and gender-neutral sports are more likely than females participating in feminine sports to be victims of micro aggressions.

### Differences in reporting of microaggressions between 2012 and 2016

Table 4 shows a significant difference in micro aggressions found in sports stories about female Olympians that were published in 2012 compared to sports stories published in media during the 2016 Summer Olympics. The finding that there was a significant difference between was not surprising to us in that there were several opinion article and other commentary suggesting that journalists made too many repeated sexist and demeaning remarks in their 2016 coverage of female Olympic athletes. People Magazine was quoted calling Simone Biles “The Michael Jordan of Gymnastics,” and NBC anchors asked whether Sweden’s Sarah Sjöström was going to “do the samba on Copacabana beach” if she won the 100-meter butterfly swim. Then

Micro aggression themes	Year		Total Number of Microaggressions
	2012	2016	
<b>Sexual objectification</b>	2 (2.9%)	2 (2.1%)	4 (2.4%)
<b>Second-class citizen</b>	5 (7.2%)	21 (21.9%)	26 (15.8%)
<b>Use of racist/sexist language</b>	21 (30.4%)	16 (16.7%)	37 (22.4%)
<b>Restrictive gender role</b>	19 (27.5%)	42 (43.8%)	61 (37.0%)
<b>Sexist/Racist Humor/Jokes</b>	6 (8.7%)	1 (3.5%)	7 (4.2%)
<b>Traditional physical appearance</b>	3 (4.3%)	2 (2.1%)	5 (3.0%)
<b>Focus on physical body type, shape</b>	13 (18.8%)	12 (12.5%)	25 (15.2%)
<b>Totals</b>	69 (100%)	96 (100%)	165 (100%)

$\chi^2=19.2$ ,  $df=6$ . Numbers in parentheses indicate column percentages.

\* $p < .001$

**Table 4:** Results of Chi-square Tests and Micro aggression Themes by 2012 versus 2016 Summer Olympics.

there was the infamous “Chicago Tribune” headline that read “Wife of a Bears’ lineman wins a bronze medal today in Rio Olympics”.

Another example of second-class citizenship or micro aggressions related to inferiority is the story about Hungarian swimmer Katinka Hosszu. Ms Hosszu eliminated the world record in the 400-meter individual. Her performance was immediately praised as one of the best of the Rio Olympic Games. However, despite this world record and accomplishment, NBC announcer Dan Hicks said, “there’s the man responsible” for her record-breaking performance.” To further illustrate the micro aggressions found in the 2016 Olympic was when covering the US women’s gymnastics team and the fact that they just secured a spot in the finals, an NBC commentator made the remark that the female gymnastic athletes, who were actually gathered to celebrate their performance, “might as well be standing in the middle of a mall” (refer to Table 4 for comparisons between 2012 and 2016).

Taken together, these examples stripped from the headlines of the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro show how female achievement in sports can be portrayed and how micro aggressions or those subtle insults made toward female athletes are revealed in news coverage [25]. We found increases in micro aggressions related to referring to female athletes as second class citizens (inferiority) and as the targets of racist and/or sexist jokes ( $p<0.001$ ). And, as the data show, we found an increase in the number of stories in 2016 ( $n=96$ ) when compared to news stories about female athletes in the 2012 Summer Olympics.

## Discussion

The paper researched a relationship between micro aggressions found in sports stories about female Olympic athletes. We then sought to obtain data that would prove or disprove whether or not micro aggressions and biases have improved, decreased, or increased from 2012 to 2016 coverage of the Summer Olympics. Although the opportunities for women in sport in the USA have grown exponentially since Title IX became a law, there are areas that still need improvement in terms of how journalist covers women’s advancement in sport. Data obtained in this study suggests that journalists and media relations practitioners need to go beyond conventional discussions of female athletes and uncover new directions for women in sport and physical activity. The data obtained in this study investigated seven micro aggression themes based on previous research and found that micro aggressions can be found in news stories about female Olympic athletes.

Micro aggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, subtle insults that are often snubs, unintentional. We found evidence of micro aggressions about female Olympic athletes which data obtained seem to communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages about female athletes based solely upon their marginalized group membership as a women and/or minority. In many cases, these hidden and subtle micro aggression messages not only demean the accomplishments of elite female athletes, they seem to communicate the idea that these women do not deserve to have news stories that are similar or even better than the stories written about male athlete. It is possible that the idea that a female Olympian may be “better than” a male athlete on some dimensions results in a feeling of inferiority and loss of self-esteem among male athletes, an effect that would not only regulate male athletes to an inferior status but could also affect ideas about masculinity and femininity.

We contend that results obtained in the current study seem to suggest that racial and gender related micro aggressions are active manifestations in media and sports news. Micro aggressions aimed at female athletes, we believe, appear to reflect the active manifestation of worldviews that create, foster, and enforce racism, sexism while also explaining the less that positive portrayals in news media about female athletes. Because people want to and are motivated to see themselves as good and decent people, research tells us that realizing that we may harbor these negative and hostile ideas and express those ideas through micro aggressions may be very disturbing and uncomfortable. This cognitive dissonance often results in denying, diminishing, rationalizing as well as avoiding attempts to look within ourselves and recognize these biases and hostile feelings. Yet, research suggests that journalists, scholars, sports managers, sports promoters, reporters, announcers, and others involved in the sports news industry are not immune from inheriting the racial and gender biases of our society. People must recognize that we all have been socialized into a culture where racist and sexist attitudes, beliefs and behaviors exist. Many of the messages that contain micro aggressions related to race and sex are often outside the level of conscious awareness, thus we find these thoughts and opinions in media, messages that unintentionally demean and discriminate against others, namely women and minority athletes.

## Limitations

We chose to employ a content analysis using a theme count,



conducted on types of sports stories that appear in news media. Chi-square tests were used to analyze news coverage to see the frequency of micro aggressions found in print media about female Olympians. Because the sample was comprised of sports stories published in American newspapers, results cannot be generalized to other countries or other forms of news media. Counting the themes in a news story does not provide data on the broader meaning which the words and pictures may convey or the effects of the words, pictures and themes on individuals.

Content analysis is a purely descriptive method. It describes what is there, but may not reveal the underlying motives for the observations. In other words, in this study we provide the “what” but not the “why.” Research might build on the data obtained in this study and determine the effects of exposure to articles containing micro aggressions about female athletes on attitudes toward women, athletes, and gender roles. However, we are confident that the results reported here are not atypical of the reality of micro aggressions that female (athletes) received frequently by news media. Nonetheless, this study does provide an update to Ho and Kaskan’s [11] study and extend the research in important ways. We have updated the research by examining news reports of female athletes and micro aggressions for a major, international sporting event, which suggests that news stories are more likely now than they were in 2012 to downplay the strength and accomplishments of female athletes.

We were also limited by availability of news stories. Observed trends in micro aggressions as reported here may not be an accurate reflection of reality, however we recognize this as a limitation, data obtained in this study tells us much about representation of female athletes in sports news articles. Studies in this research area should use this data and combine with other research methods Content analysis becomes a more powerful to when combined with other research qualitative methods such as interviews, observation, and use of archival records theme analysis as well as quantitative research such as experiments and surveys.

### Future research

Further strides can be made in studying micro aggressive themes in female athletic coverage. Examining high school and college athletes would provide better background for how women are treated prior to becoming true professionals. Also, analyzing the language and themes used in covering male Olympic athletes, both white and black, would provide insight into the other side of this micro aggression story.

One area of research that is sorely needed is to examine the role that culture plays on gender norms and how those perceptions of female athletes may vary based on culture. For example, research might explore female athlete’s self-perceived body image and then could compare self-reported feelings of their bodies with the ideal images found in media and advertisements. Research in this area could determine how female athletes are affected by these micro aggressions in news stories as well as how they are affected by exposure to idealized images in mediated messages. Then we might begin to understand and even help female athletes combat feelings of inferiority, body dysmorphia, and other negative effects exposure to micro aggressions and mass media are known to cause. We should also conduct more research on the role that our culture plays in affecting journalists and sports reporters and how they write and cover women’s sports. Will research in this area show that journalists and sports media reflect and mirror society’s norms and prescriptions for how female athletes should be portrayed?

Research in this area might also explore differences in self-perception of body image and shape of female athletes of color to those held by white female athletes. This research might also expand to LGBTQ athletes and determine if they are influenced by similar images in media or if that lack the desire to be similar to the images that are found in the media. A research question in this area might how athletes who are lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transsexual, or queer feel about news coverage; do members who identify with this group feel ignored? Will research uncovered similar micro aggressions that female athletes experience or will new and unexplored micro aggressions be revealed? These are questions that are essential for researchers to examine and explore. How might journalists, advertisers, editors, producers, researchers, scholars, counseling and sports psychologists, use the results provided in this and other studies to resolve the conflicts female athletes’ experience, regardless of their racial/ethnic background?

Media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of the accomplishments of women playing sports and whether women in general can be strong, confident and highly skilled (citation). Research in this area also shows that media can also shape the dreams and aspirations of a vulnerable group—young girls. Research shows that young girls do not receive “positive” messages and images that they can be strong, confident and highly skilled. Experimental research might control the type of message exposed and the effects of the message on girls’ attitudes and behaviors about sports, particularly about participating in those sports thought to be more masculine (i.e., football, basketball, boxing, etc).

### Implications for sports reporters, journalists, and media

Sports Management Resources (SMR), online organization comprised of athletic directors and respected researchers as well as college professors provides knowledge about best practices and also provides critical analysis to help sports practitioner address complex issues such as gender disparities in media. According to their website, SMR suggests that all sport journalists, reporters, media and editors do the following (\*note information taken from their website)

- **Commit to Non-Sexist Communications.** A great resource for both sport managers and the sports media is Images and Words, a position paper published by the Women’s Sports Foundation. This should be a resource used by every sports information director, communications officer and sports writer who is committed to non-sexist publications and writing.
- **TV Contract Negotiations.** Expose all men’s and women’s sports programs!! This should be a priority. This means coverage of events like Lacrosse, Synchronized swimming, and others should be a goal, even if the carrier or third party broker is only interested in the most popular sport program. By promoting and covering the “minor” sports practitioners make an investment in developing the value of other sports in the athletics department.
- **Coaches Shows.** Encourage coaches with TV or radio shows to “share the wealth” by commenting regularly on other teams, including women’s sports.
- **Publications.** The communications director needs to pay careful attention to photos and words in all organization communications. Sexist language and image stereotyping is never intentional but a reflection of culturally ingrained habits.
- **Media Cultivation.** The issue of increased exposure for women’s



sports is a great conversation between the athletics director and the sports editor or reporters. Remember that newspaper circulation is declining and the sports pages represent an important circulation anchor. Covering all high school boys' and girls' sports teams in the community has been a key strategy for local papers. Parents buy newspapers. Research also shows that what gets into a newspaper has little to do with "public interest" and is more about what interests the sports editor.

- **Media Training.** All journalists, scholars, researchers, sports reporters, anyone interested in this industry should be required to take training courses with regard to sexist and racist language and re-write stories where these violations have been published.
- **Public Interest Stories.** All print and electronic media are interested in public interest stories. Sports information and communications directors should constantly remind coaches to share story angles about athletes, especially women that go beyond their looks, sexual objectification, body shape, ethnicity, and violation of gender roles.

## Conclusion

Although women continue to receive enhanced training and opportunities in the sports world, they are still held back by the expectations of hegemonic femininity. A woman can succeed as long as she maintains appearance and composure, and mass media outlets are quick to check on that. When framed within the context of historical expectations, it is difficult for female Olympians to break through micro aggressions and be viewed as the true athletes they are. Female Olympians should be proud of reaching what most consider the peak of an athletic career, but it also seems that micro aggressions cause them to further fade as individuals the further they step into the spotlight.

The gap in gender disparities as they appear in sports and news coverage cannot nor will it happen by itself. Part of the problem with sports reporting and female athletes may be due to inexperience -- reporters who are unfamiliar or do not cover women athletes or sports on a regular basis. Therefore, journalists covering sports that are "new" will simply just rely on their stories that portray female athletes as wife, mother, attractive, sexual, and ideal.

In order to change, journalists, reporters, announcers, and researchers as well as diversity scholars must continue to challenge the stereotypes, biases and the micro aggressions found in news stories, as it has been said "stereotypes unchallenged are stereotypes accepted." Researchers along with reporters in the sport news and sports media must be determined to break the silence and apathy by putting female athletes and their accomplishments, training, and other professional issues in the forefront. It is possible that if a majority of the news outlets were determined to do this, we might begin to see its tremendous impact. Perhaps by working together to put female athletes' issues at the forefront of people's minds, we might then start seeing changes in how women and athletes are treated in media and in everyday life. While data obtained in this study suggests that micro aggressions in sports reporting was worse in 2016 when compared to news stories in 2012, it is our hope that the research presented in this current study will not just call attention to the "isms" (racism/sexism) we found in sports reporting, but perhaps the data obtained in this study might be used to encourage sports media accountable in hopes of improving coverage of women and women athletes in the future.

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