

The Future of Women's Olympic Sports: Trends Among Generation Z and Gender Equality Analysis

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Abstract: The increasing visibility and popularity of women's sports at the Olympic level represents a significant shift within the sports industry, largely shaped by the values and interests of Generation Z. The 2024 Paris Olympic Games further accentuate this shift, with unprecedented media attention and support directed toward women athletes. The advent of new sport programs such as women's skateboarding and surfing is expected to bring about a significant shift in the representation of female athletes on the global stage. The inclusion of these new sports has heightened expectations that the Games will be one of the most egalitarian and inclusive in history. Through secondary data analysis and thematic analysis, the paper delves into the rising popularity of women's sports in the Olympic Games and the pivotal role that Generation Z is playing in this trend, revealing the factors that are driving Generation Z's interest in women's sports, as well as emphasizing their strong support for gender equality and inclusion. Therefore, the results demonstrate that the combination of Generation Z's media consumption patterns and their advocacy for social justice will persist in enhancing the status of women's sports, creating more opportunities and visibility for female athletes.

Keywords: Olympic Games, Women's Sport Programs, Generation Z, Sports Popularity.

1. Introduction

The future of women's participation in the Olympic Games has emerged as a critical area of inquiry within sports studies, reflecting a broader societal shift towards gender equality and social justice. And the visibility and recognition of female athletes has increased dramatically over the past few decades, largely due to global campaigns advocating for gender equality in all areas, including sport. However, despite the progress made, significant research gaps persist, particularly in understanding the role that younger generations, particularly Generation Z, play in shaping the future trajectory of women's Olympic sports. Existing research has yet to fully explore the unique values and behaviors of Generation Z, such as their commitment to inclusivity, social justice, and how their digital media consumption is driving these changes. Thus, the paper seeks to bridge these gaps by examining the current trends and future prospects of women's sports in the Olympics, particularly the impact of Generation Z. To this end, an in-depth look at the impact of Generation Z's advocacy for gender equality on the creation of a more inclusive environment for female athletes in terms of media representation and institutional support is explored. Moreover, specific factors driving the growing popularity of women's Olympic sports among this demographic are examined, such as the role of

social media, the influence of influential female athletes, and the increasing coverage of women's sporting events. Through a combination of secondary data analysis and a thematic review of current media content, the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between media, societal values, and the popularity of women's sport in the Olympic Games.

2. Women's Olympic Program Development and Generation Z Attitudes

2.1. Historical Context of Women's Sports in the Olympics

The development of women's sports programs at the Olympic Games has been marked by notable achievements, obstacles, and pivotal moments. In the original 1900 Paris Olympics, only 22 female athletes competed in five sports, reflecting the severe restrictions on women's participation in sport at the time [1]. However, there has been a notable increase in the participation of women in the Olympics over time. By the time of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, female athletes made up nearly 49% of the total number of participants, marking a significant step towards gender equality [2]. In addition, the addition of women's boxing at the London 2012 Olympics and the inaugural inclusion of women's rugby sevens at the Rio 2016 Olympics have significantly expanded the opportunities for female athletes to compete at the Olympic level. Despite these advances, women's sport still faces a number of challenges, such as societal resistance, inadequate media coverage, and funding imbalances. Studies have shown that despite the growing popularity and participation of women's sports, women's sports receive only 4% of the share of sports media coverage in the United States, which is far from enough to reflect its true impact [3]. Furthermore, an IOC 2021 report states that female athletes continue to receive less funding and sponsorship than their male counterparts, hence further highlighting the persistence of gender inequality [2]. These challenges suggest that despite some progress in gender equality, there is still much room for improvement in ensuring the full development and continued support of women's sports programs.

2.2. Generation Z and Their Influence on Sports

Generation Z, with its status as digital natives and strong values of inclusivity, has had a significant impact on the sports landscape. A 2021 study by the Pew Research Center revealed that 97% of American members of Gen Z own a smartphone, with over 55% of them accessing the internet almost constantly, indicating a high level of integration with digital technology [4]. Their media consumption habits rely heavily on digital platforms and social media, which has reshaped the way sports content is consumed and marketed. For example, the 2020 Nielsen report found that Gen Z is 2.5 times more likely to discover new sports content than previous generations, and they are more likely to access information through social media than traditional television broadcasts [5]. This trend has led to a significant increase in the visibility of female athletes and women's sports programs, particularly on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, where content celebrating women's sporting achievements often goes viral. Gen Z's preference for brands has also impacted sports marketing strategies. A 2019 Deloitte survey revealed that 72% of Gen Z respondents are more likely to support brands that advocate for gender equality. This has driven sports brands to focus more on promoting female athletes [6]. However, current research fails to adequately explore how Gen Z specifically influences the status and perception of women's sports in the Olympics. For example, Gen Z's social media activities not only boosted the exposure of female athletes, but also contributed to the popularity of female sports, suggesting that Gen Z's values and digital behavioral patterns have a profound impact on the development of women's sports.

3. Gender Equality in Olympic Sports: Progress and Challenges

3.1. Current State of Gender Equality in Sports

Despite the significant increase in the participation of female athletes and the level of competition in the Olympic Games, gender equality still faces many challenges. In recent years at the Olympic Games, for example, there has been a significant increase in the number of female athletes in terms of both participation in sports and the number of competitors. For example, from 26 women's events at the London 2012 Olympic Games to 33 at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, there has been a significant increase in the participation of female athletes [7]. This change shows that the representation of gender equality in the Olympic Games has gradually strengthened. However, there are still many obstacles in reality. First, inequalities in pay and resource allocation remain significant. For example, despite the remarkable achievements of female athletes at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, their prize money and funding remain low relative to male athletes. This gap is not only reflected in direct prize money payments, but also in other forms of support such as training resources and sponsorship opportunities [8]. In addition, female athletes are limited in their career development opportunities. Although women's shot putter Olga Istrems excelled on the field at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, she still receives less career support and exposure than men's events. This unequal media attention and resource support limits the long-term development and career stability of female athletes. Despite the significant increase in participation and athleticism of female athletes in the Olympic Games, the realization of gender equality still faces challenges such as pay gaps, unequal resources, and inadequate media support. Further efforts in policy and resource allocation are needed to achieve true gender equality [9].

3.2. Role of Social Media and Social Movements

Social media and social movements have played a key role in advancing gender equality for female athletes at the Olympic Games and have been instrumental in increasing their exposure and fighting for fair treatment.

The widespread use of social media has provided female athletes with the opportunity to interact directly with the public, thus increasing their exposure at the Olympics. For example, female gymnast Simone Biles shared her training and competition experiences through Instagram and Twitter, which not only enhanced the impact of her personal brand, but also gained more attention for the achievements of female gymnasts. Social media platforms allow female athletes to showcase their personal stories and competitive achievements, breaking through the limitations of traditional media coverage and increasing public interest and support for women's sports. According to a 2023 report, engagement with women's sports content on social media increased by 30%, demonstrating the effectiveness of digital platforms in increasing the visibility of female athletes. However, there are also challenges with social media. For example, although social media provides more exposure for female athletes, the distribution of their content is still influenced by platform algorithms and user interests, which can lead to relatively low exposure for certain female athletes. In addition, coverage on social media often lacks systematic analysis and in-depth discussion, which may result in a less comprehensive focus on female athletes [10].

Social movements have also played an important role in enhancing the treatment of female Olympic athletes. Campaigns such as #EqualPay have promoted attention to gender inequality in sport by generating widespread social discussion. For example, the #EqualPay campaign has not only generated a wide-ranging discussion about the pay gap between male and female athletes, but has also prompted some sports organizations and Olympic events to rethink and adjust the treatment of female athletes. These campaigns have driven attention to the unequal distribution of pay and

resources for female athletes, and have prompted a number of improvements in the sports world. Though social movements and technological advances have made significant progress in elevating the status and influence of female athletes at the Olympics, challenges remain. The sustainability and impact of social movements may be affected by changes in social opinion, while the role of social media needs to be further optimized to ensure full gender equality. This suggests that while social media and social movements have played a positive role in promoting gender equality for female athletes at the Olympics, comprehensive reforms and long-term efforts in terms of policy support, media coverage and societal perceptions are needed in order to achieve true equality [11].

4. Future Prospects and Strategic Recommendations

Enhancing the status and influence of female athletes at the Olympic Games requires not only improvement of the current situation, but also systematic in-depth analysis and long-term strategies.

4.1. Balanced Media Coverage

Despite the notable increase in media exposure of female athletes, a considerable disparity persists in comparison to their male counterparts. This disparate media coverage is not merely confined to the quantity of coverage; it also pertains to the quality and depth of coverage. At present, media coverage of female athletes tends to prioritize event outcomes and immediate performance outcomes, while overlooking the long-term challenges and personal narratives that shape their athletic careers. To achieve gender equality, the media should take a more holistic approach to reporting not only on the training achievements of female athletes, but on their mental attributes and significant accomplishments. For example, detailed coverage of female athletes' hard work and perseverance behind their breakthrough achievements can not only enhance their public image, but help motivate young women to participate in sports [12].

4.2. Deepened Technology Application

Emerging technologies play an important role in enhancing the visibility of female athletes. Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) can provide an immersive viewing experience, enabling viewers to experience the competitive performance of female athletes from multiple perspectives. For example, AR technology can provide viewers with a deeper level of understanding by displaying athletes' technical data and movement trajectories in real time during live event broadcasts. In addition, data analysis technology can track viewers' behavioral patterns and preferences to optimize advertisement placement and content recommendation, increasing the market value and sponsorship opportunities for female athletes. These technological applications not only enhance the spectacle of the event, but also promote attention and support for women's sports.

4.3. Enhanced Policy Support

The realization of gender equality requires systematic policy support. Currently, although the Olympic Organizing Committee (IOC) and national sports organizations have taken some measures, they are often limited to short-term goals. In the long term, it is important to develop comprehensive policy frameworks that cover all aspects from training resource allocation to event scheduling. Policies should include ensuring that female athletes receive the same sponsorship opportunities and prize money allocations as their male counterparts, as well as fair treatment in career development. In addition, the establishment of a gender equality committee or a dedicated fund can be used exclusively to assess and promote the development of female athletes and to ensure the effectiveness of policy implementation.

4.4. Education and Community Engagement

The education system and community involvement are crucial to the promotion of gender equality. Physical education in schools should emphasize gender equality by encouraging girls to actively participate in sports and providing equal resources and support. Eliminating this sense of gender disparity requires a focus on socio-cultural constructs [13]. Community-level activities, such as women's sports festivals and youth sports camps, can have a direct impact on societal attitudes towards female athletes. Through these activities, public awareness and support for women's sports can be increased, thus creating a more equal sports environment. In addition, utilizing the power of the community for publicity and advocacy can help break down gender bias and promote overall social support for women's sports.

5. Conclusion

The paper provided valuable insights into the rising popularity of women's Olympic sports and the influence of Generation Z. Key findings indicate that the growing success of female athletes is significantly linked to increased media representation, advocacy for gender equality, and the active engagement of Generation Z, who use social media to champion women's sports. The integration of digital platforms and interactive technologies has emerged as a critical factor in enhancing visibility and fostering new opportunities for fan engagement and support. However, the review also identified several limitations that suggest areas for future research. One major limitation is the lack of longitudinal studies that track the long-term impact of new media technologies on the popularity and commercialization of women's sports. While current data highlights positive trends, it is unclear how sustainable these effects are over time and whether they will translate into lasting structural changes in the sports industry. Another limitation is the relatively narrow focus on Western contexts, particularly in terms of media coverage and technological adoption, which may not fully capture the global landscape of women's sports. Future research should address these gaps by conducting longitudinal studies to assess the enduring impact of digital and interactive technologies on women's sports. Additionally, cross-cultural analyses are needed to explore how different regions and cultures are engaging with women's sports and how global initiatives can be tailored to diverse audiences. Another promising area for future investigation is the role of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and artificial intelligence (AI), in creating immersive experiences that can further enhance fan engagement and support for women's sports. By addressing these limitations and pursuing new avenues of research, the sports community can better support the growth and visibility of women's sports, ensuring a more equitable and inclusive future.

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