

Feminist Media Scholarship in *Communication & Sport*: A Response to the 10-Year Review

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Abstract

In this commentary, Antunovic and Bruce comment on the state of feminist sport media scholarship in *Communication & Sport* in response to Cummins and Hahn's (2025) 10-year review. The journal has served as a “go to” space for feminist sport media studies scholarship. Hegemonic masculinity prevails as one of the most often referenced frameworks, but the journal's publications have also engaged with a range of feminist frameworks. Scholars gravitate towards analyses of content (both qualitative and quantitative), which is reflected in feminist sport media scholarship as well. We advocate for a greater use of interviews and focus groups, and note the glaring absence of experimental design. The commentary also addresses the complexities between authors' institutional affiliations, lived experiences, and contexts of analysis. We ultimately argue for a deeper engagement with theory and a continued commitment to bridging disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords

feminism, theory, media, women's sports

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In a recent study that reviews 10 years of scholarship in *Communication & Sport* (hereafter *C&S*) Cummins and Hahn (2024) found that the most frequently cited theory in the stratified sample was hegemonic masculinity. As feminist sport media scholars, we have used and critiqued the utility of hegemonic masculinity for understanding gender dynamics in sports newsrooms, content about women's sports, and expressions of mediated fandom (e.g., Antunovic & Hardin, 2012; Bruce, 2016; Cooky & Antunovic, 2022). As such, we found this conclusion notable, yet not altogether surprising. Beyond the dominance of hegemonic masculinity and the other theoretical dilemmas raised by Cummins and Hahn (2024), we were also intrigued by the findings regarding methodology and authorship, which have both been central concerns in our previous "state of the field" syntheses and commentaries on feminist sport media studies (e.g., Antunovic, 2023; Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018; Bruce, 2016; Bruce & Antunovic, 2018).

Certainly, *C&S* established itself as a "go-to" journal for scholarship that advances feminist sport media studies. The first empirical issue of the journal (Issue 3 as the first two volumes featured reflections only) highlighted several studies on the relationship between gender, sport, and the media (Cooky et al., 2013; Kane et al., 2013; Schmidt, 2013). The most recent issue (2025, Volume 13, Issue 1), similarly features theorizing and empirical contributions to the study of gender (Brown et al., 2025; McGannon et al., 2025; Smith & MacArthur, 2025). While some articles on gender do not explicitly engage with feminist theory, these works are nevertheless important for better understanding the complex dynamics, changes, and continuities in this area of research.

This commentary offers an opportunity to highlight research on gender and sports media, identify gaps, and propose future directions for research. Because of our particular expertise, we focus primarily on research on women's sports and the media as we overview some of the findings in the 10-year review pertaining to theory, methodological approaches, and authorship (Cummins & Hahn, 2024), and contextualize these within broader trends in feminist sport media studies (Antunovic, 2023; Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018; Toffoletti, 2016). In addition, we draw on pertinent articles from *C&S* to reflect on the journal's role in advancing feminist sport media scholarship and propose future directions for research. Ultimately, we argue that scholars are actively contributing to *Communication & Sport* with feminist sport media research, but also have the opportunity to engage with a broader range of epistemological traditions and methodological approaches that would further the conceptual, empirical, and practical contributions of this line of work.

The Theoretical Dilemmas of Hegemonic Masculinity

Our interest in writing a "response" to the Cummins and Hahn article was prompted by the findings pertaining to the theoretical frameworks and the authors' explanation regarding the positioning of hegemonic masculinity, which appeared 44 times (24%) within their sample. We were not surprised that hegemonic masculinity appeared so dominantly (e.g., Sanderson et al., 2017; Turner, 2014; Wolter, 2021), as sports scholars

tend to gravitate towards that framework when analyzing gendered media coverage (Bruce, 2016). It surprised us that other feminist theories and/or concepts did not appear in their top 10 most-frequently-cited or most-commonly-cited lists, although this absence may be an effect of the stratified sample and focus on named theories. What was missing for us was a broader sense of the impact of feminist theories and theorizing in the journal. A search of *C&S* in the first decade revealed high numbers of references to “hegemonic masculinity” (102) during the sample period. However, feminist approaches were also strongly visible: “feminist” (56 times) and “feminism” (55 times) appeared most frequently, followed by references to specific feminist theories such as “intersectional feminism” (24), “transnational feminism” (13), “neoliberal feminism” (10), “third-wave feminism” (9) “liberal feminism” (4) and “indigenous feminism” (4) (e.g., Cooky & Antunovic, 2022; Ho & Tanaka, 2022; Vaczi, 2019). “Feminist theory” was identified 14 times. However, “queer theory” and “queer methodologies” (e.g., Fischer & McClearen, 2020) were almost invisible.

Based on our experience of reviewing articles for journals, we are certainly pleased to see that scholars are engaging in scholarship on women’s sports and attempting to situate their analyses within feminist frameworks. However, like Cummins and Hahn (2024), we are concerned that too many references to theory do not deeply engage with theoretical ideas. In addition, when we reviewed papers (for a wide range of journals), we observed that scholars are often using frameworks that operate under conflicting epistemological assumptions or, worse, misinterpreting the foundations of the theory.

Moving Beyond Content Analysis

In terms of methodological approaches, as expected, the examination of media content – both qualitative and quantitative – dominates in the journal, representing nearly half of the dataset (Cummins & Hahn, 2024). Studies that analyze some sort of content represent a substantial body of work in feminist sport media scholarship as well. Thorpe et al. (2017) estimate there have been “many thousands of published articles” on representation of women’s sports across national contexts since the 1970s (p. 360). This line of scholarship typically analyzes newspaper content, television broadcasts, magazines, and digital media to (1) compare coverage of men’s and women’s sports, (2) unpack gendered discourses (e.g., constructions of femininity, athleticism), and (3) identify disruptions (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018; Bruce, 2016; Toffoletti, 2016). Consistent with the overall trajectory in *C&S*, both qualitative and quantitative analyses are widespread. Common are quantitative content analyses of newspapers (Bell & Coche, 2018; Kaiser, 2018), ESPN’s SportsCenter (Cooky et al., 2013, 2015, 2021; Turner, 2014), and Olympic broadcasters (Billings & Angelini, 2019; Smith & Bissell, 2014; Xu et al., 2018).

Qualitative analyses of content, such as discourse analysis and thematic analysis are also popular (Cummins & Hahn, 2024). In the case of our line of work, scholars publishing in *C&S* used qualitative analyses of media content to examine representation strategies of women’s sports and women in sports (e.g., Allain & Dotto, 2024;

Fielding-Lloyd & Mean, 2016; Hodler & Lucas-Carr, 2016; Martínez-Corcuera & Ginesta, 2024). As the network of content-creators expanded with the rise of digital media, scholars have also shifted to examining how governing bodies (Johnson & Romney, 2022), sport organizations, athletes and fans use digital media (Chen & Kwak, 2023; Schmidt et al., 2019; Toffoletti et al., 2021). Various approaches to social media content provide evidence that digital disruptions do not altogether alter the landscape for mediated women's sport.

Perhaps surprisingly, interviews were used in only 10% of the dataset Cummins and Hahn (2024) analyzed, while focus groups were not even mentioned. In feminist sport media scholarship, interviews and focus groups have been a useful tool for examining the culture of media production, such as experiences of women who work in sports journalism (e.g., Bruce, 2002; Everbach, 2018; Hardin & Shain, 2005; Harrison, 2021). Articles that draw on interviews with journalists are scarce compared to analyses of content but offer important contributions. Notably, studies in *C&S* provide insight into how journalists navigate – and in some ways perpetuate – stereotypes, barriers, and journalistic processes in relation to women's sports in multiple contexts, including Poland (Organista et al., 2021), Switzerland (Schoch, 2022), Australia (Sherwood et al., 2017), and the U.S. (Antunovic, 2017; Mirabito et al., 2025). These studies use interviews, oral history interviews, and a combination of interviews and content analysis in ways that situate the marginalization of women's sports in relation to industry norms with attention to the specific mediated and socio-cultural context. Few *C&S* articles used focus groups (cf. Marin-Montín & Bianchi, 2024), but innovative approaches that allow participants to provide interpretations of media coverage could provide valuable future directions in feminist sport media studies.

In terms of common quantitative methods, communication and sport scholars utilize surveys (Cummins & Hahn, 2024), which are less characteristic for scholars of women's sports. Nevertheless, surveys are helpful in offering insight into consumers' and audiences perceptions and experiences pertaining to gender norms in sport (e.g., Doehler, 2024; Xu et al., 2018). Combined with content analysis, surveys can also provide insight into the relationship between the presence of women in the industry and the prominence of women's sports coverage (Schmidt, 2013).

The review also points to what we perceive as a glaring absence of experiments, representing only 5% of the sample (Cummins & Hahn, 2024). Considering the strong tradition of media effects scholarship in communication and media studies (Bryant & Oliver, 2009), we found this number strikingly low. Yet, based on our observation, experiments are particularly rare in work on gender and sport, especially pertaining to women's sports coverage. The disconnect could be attributed to the notion that critical feminist scholarship typically operates under epistemological and ontological assumptions that reject – or at least question – positivism (Knoppers & McLachlan, 2018). Further, experiments (and, for that matter, surveys) treat gender as a nominal variable, which stands in stark contrast to poststructuralist traditions that challenge gender binaries (Knoppers & McLachlan, 2018). Nevertheless, psychology-informed studies in *C&S* have used experiments to examine processes of objectification and

stereotyping based on gender (Brisbane et al., 2023; Cummins et al., 2019; Reichart Smith, 2016). We do see a great need for studies that *explicitly* engage with feminist psychological traditions, such as feminist empiricism and postpositivism, in ways that are attentive to the relationship between the laboratory setting and the socio-cultural context of the natural environment as well as the power dynamics between the researcher and the participants (Eagly & Riger, 2014).

Geographic Diversity and the Risk of Overgeneralization

In terms of authorship, Cummins and Hahn (2024) observed that the sample consisted of articles primarily written by scholars from the U.S., followed by Australia, Canada, and the UK. This finding is not surprising considering that adjacent fields – including sociology of sport – have historically relied on knowledge from the West (Coakley, 1987). Feminist sport media scholarship is no exception: An analysis of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* (*SSJ*) found that 67% of all authors were from the U.S. followed by 14% of authors from Canada, 5% from New Zealand and 4% from Australia (Antunovic, 2023). While *SSJ* certainly draws on scholarship from across the world, the journal is affiliated with the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport, which is exclusively hosted in the U.S. or Canada. *C&S* on the other hand is affiliated with the International Association for Communication in Sport, which aspires to internationalism – though it rarely holds conferences outside of the United States, which creates barriers (e.g., travel, financial support) to truly international engagement. A noteworthy observation from Cummins and Hahn (2024) pertaining to scholarship in *C&S* is that the percentage of authors based only at U.S. institutions did not significantly decline between the first and second five-year periods. The journal did see a slight increase in the percentage of articles co-authored by U.S. and non-U.S.-based scholars, but that difference was also minimal. To our knowledge, no specific data exists on diversity of author affiliations pertaining to feminist sport media scholarship, but these findings provide important data points that must be contextualized.

The institutional affiliation of U.S.-based authors certainly reveals a U.S.-dominance in knowledge production, at least pertaining to where they work. The minimal presence of scholarship from countries outside Western Anglophone contexts also raise concerns about whether the flagship journals in sport studies/sport media fields – which are typically associated with major organizations (e.g., International Association for Communication and Sport) – are accessible to scholars who might operate from different scholarly traditions and/or not be writing in their native language. We are both on the editorial boards of several journals that are having ongoing discussions on how to make the journals more accessible.

We also want to caution that the U.S.-based affiliation of scholars could be disguising important nuances in terms of authors' perspectives and sites of analysis. Many of the published sport media scholars who were based at U.S. institutions at the time of their publication (e.g., Bell & Coche, 2018; Ličen et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2018; Yoo et al., 2024) were educated and/or have lived experience in multiple countries and, thus,

might be bringing a cross-national comparative lens to the research. In fact, some gender and sport media scholars, including the two of us, have lived in multiple countries, which also shapes the way we ask questions, conduct analysis, and interpret the data.

Future Directions for Research on Women's Sports and the Media

Based on our scholarly experiences and data from [Cummins and Hahn \(2024\)](#), *C&S* has clearly created space for feminist sport media studies research, and more broadly research on gender, pertaining to issues such as gender representations, gendered dynamics in the industry, and gendered audience perception. We wholeheartedly agree with an earlier evaluation by journal editors [Billings and Hardin \(2022\)](#) that “This journal has always prioritized spaces for covering gender issues, partly because the communication of sport is at least partly based on comparisons of the ideal versus the reality, the aspirant versus the status quo” (p. 591). That said, there is certainly more work to do.

Scholarship pertaining to women's sport and the media is particularly relevant now in the early 2020s. For the last decade or so, women's sport has undergone exponential growth in terms of expansion of leagues, broadcast deals, viewership, attendance, and fan engagement – a trend that is particularly prominent in the U.S. and Western Anglophone contexts, such as Australia, New Zealand, and the UK. These changes and the corresponding narratives of progress require nuanced, theoretically grounded, and methodologically sound research that recognizes global inequalities in the professionalization of women's sport and considers structural forces at the intersection of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, social class, and disability ([Bowes & Culvin, 2021](#); [Cooky & Antunovic, 2022](#); [McLachlan, 2019](#)).

There appears to be a rise in scholarship about women's sport, and certainly, some of this work is high quality and gets published. However, in many cases, we are seeing a lack of historical context, confusing use of, or “mere references” to, theory ([Cummins & Hahn, 2024](#), p. 1), and/or what former *C&S* editor Larry [Wenner \(2014\)](#) described as “quick and dirty” superficial social media analyses that can be characterized as more descriptive than analytical (p. 104). Documentation of women's sports coverage remains essential, because quantitative patterns have remained relatively consistent over the last 40 years. The high number of qualitative analyses reflects a need to capture and understand shifts in how women's sport is represented ([Bruce, 2016](#); [Cooky et al., 2021](#)). Nevertheless, we encourage scholars to move beyond description and situate their analyses more strongly in theoretical context ([Hardin, 2014](#)). Building on [Cummins and Hahn's \(2024\)](#) finding that only a minority of articles used theories as their guiding framework, we argue that explicit engagement with (feminist) theories must drive our analyses and interpretations of gender in sports contexts – especially in the cases when our data relies on content. We encourage authors planning to publish in *C&S* to expand their reading beyond their own national borders in order to more clearly

situate their analyses in the global context. While women's sport may be relevant in all countries where research has been conducted, the media context, cultural attitudes, etc. are not the same, and it is important to recognize (and value) what we can learn from these differences.

Finally, as the impact of *C&S* continues to grow, we are left with several questions about our citation practices and the value of extending engagement beyond our own bubbles. Should we make attempts to publish in broader journalism/mass communication journals, feminist studies journals, sociology journals and/or psychology journals? Now that sport communication journals and conferences are widespread, what are the boundaries of the field? How does the focus, theoretical approach, and methodology shape the direction of articles and the intended audience? Importantly, when and where should manuscripts about women's sports be submitted? There is value in maintaining a balance in where we publish in order to maintain the interdisciplinary strength of the field, but the audience matters. Therefore, we suggest that we should continue to widen our reading so that we engage with literature, frameworks, methodologies, and contexts across disciplinary and geographic boundaries. Given that sport communication research is now published in multiple outlets, it is also important that researchers do not narrowly engage with only a few journals, but read widely across multiple disciplines and bring these conversations to *C&S*. Because of the current rise of women's sports, we expect the continuing growth of scholarship in this area and we look forward to theoretically provocative, methodologically innovative, and epistemologically diverse contributions.

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