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Newspapers as Gendered Spaces: Photographic Representation of Kenyan Female Athletes in the Kenyan Press during the Rio 2016 Olympic Games

Joseph Nyanoti

United States International University–Africa

Abstract

Kenya is known globally as the home of world champions in athletics, including the Olympics. However, although the Olympic games dominate public discourse in Kenya when they are being held every four years, there is hardly any academic interest in the many press photographs that are published in this season. The main objective of this study is to analyze how female athletes were photographically represented compared with their male counterparts in the Rio 2016 Olympics in the Kenyan newspapers. I employed quantitative content analysis and semiotic analysis to study Kenya's two leading daily newspapers, the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard* between August 5 and 21, 2016, the time the Olympic games took place. My findings indicate that the two newspapers allocated more photographic space to men compared with women athletes. The findings also show that photographs in this study depicted women as weaker than men, as emotional unlike their logical male counterparts, and generally as inferior to men.

Keywords

Athletes, Gender, Ideology, Olympic games, Representation

Introduction

Kenya is known globally as home to world champions in athletics. The country's sportswomen and men have always brought glory to the country whenever they participate in international championships, including the Olympics. Whenever such international events are held, the country's media cover them extensively. Newspapers, for instance, dedicate many pages to these athletic events with news articles, commentaries, and photographs. The whole country is united in cheering on the Kenyan team and celebrating with them when they win medals for the country.

Kenya first participated in the Olympic games in 1956, when it was still a British colony (Njororai 2012). It was, however, in 1968 that the Kenyan athletics team started to win medals, including the gold. This was also the time women first participated in the games (Sikes 2016). Since that time, Kenya has been sending athletes to this sporting event every four years except in 1976 and 1980, when the country boycotted the games due to the Cold War politics of the time.

Over the years, major athletic competitions such as Olympics have dominated public discourse in Kenya, especially over the challenges faced by the athletes. These athletes have also attracted the interest of academics from a variety of research perspectives. Wycliffe W. Simiyu Njororai (2012), for instance, studied long-distance runners who were leaving Kenya to represent other countries, owing to the difficult conditions and poor pay in Kenya. He found that these athletes faced many challenges. He gave examples of those who had moved to the Middle East, where they had to change their names and religion from Kenyan Christian to Muslim. They found leading a Muslim lifestyle difficult, given that Islam, unlike Christianity, cannot be separated from an individual's social and cultural life. Others faced hostility from the population of their host country; still others ended up losing citizenship in their adopted nations because they had not fully understood what it meant to emigrate to another country for only financial gain.

Michelle Sikes (2016) analyzed Kenyan newspapers to investigate the barriers that bar many Kenyan women athletes from international achievements. She identified institutional, economic, and cultural barriers as reasons why Kenyan women could not perform as expected in the international athletics arena. She also points out that many studies on Kenyan athletes have focused on male athletes at the expense of women, hence the contribution of her study. She analyzed the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard* newspapers, which she described as "repositories of information pertaining to the challenges that confronted female athletes" (323). Thus, I believe it would be worthwhile to interrogate these same newspapers' texts as potential contributors to female athletes' challenges.

Although the Olympic games dominate public discourse in Kenya while they are being held every four years, there has been little academic interest in the many photographs that are published during the games. My study aims to address this gap. I was concerned with how female athletes were represented photographically compared with their male counterparts in Kenyan newspapers during the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic games. The focus of my study was to examine the press photographs as media texts. This is a media cultural studies investigation, concerned with meanings created by media texts and how these meanings, contestable as they may be, are likely to reinforce power within the Kenyan patriarchal capitalist society (Develeux 2003).

The purpose of my study was to analyze sports photographs in particular as a site for meaning-making within the context of gender equality discourse and the politics of representation (Hall 1997). This would be an important contribution to the gender equality debate in Kenya. The Constitution of Kenya (Republic of Kenya 2010) is clear about giving equal opportunities to young men and women to fully exploit their potential in areas like sports. As Article 27 (3) of the Constitution (2010) states, "Women and men have equal right to treatment, including the right to equal opportunities, in political, economic and cultural and social spheres." However, over eight years since the constitution was promulgated, Kenyan women have yet to achieve equal treatment with men in many spheres. This was summed up by a *Daily Nation* newspaper editorial (2019): "Inasmuch as progress has been made, the overall picture is that of persistent inequalities arising from socio-economic and political structures that confine women to the periphery."

Paradoxically, the newspapers themselves could be contributing to the marginalization of women. An examination of gender representation in media texts can hold the media, as the watchdogs of society, to account for whether they have upheld the societal values of fair treatment of all members of Kenyan society, as envisaged by the Constitution. It is through a media cultural studies investigation like this that we can determine

whether certain Kenyans (i.e., female athletes) are marginalized by the institutions that are entrusted as purveyors of truth and justice. In the next section I review the relevant scholarship for my study, specifically the significance of photography in gender representation, the cultural studies framework for this research, and the related studies.

Literature Review

Digital Photography and Gender Representation

The invention of digital technology in the late twentieth century was believed to be a blow to photography and how it had been practiced for over 150 years. Geoffrey Batchen (2002) pointed out that people were going to lose faith in photographs and embrace computer-generated images that mimicked photographs. According to Batchen, "Given the proliferation of digital images that look exactly like photographs, photography may even be robbed of its cultural identity" (2002, 129). Although Batchen was writing about analog photography, it was not long before digital technology moved fully into the photography domain.

Today, photographs are not only digitally composed and produced using digital cameras, but they are also easily manipulated into completely different images using computer software such as Adobe Photoshop and Lightroom. Newspapers use photographs taken by digital cameras that transfer them directly into the editing computers. These photographs are themselves *edited* to produce images that are, in most cases, different from what the photographers captured in the field. It is now possible for editors and graphic designers to digitally manipulate photographs to project gender representations that suit the ideological leanings of a newspaper.

The manipulation of photographs in newspaper editing is not new. Editors have always manipulated photographs to suit their page designs or to create a particular context for the readers. Before the digital era this mostly involved cropping and enlarging. However, in the digital era newspapers have professional photo editors who manipulate photographs using computer software.

In modeling and beauty photography, photo editing to match a certain beauty ideal is very common, and according to Jean Kilbourne (2012), the advertising industry uses Photoshop to create an idealized sense of beauty for women to sell beauty products. Although photo editors are often viewed as artists, there is a moral dilemma as to whether it is ethical to manipulate photographs of beauty models (Reaves et al. 2004; Martin 2009). However, visual arts professionals argue that those who see photo manipulation as unethical are setting those standards from outside the arts industry, who see photo editing as a means of enhancing aesthetics (Lowery 2003).

Ideology and Media Representation of Gender in Sports

Ideology has been defined by Eion Develeux as "the ideas that legitimate power of a dominant social group or class" (2003, 98). He believes that "the mass media play an immensely powerful part in the production and the circulation of ideologies." According to Douglas Kellner, "ideologies refer to the ideas or images that construct the superiority of one class or group over others" (2015, 13). The project of cultural studies is concerned with the study of the media as a site where, among other issues, power relations in society play out (Hall 1996).

For the ordinary newspaper reader, journalists and their editors "represent" events as they occur daily. Cultural studies scholars, however, argue that the media construct representations of reality from a deliberate particular perspective (Hall 1996; Devereux 2003). For instance, feminist scholars argue that the media usually present the world, including the imagery of women, from a patriarchal perspective. As Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner (2004) put it, "The messages of media texts never simply mirror or reflect 'reality,' but instead construct hegemonic definition of what should be accepted as 'reality'" (21). Amy Godoy-Pressland and Gerald Griggs, who studied the photographic coverage of the London 2012 Olympic games in the British print media, found that although the games were widely reported as "women's games" a careful study of the photographs brought out a different picture. They used content analysis to compare the prominence given to male athletes'

photographs compared with those of women athletes. They concluded that that there is indeed gender imbalance in the media coverage of sports.

Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter (2005) believe that "masculinity is at the heart of newspaper journalism, both in terms of ownership and control of the industry" (75). They argue that this is the reason why women are underrepresented or trivialized in media coverage. Even in journalism, they argue, women are underrepresented, and the few women who work in media "are under no illusion that they have to be 'one of the boys' to get on" (75).

Erving Goffman (1979), who studied photographs of magazine advertisements, argued that images in these photographs reflect the relationship between men and women in the society where they circulate, with the only difference being exaggeration—or, as he calls it, "hyperritualization" (84). Media texts created by the patriarchal system, according to Liesbet van Zoonen and Irene Costera Meijer (1998), are meant for male pleasure: "The [Pamela] Anderson billboards and similar images of women invite us to look at them with a prospective male viewer in mind" (298).

Brian Ott and Robert Mack (2014) argue that "socially powerful groups like men have greater access to media outlets as a function of privilege and this access grants them the ability to represent their particular impressions of other social groups to the widest audience" (196). According to Laurie Ouellette (2013), representation and meaning-making are "the central domains of critical media studies" (167). Whereas the media are believed to represent the world objectively, critical media scholars argue that the media construct social reality according to the dominant ideology of the culture within which they circulate (Williamson 1978). For instance, women are represented in the media according to a patriarchal logic.

Representation, according to Stuart Hall (1997), is the production of meaning through shared language: "any sound, word, image or object, which functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system" (19). However, he points out that representation should be studied using the tools of semiotics, as developed by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and applied in the study of media texts by French critic Roland Barthes.

Related Studies

I set out to find out whether there is a gender power imbalance in the way Kenyan newspapers photographically represented women and men athletes in the Rio 2016 Olympics. I was concerned with whether the women athletes were trivialized or misrepresented by Kenyan photojournalism in the newspaper coverage. The available literature in critical sports media research from other parts of the world has indicated that sportswomen are underrepresented and misrepresented in media coverage during sporting events such as the Olympics (Bernstein and Galily 2008; Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015; Godoy-Pressland and Griggs 2014; Kane, LaVoi, and Fink 2013).

Antti Laine (2016, 84) posits that "this marginalization is reinforced in sports." Sports journalism has been accused of trivializing women and portraying them as sexy, fragile, and not as strong as men. Women athletes are not seen as discharging their athletic competencies, developed through strenuous training, but rather as passive beauties for the gaze of male spectators. This kind of misrepresentation of women in sports has been an enduring concern for critical sports scholars. A five-year study by Cheryl Cooky, Michael Messner, and Michela Musto (2015) found that although women had made tremendous progress in many sports activities, the coverage of women's sports on television had not changed much for over a quarter of a century. Their research aimed to update a twenty-five-year longitudinal study of gender representation on television in the United States. They found that, although over time television had reduced portraying sportswomen as objects of sex and humor, otherwise not much had improved. Sexual objectification had been replaced with portraying sportswomen in their stereotypical roles as mothers. Whereas men's sports were highlighted with pomp and excitement, women's games were routinely reported without much fanfare. Mary Jo Kane, Nicole LaVoi, and Janet Fink (2013) were concerned about studies that suggested that sportswomen actually liked to be identified with their sexualized images in the media.

Musto, Cooky, and Messner (2017) have proposed the concept of "gender-bland sexism" to describe the lackluster way in which women's sports are covered compared with those of men. They argue that the coverage of women in sports avoids overt sexism, but the stories and images of women compared with those of men are uninspired. This, to them, is one way of trivializing women's sports.

The debate over coverage of women in sports has caught the attention of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The IOC in 2018 released guidelines on how the media should represent gender during the games. The guidelines give recommendations to journalists and media houses on how to allocate editorial space for images and suggestions on language and terminology by sports reporters and commentators. The guidelines conclude by pointing out the role of gender representation in sports coverage in promoting gender equality: "Gender portrayal is a small though incremental step on the path to gender equality. Raising awareness of the importance of gender portrayal is the first step in influencing behaviour" (International Olympic Committee 2018).

Semiotics and Media Text

In this study I analyze the denotative and connotative meanings created by the Rio 2016 press photographs through the use of social codes, textual codes, and interpretive codes. I looked at how various meanings were embedded in the photographs, given that media artefacts are always embedded with ideological meanings (Bignell 2002).

Objectives and Research Questions

The main objective of this study was to analyze how female athletes were photographically represented compared with their male counterparts in the Rio 2016 Olympics in the Kenyan newspapers. I was guided by three research questions:

1. How much photographic space was allocated to women athletes as compared with men athletes in the Rio 2016 Olympics?
2. How were women athletes depicted photographically compared with men in the Rio 2016 Olympics?
3. What ideological nuances were embedded in the women's photographs in the Rio 2016 Olympics?

Methodology

I employed two methods—quantitative content analysis and semiotic analysis—to interrogate representations in Kenyan photojournalism during the Rio 2016 Olympic games. I studied photographs in the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard* between August 5–21, 2016, the time the Rio Olympics took place. These two newspapers were chosen because they are the only commercial daily newspapers in the country with a wide circulation nationally. All the sports pages and any other pages (including page ones) where the Rio 2016 Olympics photographs appeared were studied.

For the quantitative content analysis, the space covered by the photographs was measured in square centimeters (cm²). I used a ruler to measure the length and width of all the photographs studied and recorded the measurements in an Excel spreadsheet, indicating the publication, sex of the photograph's subject, and total area. The values for the men's and women's photographs were added separately, and the totals were compared to reflect the space allocated for the two sexes' photographs. For the photographs that were irregular, cutouts, or bleeding out of the frame, I estimated the general length and width because I had no specialized equipment to measure the irregular shapes.

For the semiotic analysis I closely read all the photographs of the women athletes, looking at the various codes that the creators of the photographic content might have used to create various meanings (Hall 1997). The photographs were treated as signs, and the analysis was done at connotational level, in line with the research questions. It is by analyzing the connotations that semioticians are able to understand the hidden or ideological

meanings. I identified social codes through mode of dress, gestures, body language, and the way men and women athletes interacted with each other and with their fans.

I also analyzed various rituals displayed by the men and women athletes as part of social codes. In this I was guided by Goffman (1979) who identified various rituals associated with men and women in gender displays in advertising photographs. The rituals involved how the athletes used their hands (women touching or caressing objects with a feminine touch while men grasped or manipulated them), when they were shown lying down (women placed at a lower level or lying down compared with men), how they licensed withdrawal (women showing subordination when in front of men), and whether they were infantilized (women generally treated like children). I looked for these rituals in the photographs I studied as part of the analysis.

The photographs were also analyzed using textual codes. Here I was looking at the rules governing press photography in general and photo page layout in particular in the era of digital photography. The way photographs were placed on a page and how they were cropped or cut out to fit a particular space were analyzed. The editing of the photographs to brighten them or to airbrush facial features was also analyzed as part of the textual codes. Here I relied on my knowledge of Kenyan culture and of newspaper editing and photography, having worked as an editor and photographer in Kenyan newspapers, as well as on my experience teaching photography and photojournalism in Kenya.

It should be noted that the photographs in this study were not captured as they were shot during the field and track events in Rio. In fact, none of the photographs from the Rio event were taken by a Kenyan photographer because no Kenyan newspapers sent a photojournalist. All the photographs that were published in the Kenyan newspapers were taken by international news agencies to whose services the Kenyan newspapers subscribe. This is not a unique practice; as Gynnid (2017, 25) has noted, in this era of globalization "news agency networks have become the main suppliers of visual content to the news media."

The publishing and the treatment of the photographs in this study were the work of editors, who made the editorial decisions, and graphic designers, who created the layouts and processed the photographs for publication. This means, therefore, that the photographs selected for analysis in this study were from the shots taken during the games in Rio as well as graphic manipulations of the same photos of events that had already been published. Some of the photographs were of participants in the Rio Olympics shown in action during past Olympics or other international athletics championships for illustration purposes.

Findings and Discussion

Examining all the photographs in all the field and track events it was clear that the two Kenyan newspapers in this study covered all the sports that Kenyan women and men participated in. The Kenyan team that participated in the Rio Olympics had eighty-nine athletes. Of these there were forty-seven men and forty-two women. From these figures it is clear that the country was represented by an almost equal number of men and women teams in the Rio Olympics. However, when it came to gender representation in the photographs published in the studied newspapers there was clear imbalance in favor of the men's team. A critical analysis all the photographs indicated that how men were portrayed in the photographs was different than how women were portrayed.

Space Allocated to Female Compared with Male Athletes

When the whole space allocated to photographic content in the 2016 Rio Olympics was calculated, there were more photographs of men athletes than women. As shown in table 1, out of the 181 photographs in the two newspapers, ninety-nine were of men while eighty-one were of women. For individual newspapers, the *Daily Nation* had a total of 103 photographs covering the Olympic games. Of these, fifty-six were of men, and forty-seven were of women. The *Standard* had seventy-eight photographs, forty-three of men and thirty-five of women.

Table 1. Space covered by athletes' photographs in two newspapers

	<i>Daily Nation</i>		<i>Standard</i>		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
No. of athletes	56	47	43	35	180
Space (cm ²)	7,295.5	4,683	5,620	4,555	22,153.5

The total space for photographs in the two newspapers was 22,153.5 cm². In the *Daily Nation* the total area covered by the photographs was 11,978.5 cm². Of this, 7,295.5 cm² was allocated to men's photographs, and 4,682 cm² was for women's photographs. In the *Standard*, 5,620 cm² was for men's photographs, and 4,555 cm² was for women's photographs. The two newspapers combined allocated 22,153.5 cm² for the photographic content. Of these 12,915.5 cm² was allocated to men, representing 58 percent of the total area for photographs; 9,238 cm² was allocated to photographs of women, representing 42 percent of the total area.

Semiotic Analysis

After a semiotic analysis of all the photographs I found that men and women athletes were depicted differently in the two newspapers. Although the photographs were expected to capture or represent what took place at the games venues, most of the women were shown smiling even after a strenuous track event while the men were shown grimacing. In this way, men were shown as athletes who were working hard for their success. The women were shown as people who did not put much energy into their sport and therefore as soft or fragile compared with the men. This was better illustrated by photographs of two star athletes, David Rudisha, the men's 800-meter gold medalist, and Vivian Cheruiyot, the women's 5,000-meter gold medalist. Most of the photographs of Rudisha showed him as an energetic man straining to win the gold medal. However, the photographs of Cheruiyot showed her running normally to beat her competitors. This was a clear indication that during the selection of photographs to illustrate the Olympic games the editors chose photos that supported the media houses' ideological tendency to project the male athletes as more serious than their female counterparts.

Most women were also shown as being overly exhausted at the end of their races while the men were shown as still strong, even after the race. Although women athletes were shown as not straining during the running, they were shown falling down after finishing the race while the men were shown still strong, running around and acknowledging cheers from fans. Another difference in the photographs was in how the athletes celebrated their victories. Whereas the men celebrated by waving to the crowds and exuding confidence, the women showed emotions by covering their faces, eyes, or mouths with their hands; falling down, or shedding tears in excitement. Although facial close-up photographs were not common, women athletes tended to be shown as well-groomed and smiling to the cameras. The photographs had been tightly cropped and retouched to show radiant faces. Their male counterparts were rarely shown smiling at the cameras.

In order to further decode the ideologies embedded in the photographs in this study, I employed tools of semiotics, the study of signs and their meanings. French critic Roland Barthes identified three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth (Rose 2012). All in all, the photographs in this study depicted women as weaker than men, emotional as opposed to logical like their male counterparts, and generally too weak to indulge in energy-requiring activities like sports. It is normal for a human being to be overwhelmed with excitement after a big achievement like winning an Olympic medal; however, in the photographs in this study, it was only the women who were shown to be overwhelmed by emotion after winning. This promotes the myth of male superiority.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the above findings it is clear that Kenyan newspaper photographs are replete with ideological nuances that support the patriarchal status quo. Although male and female athletes are well represented at the Olympic games, newspaper editors consciously or unconsciously discriminate against women in their coverage of this

event. Although Kenyan women won more medals than the Kenyan men in the 2016 Rio Olympics, the men were given better treatment in the photographs published in the *Daily Nation* and the *Standard*. This is a demonstration of how the Kenyan media promote nuanced patriarchal hegemony. As the IOC (2018) points out, trivializing or misrepresenting sportswomen in media images is likely to have a negative effect on young women, given that these athletes are role models for the communities they come from.

According to Ott and Mack (2014), media images may look harmless, but they are potentially harmful to their consumers: "Although by no means do these images dictate or control how men and women should act, they are powerfully persuasive in constructing the social rules we tend to live by unconsciously" (204). Whereas the media operate within existing structures, where the dominant ideologies dictate gender relations, they have a role to play in bringing about social change. As Alina Bernstein and Yair Galily (2008) argue, "The media, on their own, cannot change the inequality present in sport itself ... However, they can contribute to stimulating a wider initiative toward the promotion of women's sport and women in sport" (191). The two newspapers analyzed in this study are the most authoritative and widely circulating in Kenya. They therefore have a big influence in shaping opinion in the country.

Although the depiction of gender in the 2016 Olympic games does not show outright sexism, the fact that there is a nuanced gender bias in the treatment of photographs by editors makes it clear that Kenyan print media is not gender sensitive when it comes to press photography. This study is meant to sensitize Kenyans to look at media content critically (beyond the messages) and decode the embedded meaning because, as Douglas Kellner (2015) warns, "Those who uncritically follow the dictates of the media culture tend to 'mainstream' themselves, conforming to the dominant fashion, values and behaviour" (8). The ultimate goal of this study is therefore to promote critical media literacy. According to Kellner (2015), "the gaining of critical media literacy is an important resource for individuals and citizens in learning how to cope with a seductive cultural environment" (7).

I therefore recommend further research in the field of critical sports media studies, which is not well developed in Kenya. I further recommend that consumers of media texts in Kenya be sensitized through media literacy initiatives so that they can learn to decode potentially harmful media messages.

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Joseph Nyanoti

Joseph Nyanoti teaches Journalism and Media Studies at the United States International University-Africa. He holds a PhD in Media and Cultural Studies from the University of Nairobi (2015). He also received a Bachelor of Arts in Literature and Linguistics; a Post-graduate Diploma in Mass Communication and a Master of Arts in Communication Studies from the same university. He practiced newspaper journalism for 17 years before moving to university teaching in 2008. His research interest areas include media and gender, media semiotics, popular culture, and critical media literacy.

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