



RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Sports, Gender and Media: Why Are There Fewer Female Coaches On The Court In Hong Kong?

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Jul 13, 2024 Accepted: Sep 2, 2024	Despite the improvement in gender equality in the sports industry, still, there are many hidden biases in our society. The imbalanced number of male and female coaches, the different ways of reporting female and male athletes, which in turn affect their images presented to the audience, thus eventually influence how learners choose their coaches. To explain this phenomenon, this study examines the presentation of and hidden biases in sports media and the impacts brought by it. A qualitative research reveals that there is an asymmetrical view on gender role formed that affects the participation rate and prosperity of female coaches in Hong Kong, the major problems faced by female coaches recently, Male coaches outnumber female coaches, the imbalanced reports in sports media in terms of both quality and quantity, also the challenges/ opportunities offered to female coaches. This study contributes to the understanding of gender imbalance in the sports industry by pointing out the hidden biases and gender expectations that may put pressure on female athletes/coaches who will be/ are struggling in the field.
<b>Keywords</b> Sports coaching Female coaches Stereotypes Mass media Gender roles Media bias Sports media Media representation	
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### INTRODUCTION

In Hong Kong, there has been an increasing number of opportunities for female athletes since the last decade when women start to achieve excellent results in major sports events (Leung, 1995). The participation rate of females in sports was 90% until 2018 (Lui, Jain & Groos, 2018). Despite the increasing number of female athletes, the proportion of female coaches to male coaches remain at a ratio of 1:3 (Leung, 2002). This phenomenon is mainly caused by typical stereotypes influencing the employment of coaches related to gender (Leung, 2002).

Previous studies found that there is a higher percentage of preference for choosing male athletes (Leung, 1995; Leung, 2002). According to Leung's (2002) quantitative study, even female athletes show a higher preference for female coaches when compared to male's choices but in overall, the majority of the athletes are also having a more positive attitude towards male coaches (Leung & Chan, 1999), this is mainly due to the culturally established gender expectations in Hong Kong's Chinese society, which accords greater esteem, privileges, and status to men (Chan, 2014). Thus, the deep-

seated traditional values and stereotypes influence people to regard coaching as a more 'men-appropriate' occupation (Wang, 2006).

Also, the preference is reflected by the number of participation of coaches in the Hong Kong Games, there was only one female head coach among all of the teams (Leung, 2002). nonetheless, the participation of female athletes remains high, without a concomitant rise in hiring female coaches (Leung, 2002; Hasbrook et al, 1990).

The views of people towards gender issues can be greatly affected by the media since the media that we consume nowadays carry an abundant amount of information relating to gender roles (Chan, 2014); especially in Hong Kong with such a media-saturated environment, together with the rich variety of print-based media outlets (Chan, 2014), the mass media brings different images ideas and stereotypes to us. Besides, the media also offers behavioral models for us to follow, how different genders should act 'appropriately' (Chan, 2014 ). For example, females are regarded as softer and gentler which does align with the expectations of being sports coaches who should be stronger and more aggressive (Wang, 2003).

There have been several research criticizing the mass media being biased and underrepresenting female's image in the sports industry that influences people's confidence in female athletes (Chan, 2014; Hung, 2003; Liao, 2007; Riordan, 1996, The Council of Europe, 2013), also it is argued that the retroactive representation of females in sports encourages gender stereotype and fewer females may enter the field and would not prefer to pursue a career in sports leadership (Murray, 1991). Although there is an increased emphasis on gender equity within the Hong Kong society and the participation of females in sports, the imbalanced gender ratio in the coaching industry remains very high (Wang, 2003).

Besides, apart from the uneven distribution in numbers, there is also an imbalanced distribution in positions of male and female coaches. Men are usually leading elite level athletes and taking the role of head coaches while women taking the role of assistant coach (Fasting, Sisjord & Sand, 2017; Chow, 2001). This kind of dominance of men is known as patriarchy, which has been transferred universally through the spread of culture and media information, thus creating an ideology of male superiority and at the same time reinforcing male domination over women (Boyle & Haynes, 2000).

It is important to figure out what are the difficulties faced by female coaches, why there is such an imbalanced number and status of coaches in Hong Kong, what role does the mass media take and how do they impose affect the prosperity of female coaches.

In order to understand the current situation and thoughts of female coaches, the following research questions will be studied:

- What are the major challenges that lead to fewer females participate in coaching?
- How are the images of females in the sports industry presented in the mass media and how are they interpreted?
- How do the challenges along with the messages conveyed by the media affect the participation of female coaches?

## **THEORY AND LITERATURE**

This section discusses two main ideas: (1) the challenges faced by female coaches under the influence of gender biases and (2) the sports media portrayal of the image and expectations of female athletes which contributes to the audience's expectation and assumption of female athletes who are directly related to female coaches, as coaches are former athletes, so the audience would judge the coaches according to athletic images and representations.

## **Coaching Industry and Theory of Homologous Reproduction**

The theory of Homologous reproduction, according to Kanter (1977), it refers to the kind of reproduction that authority and power holders maintain their control by allowing only others who possess similar social characteristics (instead of their true abilities) to get into their circle of influence. The sports coaching industry has long been identified as a male-dominant industry (Greenhill, et. al., 2009; Wang, 2003; Frank & O'Neill, 2016; The Council of Europe, 2013), and women with different social characteristics would have been excluded (Greenhill et al., 2009).

This value brings a lot of consequences, which imposes challenges to female coaches at the individual, interpersonal, and social-cultural context (Chow, 2001; Hyre et al., 2017; Fasting, Sisjord & Sand, 2017; Wang, 2003; Greenhill, 2009).

### **Social closure, congruity of gender roles and hegemonic masculinity**

Sports have been perceived as activities and professions that are outnumbered, controlled and dominated by men (Hyre et al., 2017; Nicole, LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). The concept of social closure coined by Weber (1978) suggested that a closure is formed when exclusion of individuals with "some externally identifiable characteristic of another group of (actual or potential) competitors-race, language, region, local or social origin, descent, residence, etc."-but the result is "always the closure of social and economic opportunities to outsiders" (Weber, 1978, p. 342); and in our case, females are considered as outsiders. And this concept is also reflected in the attitudes of administrators and athletes towards female coaches (Wang, 2003). As males are holding a more powerful position in the field, they tend to recruit men like themselves due to the practice of homologous reproduction (Fasting et al., 2017), therefore bringing challenges to female coaches. At the individual level, according to Wong (2002), in his interview with female coaches from the US about the recruitment process of sports coaches, the interviewees claimed that there was still prevailing discrimination and female coaches recruitment was not fairly taken place as the male coaches. It is perceived by coaches at all levels that administrators are reluctant to hire females as they regard female coaches being less competent than male coaches (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Hasbrook, 1988). For example, female coaches are questioned to be not suitable for being head coaches even though they are qualified for the position (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). For instance, there were only 5 out of 51 coaches are females in the 2012 London Olympics (Fasting et al., 2017). Thus, females may have fewer chances to reach for their aspirations and potential in their sports career (Hums et al., 2007).

Besides encountering challenges at an administration level, coaches could also have encountered additional stress due to the long-existing gender expectations in our society. Athletes themselves also seem to have some stereotypes towards female coaches (Wang, 2003). Especially for male-sports like basketball, football, rugby, etc. Some athletes agree that they have a higher preference with male coaches in terms of performance and skills (Wang, 2003); According to the theory of role congruity by Eagly and Karau (2002), due to the prejudice of female lacking masculine traits which does fit others expectation in the leadership role, others, especially male would think that woman is incapable of coaching male-typed sports (Kalin & Waldron, 2015). Scholars have also argued that this may be caused by the traditional gender roles that subordinate and marginalized women and their abilities are having lower values in sports (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). And according to Kanter (1997), this kind of attitude creates a minority status of female coaches and they may have to over-perform to gain credibility and being pressured to conform to organizational norms.

Apart from the difficulties mentioned above, at the interpersonal level, lacking family support is also another external difficulty faced by female coaches (Chow, 2001; Nicole, LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). As the older generation believe that (traditional values) pursuing elite sports career would not be worthwhile. And it is also believed that there will be greater barriers for females than males as males are still the dominant ones in this field (hegemonic masculinity) and girls are traditionally

encouraged to prioritize academics over sports (Choy, 2018), so that male coaches often gain more support from their families (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). While family support is agreed to be an essential asset in sustaining and engaging in a sports career (Chow, 2001), all of the interviewers (athletes) agree that a supportive relationship plays a critical role in deciding whether to be or not be a coach (Chow, 2001) and allows an easier transition from athlete to coach.

Under the practice of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), which legitimized the dominant position of men in the field, the situation will be more challenging especially participating in 'ideal man's sports' e.g. football, which encompasses masculine traits uncommonly found in female, like power, strength, and aggressiveness (Shearer, 2018). And this kind of patriarchy continues to play a major role in discriminating female coaches in the field, therefore limiting the availability and opportunities for females (Shearer, 2018).

### **The reinforcement of the stereotypical ideology of female sports and media image interpretation strategies**

Media has been playing a critical role in constructing a perception into people's minds (Lim, 2018). According to Hirschman & Thompson's media image interpretation strategies (1997), media information and messages have effects on our sense of self and behavior. Moreover, even gender equality has improved much in reality, when female athletes or coaches are still seen as a female at first and as an athlete second no matter on the court or in the media (Trojan, 2013). And the media seems to be supporting and perpetuating the perception of the public that sports is an activity with a sexual signature of masculinity (Murray, 1991). For instance, in the mass media, male roles are mostly described as authoritative and powerful and media as a persuasive channel to spread the idea throughout the society (Hung, 2004) while females are described as less competitive and powerful which is distinctly different to the description of males (Hyre et al., 2017); females are also often portrayed with a peripheral image, so they are usually regarded as the less valuable ones (Smith & Granados, 2009). Thus, resulting in the portrayal of gender occupation that coaching is a better occupation for males, which in turn affecting female athletes' career choices (Smith & Granados, 2009).

Hence, as the media plays an important role in affecting people's value on female coaches (Murray, 1991), the media has been favoring the development of the idea of hegemonic masculinity in society and allowing the typical ideology to continue to persist. Therefore, this does not only influence how others think about female coaches but also how female coaches think of themselves (Smith & Granados, 2009).

### **The underreport and trivialization of women's sports and media biases**

Under a male-dominated setting, women sports are mostly underreported and sports that are traditionally played by men are given more visibility e.g. football (the Council of Europe, 2013), as a result, people are exposed to men's performance in sports more than that of women (Hyre et al., 2017). According to Liberty Times (newspaper in Taiwan), among 70 news articles in 3 consecutive days, it has been found that there are actually only 2 are related to female's performance in sports, the others are mainly related to men and football (Liao, 2007). This is also proven in research from the University of Cambridge (the Council of Europe, 2013) that men are mentioned 3 times more than women in sports media across the globe.

In fact, the majority of sports are actually intended to create for men are more than women (Liao, 2007). For example, football, rugby, basketball, etc. Along with the preference of reporting male professional sports by the media or based on marketing strategies, results in the imbalance phenomena in the quantity of sports media reports (Liao, 2007). For instance, the National Basketball League (NBL), performed by professional male athletes are drawing the most attention from the media (Liao, 2007). Thus, lacking in media coverage of female athletes and coaches will influence

readers to believe that they are not as important and worthy as their male counterparts are (Trojan, 2013).

Moreover, the media has the responsibility to proactively regard their representation of women in the sports industry and remove gender bias in their reports (Murray, 1991; Trolan, 2013). However, in reality, the media tend to neglect female sports events, including their achievement, athletic ability and sport competency (Jacob & Schain, 2009), which continuously trivialize the accomplishment achieved by female athletes and coaches such that the general public will have a lower awareness of their participation and achievements (Kian, 2007). At the same time promoting hegemonic masculinity as a form of superiority over women, then allowing patriarchal values and gender inequalities to be reinforced continuously (Trojan, 2013). In fact, the society has been more aware of the gender inequality in the field, and there have been more female events establishing, for example, female boxing, female rugby, female soccer, etc (Liao, 2007), it is also found that Hong Kong female athletes have a higher participation rate and success in both kinds of national and international competitions (Wang, 2003) but under the reality that media tend to filter out these events and prefer to report the 'more exciting' male events, usually soccer, basketball, leading to less acknowledgement of the growth of female sports events (Liao, 2007).

Since the audience has less exposure to female sports reports, there will be less chance for them to know more about female coaches and athletes through the media and the information perceived is still about men. Therefore, there is a lack of means for other people to see the real picture of female sports, including both athletes and coaches.

### **Media underrepresentation, femininity and sexuality, gender appropriacy**

Apart from being underreported, women are also far less represented when compared to male athletes (Sherry, Osborne & Nicholson, 2016; Suendarti et al., 2023). Since they are more often being portrayed stereotypically, comically, sexually and in a sexist manner which focuses on females' appearance, femininity or sexuality instead of their actual athletic abilities (the Council of Europe, 2013; Maguire, Jarvie, Mansfield & Bradley, 2002; Rahman et al., 2024). Along with the reproduction of sports hegemonic masculinity, and the objectification and highlight of the aspects of women's body. Thus, they are not being viewed as 'real athletes' (Trolan, 2013). This does not only create affect women participation in sports but also their coaching role and leadership position in this field. (the Council of Europe, 2013)

It is also mentioned in Liao's (2007) research that words like 'aged', 'older', 'pregnant' and 'marriage' are mostly linked with female sports articles, while 'strong', 'big', 'fastest' and 'great', which are more sports-related are linked to male participants. In addition, in terms of sportsmen and sportswomen, sportsmen are usually combined with 'beat', 'win' and 'battle', as for women, they are mostly combined with 'compete', 'participate' and 'strive' and this will convey a different image even though woman and man might have achieved the same level of success. With such labels, female athletes and coaches may receive less respect from the general public when compared to their male counterparts (Hyre et al., 2017).

As a result, this creates a viewpoint of 'gender appropriate' sports events, like females are more suitable for events like figure skating, gymnastics, diving which emphasized much on femininity, body shapes, posture, and aesthetic feeling. In turn, regarding other sports, the audience may easily regard females participating in 'gender inappropriate' sports events as less professional (Liao, 2007). And this is reflected by the media that females participating in gender-appropriate sports had higher coverage than those who do not, thus reinforcing the gender stereotype in sports again (Trojan, 2013).

Furthermore, female athletes' abilities have always been related and judged by their physical appearance (Liao, 2007). According to Hung (2003), it is found that the news report relating to female

athletes focused more on their beauty which marginalized and trivialized their efforts. Thus, this creates a stereotyped image of female athletes in the eyes of the audience and limiting the potential of female athletes (Hyre, et al., 2017); as this phenomenon is pervasive in all modern sports events and leads to the female athletes being marginalized in sports media (Boyle & Haynes, 2000) and causing a vicious cycle.

To conclude, under the pre-developed values relating to gender and sports in Hong Kong society (Shearer, 2018), along with the limited media attention and coverage when compared to male, these inappropriate representations do not only influence others' views on female coaches but also result in a lower self-esteem and mental health problems (Hyre, et al., 2017). Also, the embraced superiority of men over women in the form of hegemonic masculinity, denigrate them through physical and emotional weakness (Trojan, 2013), so women coaches need to pay extra efforts to prove their credibility to others (Shearer, 2018; Jaurigue et al., 2023), in order to obtain their deserved respect for their athletic success (Hyre, et al., 2017).

From the above literature, we understand that homologous reproduction, hegemonic masculinity, femininity and sexuality of female coaches as well as traditional gender bias are reinforced by the media and have brought some challenges to female coaches. However, most of the literature cited in this part mainly emphasized on the western context, while in Hong Kong, relevant studies are still lacking, or the situation of Hong Kong has still not yet been well delineated. Also, most of the literature cited above do not involve interviewing with coaches that allows us to understand how female coaches themselves think about themselves, so we could understand the issue more thoroughly from their point of view. Therefore, semi-structured interviews have been done with female sports coaches in Hong Kong to collect more data for further analysis.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As the leadership positions of females have been an anomaly in the male dominant sports industry, the purpose of the study is to have a more thorough and detailed understanding of female coaching experience in Hong Kong through a qualitative approach. As to know more about what challenges are faced by females, what are people's attitudes towards female coaches as well as the role taken by media in influencing female coaches' experience and people's thoughts and lastly, how are those messages being interpreted by the readers. The following describes the sample in the study, method of data collection, the procedure of the interviews and the analysis of data.

### **Interview**

#### **The Sample**

5 Female and 5 male coaches were planned to interview in order to understand the different views of both gender and the age of interviewees ranged from 20 to 50 years old who have different number of years of coaching experiences. They have been coaching at different levels, including beginners, intermediate players and elite team players who engaged in individual sports like badminton, athletics and tennis. All of them were coaching one sport only. The interviewees consisted of one female and one male senior coaches (coached for more than 10 years), two female and two male mid-level coaches (coached for 5-10 years), and also two female and two male junior coaches (coached for less than 5 years). Coaches of different experience and gender were selected as they might have different experience and exposure in the industry which might give a greater variety of insights and data. during the interview, respondents have reported on their experiences and provided more understanding of the impact of gender stereotype and patriarchy on female coaches.

I also planned to interview 10 athletes to understand their views towards this phenomenon, in order to understand the situation in more perspectives. These athletes are at intermediate to elite levels, have had training experiences with female coaches or male coaches. Athletes have been recruited as

well as they are important in influencing the experience of female coaches their attitudes are important for investigating the issue as well. And specifically, for female athletes, they are recruited because they are potential female coaches that they might want to be coaches in the future, therefore, there is a need for us to understand their outlook for this career.

In addition, there are lacking research collecting data from both coaches and athletes, most of the researches either do interviews with coaches or athletes only. interviews of both stakeholders are conducted as they are having a mutualistic relationship, their interaction and attitudes affect one another.

Participants were recruited through a combination of snowball and quota sampling. They were selected via individual networks. Snowball sampling was adopted to recruit participants because it was hard to find various numbers of coaches of different gender, age-range and coaching experience. The series of interviews began with one case of a female coach who has coached for 2 years is now 21 years old, then I asked her to refer someone who has coached for more years of coaching experience and the referral continues in order to locate other coaches with different backgrounds. In addition, quota sampling was used, quotas were set to ensure that the proportion of the target category reaches the determined number of cases.

### **Procedures and methods of data collection**

In response to the research questions, interviews have been conducted with both female and male coaches so that opinions can be understood from a broader perspective since by understanding the experiences and thoughts of the 'minority' and the 'majority', the study can be benefitted by making further interpretation from this information.

The interviews conducted were in a semi-structured format, which are guided by a set of questions. This type of interview allows the interview to flow more freely with fewer constraints while still being able to answer questions relating to the related themes and topics with more focus and consistency. Open-ended questions were designed to explore the different possibilities and avoid leading questions.

Before the beginning of the interview, a written consent form was provided for each interviewee, in order to give them some brief information and confidentiality of the study. All interviews were conducted in the participants' mother tongue, i.e. Cantonese. Interviews were conducted through Skype due to geographical and time constraints, the interviews lasted for 45-60 minutes. In order to have a smoother interview, each interview was audio-taped (with the consent of the interviewee) for review and transcription. A set of questions relating to coaching experiences and challenges have been asked. Interviewees were encouraged to answer the questions with detailed insights and comments along with facts and experience to support their claims.

### **Data analysis**

Data collected was analyzed by a thematic analysis which allows us to develop new ideas and patterns from the interview transcripts. Coding was also performed via the computer software NVivo in order to locate themes and categorize collected data. The data collected was coded until saturation. Then common themes were found, and they were reviewed and refined. The interview response assisted in answering the three research question: 'What are the major challenges that lead to fewer females participate in coaching?', 'How are the images of females in the sports industry presented in the mass media and how are they interpreted?' And 'How do the challenges along with the messages conveyed by the media affect the participation of female coaches?'

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this section, the findings of this study will be discussed. By using thematic analysis, coding the qualitative data to extract underlying themes from the interviews for interpretation. Analysis of responses from male and female coaches has been done to find out common themes to discuss and examine the research question. The main argument here is that female coaches do experience challenges due to discrimination and prejudice from students, parents and employers and the media do have certain effects on it. Along with their physical constraints, they are facing more obstacles. Also, the underrepresentation and biased messages conveyed by the media do affect the views of others towards female coaches to a large extent thus posing the challenges (mentioned above) to female coaches. And reasons deterring female athletes from becoming coaches will be discussed in this section as well.

In the collected data, relating to the purpose of the study, the following themes are identified, including (1) thoughts of coaches and challenges in the coaching industry (2) attitudes of parents and students towards female coaches (3) how audiences decode and make sense of sports media.

### Thoughts of coaches and challenges in the coaching industry

Throughout the interviews, both female and male coaches have mentioned their views towards the imbalanced number and status of male and female coaches as well as their opinions towards the gender-biased coaching industry in Hong Kong along with further explanations on the reasons they think that contribute to the phenomenon.

#### Internal barriers: devaluation of abilities and confidence

Similar to the previous findings, the interviewees agreed that gender images and stereotypes play a critical role in affecting their position in the field and their confidence in coaching, as they might seem to be the weaker members in the community, and they will easily think that they are not competent enough for the position, resulting in internal barriers. According to one of the interviewees,

*'male coaches are having more positive images like more powerful, fitness strength female coaches are gentler and less powerful. male athletes might have a smaller preference for female coaches' (female coach, 21, coached for 1 year)*

*'It is easy to make a comparison between myself with male coaches, men are always more powerful and inborn with better fitness strength. I feel disappointed in myself especially when students of mine are appreciating male coaches on the court beside us because of the power and speed. Even though badminton requires skills more than power, men still seem to have a better image in leadership in this field.'* (female coach, 23, coached for 5 years)

Traditional values and gender labelling like men possess the 'natural' and universal athletic bodies, just as the majority of males are born to perform sports. In contrast, females are expected to be weaker and gentle who will not be able to perform well in the aggressive and traditional male sports. With such beliefs and gender expectations present in the society, it certainly brings negative impacts to female coaches themselves, such as a lower self-esteem and confidence, questioning their abilities in coaching. The imbalanced situation may also easily make female coaches to regard themselves as minorities while facing gender prejudices and credibility issues. This is also supported by Lavoie & Dutote (2012), female coaches generally regard themselves as less qualified for the position, even though they do have enough athletic and coaching capital.

In addition, with the embedded Gender expectations within society, it brings a kind of invisible pressure on female coaches. They will pay more effort to become successful, so that they can gain more respect and recognition for the general public.



*'I know females are inborn to be physically weaker than males, so they worked really hard as many adults pre-assumed that male coaches are better than female coaches in overall. Nonetheless, I have seen how hard they worked so I will not consider females coaches are not qualified.'*(male coach, 30, coached for 6 years)

Female coaches worked harder in order to catch up with male coaches and certainly, this does require extra effort and time of female coaches. Prejudice rises when desired characteristics like caring and considerate do not match with people's expectations on sports leaders like aggressive, powerful, etc. so people would usually understand women as lacking in masculine characteristics that are credited to men, thus regarding females are lacking the leadership abilities without really considering their actual qualifications. So apart from acquiring better skills and techniques of the sports, female coaches might need more time and effort in adopting agentic characteristics that resemble a controlling, aggressive and confident inclination. As men have been regarded as a more favorable occupant of leadership role, there would be a need for females paying extra effort and it could have imposed additional stress on female coaches causing them to quit as the additional requirement makes them think that they are no longer as suitable as male for this job.

### **Male dominance and lacking in female role model**

Role models and mentors are very important characters in guiding athletes in becoming coaches in the future. However, as mentioned in the previous sections, under the male-dominated environment, the prevailing stereotype within society bring challenges to females, such as lacking in job opportunities, taking the position of head coaches, leading elite teams, etc. therefore, are usually being stereotyped and marginalized, causing females athletes to refrain from being coaches in the future, so there would be fewer role models available in this field. And this would influence coaching as a career option for female athletes.

*'when you are an athlete and it's very rare to see a female coach or you might not have the chance to train with a female coach, you would not think about your next step is to be a female coach.'* (female coach, 40, coached for 15 years)

*'We are now in a rather gendered sports coaching environment, which I think that it is hard for us, females, to come through. The coaching industry is still male dominant so it is less attractive for younger females to aspire to this job and is difficult to inspire them also.'* (female coach, 23, coached for 5 years)

If a female athlete has a female coach as a role model, she will be able to identify and prepare for those obstacles and negative experiences like common gender stereotypes that she might face in the future and seeing success in their role models would motivate and inspire them to become coaches in the future. Moreover, having a same-sex role model is especially important during the stage of adolescence, who can help to enhance the performances of female athletes and improve their sense of belongings.

The lacking in role models for potential female coaches would create a vicious cycle which will continue to prevent female athletes to aspire to the job. As there will be fewer females to become coaches, as a result, there is a smaller number of same-sex role models available to athletes, thus lacking in a proper support to female coaches, while sports organization or society is not able to provide visible pathways and role models for potential female coaches so female coaches could not be recruited and retained, the cycle continues.

### **Attitudes of parents and students towards female coaches**

Both parents and coaches have the good intention of supporting young athletes to develop to their full potential on the field. Attitudes of parents and athletes also play an essential role in affecting female coaches. Interviewees' opinions on the prevailing attitudes toward female coaches were asked and they answered the question according to three aspects, including from the aspect of coaches

themselves (discussed above), parents and athletes. In the following, I will focus on analyzing the attitudes of parents and athletes.

Attitudes of parents are understood through the answers of coaches, while the attitudes of athletes are understood through the answers of both coaches and athletes themselves. During the interviews, questions about the attitudes towards female or male coaches are asked. Coaches discussed how they were treated by parents and their athletes.

### **Attitudes of parents towards female coaches**

Parents' attitudes have been a concern in this research is because they are the major stakeholders for deciding the coaches for their children. When asked about the attitudes of parents towards coaches, parents somehow prefer having male coaches,

*'Some parents asked me for referral of other coaches for their friends and some of them would request having male coaches in specific. As they think that male coaches seem to be more aggressive and powerful in performing a leadership role.'* (Male coach, 30, coached for 6 years)

With pre-existing long-term prejudices and biases in the society, the qualifications of female coaches are always being questioned by others and this gives female coaches the feeling that there is a belief that women could not really do well in coaching. Coaching is a male dominated field where athletes may think women were not competent enough to coach. This is because there is an invalidation and fear of femininity has been continually instilled and conveyed, which is marginalizing femininity. So, it is assumed that male athletes did not want to be coached by female coaches which is a belief held inside the patriarchal field. Hence, rejecting female coaches. For example, this is also supported by Shearer's article (2018) as well, the public was also more concerned with whether male athletes are comfortable and able to handle having a female coach rather than the skills and knowledge she possessed. It is not a debate of females' qualification for the leading position but the qualification for getting higher respect from male athletes and parents. However, this is only applicable to the general public but not athletes.

### **Attitudes of athletes towards female coaches**

Surprisingly, when I asked about the attitudes of athletes towards female coaches, there was a different stance compared to the previous literature. Both male and female athletes also show respect and acceptance to female coaches.

*'I have trained with a female coach when I was younger, I think it is acceptable as she was able to demonstrate the correct skills and techniques that are expected in male coach'* (male athlete, 19)

*'My kids do respect me a lot, even sometimes I might be too harsh on them, they know I am doing it for their own good, they never disrespect me.'* (female coach, 23, coached for 5 years)

Female coaches will gain their support from their athletes as if they are having the qualifications and skills to help athletes to develop to their full potentials. The athletes would respect their coaches if their coaching style and techniques are good enough to help athlete success. To gain trust and support from the athlete is not about embracing gender norms but the suitable coaching styles instead, therefore, if female coaches are able to provide the best coaching styles and programs for their athletes, they will be respected. Apart from physical and technical support, coaches are also important in providing psychological support for their athletes. One of the athletes also added why she likes having female coaches,

*'When I encounter some personal problems, I think I feel more comfortable to tell my female coach as I think they are more thoughtful and considerate.'* (female athlete, 20)

Apart from performing appropriate skills and knowledge, athletes suggest that leadership and communication skills are more important than the knowledge and technical skills that the coaches

possessed. Preferred coach having the best coaching skills and knowledge which are based on his/her qualifications, not gender.

The results for the interviews are quite different from the previous research that athletes have a higher preference for male athletes but in this interview, athletes seem to be quite supportive of female coaches. One explanation for the differences of results is that in previous studies, a hypothetical methodology was used, questions regarding respondents' past experience were not asked, instead, hypothetical coaches and situations were used. And these hypothetical questions assume all interviewees that are having the same background but it's not the case. It is important to consider participants' past experience because we need to be aware that those who have only had trained with male coaches in the past might be biased in favor of having a male coach by default as they have no experience in training with female coaches. This is also supported by Kalin & Waldron's findings (2015) that "participants who have a male coach dominant background prefer male head coaches more than those with a female coach dominant background". Hence, the attitudes towards female attitudes should not be determined unless they really have the experiences of training with female coaches. Therefore, all interviewed athletes are required to answer the questions based on their actual past experience in this research.

Furthermore, in previous studies and research, it was suggested that athletes are having a higher preference towards female coaches (Wang, 2003; Leung, 2002) which contrasts with our interview results. This contradiction is mainly due to one of the limitations in those studies is that those respondents (athletes) were responding to questions about hypothetical coaches. As Hypothetical methodology was adopted, which assumed that all participants had the same background, which is not true in our case. Questions directly related to coaches' past experiences should be asked.

To summarize for this section, most of the discrimination and prejudice actually comes from the older generation like parents who are more affected by the long-term instilled gender biases in the society, whereas athletes are actually showing more respect to female athletes. Both athletes and coaches would experience a positive impact if they show mutual respect to each other, building a better relationship between athletes and female coaches.

### **Sense making and decoding of sports media by audience**

The sports media is an important stakeholder in maintaining the overall gender order in sports. However, it might not be aware of or prepared to acknowledge such a decisive role. They have been showing to the audience that men are way better than women in sports, thus reinforcing those values emphasizing femininity and appearance. The gender-based attitudes displayed by the media at the same time disadvantage females' position in society. We have mostly discussed what have the media conveyed to their readers and in the following, we will evaluate how readers make sense of and decode the information for the media.

### **Reinforcement of femininity and sexuality**

There have been pre-existing gender biases present in the sports media which is mentioned in the previous section. Images constructed by the media are powerfully affected by the ideologies and aesthetics of hegemonic masculinity, which are also impactful in reinforcing gender biases. For example, giving higher coverage for male athletes, ignoring female achievements but focusing more on their appearance and the descriptions done by the media are likely to reflect the major beliefs and values within society. In order to have a deeper understanding of how readers think about these messages, interviewees were asked for their opinions on the media representation of female athletes and coaches. one male athlete answered,

*'Sometimes the media do promote better looking female athletes, I think I also read more of those news reports sometimes on the internet as they always put more attractive headlines...'* (male coach, 30, coached for 6 years)

There is still a relatively high coverage focusing on the femininity and appearance of females in sports, which in turns trivialized the achievement of female coaches, and underemphasizing the athletic capability of females. The media is not necessarily the major reason for this marginalization, still, it is taking a critical role in its reinforcement, as well as opinions shaping and attitudes framing. The biased values which are historically connected to gendered sports have been reinforced by the media, taken for granted and not reflected upon. The male world is taken for granted by most sports media, especially in top-level sports.

### **Decoding sports media: legitimacy and 'fact-checking'**

Surprisingly, Athletes and coaches at a younger age who may also be aware of the legitimacy of media in Hong Kong will understand that the media can somehow be biased. Both male athlete and coach have claimed that,

*'Well, actually I don't read much newspaper or news on TV, I tend to understand the sports industry through videos, posts on social media because I believe those are first-hand information that is more reliable. And I also think that female athletes sometimes can be quite strong and skillful.'* (male athlete, 19)

*'Due to the current social movement, I understand that it is important not to believe everything reported by the media as there is always biased. It is important to 'fact check' before making a judgement as it may easily create misunderstandings. And it should also be applied to this phenomenon.'* (male coach, 20, coached for 3 years)

In contrast to the previous studies mentioned above sections, which assumed that the audience receives information passively, however, in reality, the younger generation actually knows how to gather more information relating to the issue and they have the ability to filter media messages before absorbing them. For instance, as mentioned in the Audience and Reception Theory (Ang, 1995), the audience is active in their choices of media material instead of passively receiving information from the media output. Critical thinking has been developed during athletes' education, they understand the importance of analyzing information before believing them. Especially under the influence of the social movement in Hong Kong, we understand that there is numerous information available in the media, thousands of messages are implied in the mass media, media taking different stances are showing the audience different evidence, so it is important to do 'fact-checking', to investigate and verify the facts. It is understood that the representation of females in sports media is somehow not reliable and biased. Those who have participated in training with females would know some media are underrepresenting females as they have first-hand information.

However, not everyone has the critical thinking to criticize the media and tend to believe its messages without seeking the truth, especially for the older generation, as they have already get used to these social norms, they would not bother to challenge the existing system or set of values. So that the pre-existing misunderstanding will continue to exist. Moreover, the general public who have not participated in the sports industry, they are having less exposure to the reality of the sports industry. Most of the information they got is from the underrepresented image and biased presentation of females in the field.

The sports media affect the general public's interpretation of female coaches in Hong Kong, despite the different effects on various people depend on how its audience decode the messages that it wants to convey, sports media still bears the ethical responsibility to the people it serves, bringing truth and neutral facts to their audience, embracing its responsibility to empower females in sports.

Female coaches will continue to face those difficulties until the media and its audience are able to see successful sports teams which are coached by female coach, therefore, there has to be an unbiased coverage for female athletes and coaches for the general public to understand them from the correct perspective.

## CONCLUSION

This research attempted to understand the lack of female coaches and gender imbalance situation in the coaching industry by analyzing the challenges faced by female coaches, the under representation of female images in sports media, as well as the effect of it. Since this is a qualitative research with limited numbers of individual interviews, the results cannot be generalized, and the interpretation may not be subjective enough due to limited interviews that have been made to understand the situation which cannot be understood in a broader view and more perspectives. In future research, more interviews can also be done with parents, to know directly their stance from them instead of getting the information from coaches; also, interviews can be done with journalists or reporters, in order to directly know the stance and views of the media towards the issue.

According to the review of previous literature, the practice of homologous reproduction along with the long-term patriarchy and gender bias within society which is reinforced by the local mass media, has been imposing more challenges to female coaches. This also matched with most of the data collected. However, there are some new findings appeared from the collected data: (1) athletes who have experienced training with female coaches do not agree that female coaches are not good at coaching while previous researches have mentioned that athletes have a higher preference for male coaches. (2) In previous research, it is claimed that the mass media, which is responsible for framing values in the society, has been promoting and reinforcing femininity and trivializing the achievements of female athletes and coaches, hence underrepresenting females to their audience. Nonetheless, our interviews found that with the advancement of technology, the audience no longer just rely on second-hand information, the younger readers tend not to believe everything read from the media, instead, they would search for information online, if they would really want to know about the issue. Therefore, the key message is that, it is important to understand that the gender of coaches should be irrelevant, but their experience and ability should be considered in their qualifications.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview questions**

#### **For coaches**

- What kind of sports are you coach? How long have you been coaching?
- Do you think that there are differences in training with male and female coaches?
- Are you aware that there is gender inequality within the sports industry?
- Do you think that there is gender stereotype in the sports industry? And have you encountered any difficulties regarding gender stereotype?
- Have you read any anything from the sports media recently?
- What do you think about the presentation of females in the sports media? Are you aware of the different representation of men and women in the media? How would you interpret them?
- Is there anything else you want to say about this topic?

#### **For athletes**

- How long have you been participating in this sport?
- Have you had any trainings with female coaches?
- How have you coaches influenced you? (both mentally and physically)
- Have you ever thought of becoming a coach in the future?
- Do you think that there is gender stereotype in the sports industry? And have you encountered any difficulties regarding gender stereotype?
- Have you read any anything from the sports media recently?
- What do you think about the presentation of females in sports media? Are you aware of the different representation of men and women in the media? How would you interpret them?
- Is there anything else you want to say about this topic?