

A Tale of Iranian Women Athletes: Elite Female Athletes Share Their Perspectives of Barriers and Consequences of Media Coverage

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ABSTRACT

Despite historic marginalization, female athletes excel in sports, yet media coverage of professional women's sports in Iran remains inadequate. This study employs content analysis to explore how Iranian female athletes experience the lack of media coverage and its impacts on women's sports. 22 elite female athletes were selected for semi-structured interviews. The findings of this study underscore the continued under representation of women's sports in the media, influenced by cultural barriers, socialization norms, inadequate sports marketing, and lack of strategy for producing women's sports programming in mass media. Consequently, these factors not only perpetuate cultural biases against women but also hinder effective sports management. In contrast, social media emerges as a potential platform for promoting women's sports. Due to the lack of media representation, Iranian female athletes have turned to social media as a valuable platform for personal branding, boosting their motivation, expanding their fans, and attracting potential investors.

1. Introduction

A historical review of most societies reflects the marginal role of women in sports. Sport has historically been a realm of males and its standards and values have been shaped by men's standards. Considering the role of women as insignificant and the marginalization of their position in all economic, cultural, and social aspects of societies in the world and most of all in the Third World countries this is evident in sports, as well (Gacka, 2017). Meanwhile, feminist efforts for gender equality in sports have always existed. Although developments in women's sports around the world indicate changes in this area, in-depth studies still show that historical gender issues towards women persist due to poor media coverage of women's sports. According to feminists, legal reformations are needed to address this discrimination in women's sports. There must be changes in the actions of governments, sports associations, and, most importantly, in the gender assumptions that exist in society and sports for women. Furthermore, Liberal feminists see the elimination of gender inequality in sports as dependent on prior equal rights, such as equal rights for male and female athletes, equal access to equal opportunities, coaching, and other employment opportunities (Gacka, 2017).

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There are different forms of discrimination in women's sports both in the world and in Iran, which is the result of a patriarchal attitude and media management of women's sports events against men's sports. Indeed, the media plays a crucial role in the advancement of sports, especially in championship and professional contexts. The media also influences public belief in sports by publishing various information about sports. However, in the opinion of Iranian researchers, not only in television programs, there is an induction approach to gender stereotypes but also, domestic media completely fades women's championships from the public view and refrains from showing sports events (Arab Nermi et al., 2015). There are 48 national and over five thousand local news agencies in Iran, which have specific sports pages. National and international men's football competitions receive the most media coverage on television and radio in Iran. Wrestling and men's volleyball are among other sports that have live broadcasts on Iranian national media. Talk shows, sports analysis programs, news coverage, round table discussions, and inviting athletes to entertainment programs all contribute to media coverage of men's sports and the introduction of national athletes in Iranian media. Relying on the work of Doroudian et al. (2021) Football sports field with 93.4% owns the most frequent coverage of the various fields' news. Another notable discovery of this study was a significant gap in gender representation. Specifically, 98.2% of the news coverage focused on men's sports, while only 0.3% centered on women's sports. Karami et al. (2020) undertook a study examining the content of sports programs on Iran's national television networks, with a specific focus on women's sports. The findings revealed that women's sports accounted for a mere 3.3% of the program airtime, in stark contrast to men's sports, which received 84.3% of the coverage. Short segments in Iran's national television news do touch upon women's sports events, but they notably refrain from broadcasting any footage of actual competitions. There's a tendency among news agencies to censor images of women's sports events, often to obscure the shape of the female body. Moreover, coverage of women's sports in these agencies is limited to the achievements in international events (Zare et al., 2021).

However, the advent of social media has changed the way athletes interact with fans and enthusiasts in various sports and advertising fields of this issue. By examining the behavior of the second page during the 2018 World Cup, Weimann-Saks et al. (2019) showed that the use of social media has affected the enjoyment of watching matches. As a form of modern information technology, social media has revolutionized the way people interact with sports, allowing people to express themselves freely during sporting events and to engage actively with citizens in the virtual world (Weimann-Saks et al. 2019). The online landscape in Iran appears to be a constant back-and-forth struggle. On one side are authorities persistently attempting to impose fresh restrictions and controls, while on the other are tech-savvy young generations tirelessly seeking innovative methods to stay informed and initiate discussions on politically and socially sensitive matters (Zanconato and Sabahi, 2019). In Iran, sports media have a special position in developing and spreading sports culture in society. Establishing and launching sports networks on radio, and television and the publication of numerous sports newspapers and magazines indicate the importance of this socio-cultural category (Alamshahi, 2013).

The authors investigate the barriers and consequences of media coverage of women's sports in Iran by conducting interviews with female athletes who have won medals in international arenas, national team coaches, and vice presidents of federations. Poor coverage of women's sports news and the need to improve the current situation has always been the focus of domestic and foreign researchers and the content of women's sports news has often been studied in different periods. Meanwhile, there is a need to qualitatively examine the views of professional female athletes and female officials regarding media coverage and the

consequences of media coverage should be known. The aim is to find the effective factors of media coverage and their consequences. The method of women's participation in sports activities is a complex issue in which many factors are involved. As illustrated by the various research, there are various barriers in media coverage of women's sports that trying to identify the factors affecting Iranian media sports coverage and its consequences can pave the way for developing and increasing women's approach to sports and the growth of mental and physical health. In the next section the authors will present the conceptual framework identifying the gaps, followed by methodological explanation, findings, conclusion, and final discussion.

2. Conceptual Framework

Given that the prevailing perception is that women are largely absent from the sports scene and in the meantime, media efforts marginalize women's sports activities, to reconsider the programs for getting out of this situation and making good use of the media position, we shall adopt strategies to create more interaction with the media (Ghasemi et al., 2016) and thus the first step in this route is identifying the barriers to media coverage of women's championship sports in Iran.

Soltani et al. (2021) investigated the portrayal of male and female sports in the online platforms of five news agencies: Aftab, ISNA, Tabnak, Tasnim, and Fars in 2016. Their analysis revealed that out of 34,768 news items, only 1,140 focused on women, representing a mere 3.31% of the coverage, while men received 96.68%. Women's sports, particularly shooting, received minimal attention compared to the predominant coverage of men's football. Furthermore, male personalities were featured significantly more than their female counterparts, with 45,6 and 17,951 mentions, respectively. Additionally, the number of photos depicting women was notably lower at 739, compared to 22,074 featuring men. Abdolmaleki and Khalili et al. (2023) offered an alternative viewpoint, identifying unequal media representation of women's sports as a key factor hindering their branding success and limited presence in sports advertising. They highlighted various cultural and social barriers, including unequal media coverage, traditional gender norms, patriarchal sporting structures, limited awareness of female athletes' capabilities, religious biases, and constraints on women's portrayal in advertisements, alongside the greater popularity of male athletes, contributing to the invisibility of Iranian female athletes in sports advertising. Golnabi et al. (2018) showcased that media managers and sports officials perceive an inadequacy in the coverage of women's sports, with only 4% of total sports news dedicated to women. Media focus primarily revolves around medal-winning, high-profile sports in international competitions. Karami et al.'s (2021) research on Channel 5's sports programs highlighted football's dominance, despite the participation of Iranian female athletes in diverse sports like shooting, ping-pong, sailing, and field events during the Olympic Games. However, national media coverage of women's sports competitions remained limited to brief news segments. Drawing on Sadeghi et al.'s (2018) findings, media portrayal, societal misconceptions, entrenched cultural attitudes, religious influences, and legal constraints collectively contribute to the discrimination against women's sports. Also, relying on the work of Harkness (2017) female athletes in Qatar encounter numerous barriers to participation, including issues related to religion, family and changing gender dynamics. While female athletic participation is on the upswing in Qatar, overall rates of involvement remain somewhat low. Sports fans are not interested in women's sports because they are covered significantly less than men's sports, indicating that they are less important and less interesting than men's sports and other topics that are covered more frequently in the media. Many

sports fans and critics argue that women's sports are just boring; they complain that women's sports are not nearly as exciting as men's sports (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018).

The literature review has illustrated that there are information gaps about barriers of media coverage in Iran-Media. Various researchers have conducted studies on media coverage of women's sports and have proven insufficient media coverage in Iranian media. On the other hand, with different perspectives, underdevelopment of women's sports and various issues in this area, cultural issues such as lack of media coverage have been addressed. However, there is still not enough research, and the exact obstacles of insufficient media coverage of women's sports is not clear, and its consequences also are not revealed. Therefore, the present study will examine the obstacles to media coverage of Iranian women's championship sports and study the consequences thereof.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted with an exploratory nature to expand knowledge recognize barriers to media coverage of Iranian women's championship sports and identify the consequences. The purpose of exploratory research is to clarify concepts, gather definitions, gain insight, and correct problems and ideas. Also, this research is based on data search and has a qualitative nature. The reason for using qualitative methodology is the existence of weakness in the theoretical and experimental background of research. A qualitative method of content analysis was used in this research. Using this strategy, the researcher can systematically extract subscription funds from a large amount of data and theorize his/her field of research based on it. The main purpose of this strategy is to explain a phenomenon by identifying the key elements of that phenomenon and then classifying the relationships of these elements within the context and process of that phenomenon.

In selecting the statistical sample for semi-structured (open) interviews, it was tried to use women sports elites in three groups with more than 10 years of experience. In order to sample the interviews, the purposive sampling method and snowball sampling technique were used and the time of each interview was 45 minutes on average. At the end of each interview, each interviewee was asked to introduce other successful managers or activists in women's sports, which continued until the interviews were saturated and no new answers were obtained. In this study, 22 people were interviewed and from the Seventeenth interview on wards, repetition was observed in the received information, but to be sure, it continued until the Twenty-second interview.

The steps proposed by Graneheim & Lundman (2004) were used for the data analysis process. Interviews were recorded, and transcribed and the transcribed files were reread to gain a general and accurate understanding. All interview information was considered as a unit of analysis. The sentences were considered as semantic units that are related to each other in terms of concept and content. Then, according to their content, they were summarized and put together. By continuing this process, the semantic units reached the level of conceptualization and abstraction according to the concept hidden in them and were registered with codes. Comparing the codes in terms of their similarities and differences with each other was done in the continuation of the process and they were classified under more conceptual and abstract classes with specific labels. In the end, the classes were compared with each other, and with careful and deep reflection, the content hidden in the data was introduced as the main theme of the research.

4. Data Validation Method

In this study, four Guba and Lincoln criteria were used to ensure the robustness of the findings. For acceptance, the findings were shared with four women sports experts who participated in the study, who confirmed the appropriateness of the findings. In order to validate the findings, the text of the extracted interviews, codes, and classes were reviewed and approved by the co-authors and one of the professors. Furthermore, in order to ensure the reliability of the findings, the steps and process of the research were recorded and reported as accurately and step by step as possible. Finally, an attempt was made to maximize diversity in terms of work experience, role, position, and age of the participants, which in addition to acceptance, helped to transmit the findings.

5. Findings

A total of 170 initial codes regarding media coverage of women's championship sports in Iran were extracted from 22 interviews conducted with 22 participants. These codes were classified into two categories: barriers to media coverage of Iranian women's championship sports and its consequences. In this study, the interviewees were purposefully selected from among the top athletes in international arenas, coaches, and vice presidents of federations with experience in various sports and management courses over 10 years. The information of the participants is presented in a general overview in Table 1. Interview questions were open semi-structured and in cases where additional information was needed to obtain more accurate information, participants were asked to provide examples for their answers and to share their experiences.

Table 1.

Information of the interview participants

Frequency	Age	National & International Championship	Education	Type of Activity	Activity Record
9	20-30	International Championship	Student of B.Sc.-M.Sc.	Athlete	+10 Years
7	30-40	National and International	M.Sc.	Coach	+ 15 Years
6	40-50	2 National / 2 International	M.Sc.-Ph.D.	Vice-chairwoman	+ 20 Years

6. Barriers to Women's Championship Sports Media Coverage

In the first step, the barriers to media coverage raised by the interviewees were identified, which are known as effective factors in creating the current media coverage situation. These barriers were classified into four categories: cultural factors, lack of media planning strategy, socialization, and lack of sports marketing strategy.

According to the interviewees, cultural factors are one of the most important and main factors that affect the coverage of women's sports media. This factor is rooted in three main parts, which according to the themes extracted from the conversations; include sexism, which is the result of the idea of gender discrimination, hegemonic masculinity, and gender stereotypes, which are in fact rooted in the culture of Iranian society. What exists in the role of femininity and masculinity in society concerning various activities, the media also represents the same gender stereotypes. What the interviewees mentioned in their answers is about the ineffectiveness of the Islamic hijab and the observance of the law in the media coverage of women's sports, and in fact, what prevents women from broadcasting sports in the media is the female body.

Person 1: “Full observance of the Islamic hijab in accordance with the laws of the country has not been able to improve the situation of media coverage of women's sports, which also raises the question of why compliance with the laws cannot have an impact on the state of women's sports coverage. In fact, a woman's body is a red line. The variety and creativity that exists in the preparation of video reports of men's sports are not present in women's sports, and out of several photos taken of women's sports, only one or two of them are allowed to be published according to the principles and laws of the country. In fact, the athlete's body should not be noticed in the photos and images taken from games and competitions.”

Another factor that diminishes the portrayal of female athletes in the Iranian media is the perception of masculinity in the sport and the priority of male athletes over female athletes. The image is repeatedly instilled in the audience in the form of video reports in electronic media or television programs. Restrictions on showing women's sports in all its forms include video reports in print media, television competitions, the sharing of a joint image of a team of female athletes with male coaches, and the sharing of images on personal social media pages.

Person 2: “In television programs, a distinction is made between male and female athletes. My brother and I are both athletes and on a TV show we were invited to, the host talked to my brother all the time. The camera was far away from me and the whole focus of the program was on my brother. While we are both on the same level of success in the international arena.”

Person 3: “The smallest issue for women athletes is controversial. Sports activities cannot be reflected on Instagram and often interfere with the real life of athletes with the framework of the country's laws, given that personal pages are also monitored by the media and federation managers, often we are dealing with controversial issues.”

However, another factor that affects the coverage of women's sports media is the socialization of women athletes, which is intensified by the media and officials, and the media restricts media coverage by imposing censorship and officials taking a stand on women's sports and their competitions. So women athletes use lobbying and self-censorship to be present in the media and to introduce their abilities more than a few short news items. Furthermore, the mass media do not have a specific program and strategy to show more women's sports, introduce women's sports and the presence of women athletes in the media, and women's sports cover only a limited part of sports news during international competitions. In this context, what is extracted from the content is clear from the statements of the interviewees; the lack of sports marketing strategies also exacerbates the coverage of women's sports media. In addition, having insufficient awareness of its effective role, the sports federations have not been able to create a proper interaction between the media and athletes and provide the ground for the promotion of women's sports in the media. Meanwhile, the lack of sports marketing strategy in the field of women has also caused the stakeholders in sports to not participate and cooperate. While the media in men's sports always pays attention to the issue of income generation and financial gain in their various programs, there is no such interest from the media in women's sports.

Person 4: “Officials' opposition to women's sports makes it restricted. The attitude of the officials towards women is traditional and they know women for home and family and for having children and raising children. The media promotes the same view. In this regard, public relations can play a very effective and key role in introducing women athlete champions and create opportunities for athletes to be seen and introduced through communication with the media, but unfortunately, many public relations are either unfamiliar with their role or they do not do their job very well.”

Table 2.

Barriers to media coverage

Theme	Sub Theme	Quote
Cultural barriers	Sexism, gender discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Observance of the Islamic hijab of female athletes has not been able to increase media coverage of women's sports - Showing female body movements is the red line of the media - The focus of the foreign media is on the clothing and hijab of Muslim athletes - The focus of the international media is on the female attractiveness of athletes instead of competitions - Photographers in the local media are not allowed to publish photos of women athletes whose bodies attract attention during exercise. - Not observing hijab by foreign women athletes is a factor in not broadcasting international competitions in the domestic media
	Hegemonic Masculinity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The TV camera does not take a close-up view of the female athlete -With the simultaneous presence of male and female athletes on the television program, the camera view focuses on the male athlete - Women are constantly censored in front of the cameras of journalists and television - Location of news, type of video reports, visibility of news, being updated, and evaluation in news headlines in online and print media also show differences between men's and women's sports.
	Gender stereotype	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is a traditional view of women in sports and television programs - The media has a one-dimensional portrayal of women's housekeeping in their programs - The media pays more attention to the role of femininity than to the skill of the athlete - Instead of talent, the media focuses on the abnormality of women's activity in high-impact physical sports. - Instead of showing sports skills, the media focuses on women's personal lives
Lack of strategy and planning in the media	The pressure of power resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is an imposed view of the type of programming in the national media of women's sports - The opposition of the officials prevents the effective interaction of the media and the athletes
	Poor and unfair performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is no opportunity for female athletes to be seen in the media - Women athletes are as successful as men, but the media does not pay attention to their success - Women athletes deliberately have little and no marginal coverage in the national media - The amount of media attention to women's soccer is not comparable to men's soccer
	Lack of motivation of public opinion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women's sports events are limited to news coverage - There is no opportunity to introduce women's sports in the media - There is no programming for women's sports on television, and the coverage of women's sports is event-oriented.
Socialization	Imposing censorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - TV directors do self-censorship in the speech and clothing of female athletes The presidents of the federation monitor and control the personal Instagram pages of the athletes - Video reports of female athletes alongside male coaches should not be reflected in the media - There is an imposed view of the type of portrayal of female athletes in the media

Theme	Sub Theme	Quote
	The role of values in interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Media marginalization makes it difficult for athletes to interact with the media - Lobbying plays an important role in the presence of female athletes in television programs - Personal relations are influential in media coverage of women's sports and the success of women athletes
Lack of sports marketing strategy	Lack of sports marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is no creativity in advertising women's sports - Managers do not have a positive attitude towards income generation in women's sports - Attracting fans and spectators in women's sports has no real place
	Lack of promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The public relations of the federations do not have enough knowledge about their influential role in the development of women's sports and the introduction of successful athletes - Women's sports competitions are not advertised enough - Public relations of federations should pave the way for effective communication between the athlete and the media

7. Consequences

Given the impact of media on the sport, undoubtedly the current state of media coverage of women's sports will have consequences, which we tried to identify in this study by content analysis.

Table 3.

Consequences of media coverage

Theme	Sub Theme	Quote
fostering a culture	Lack of heroism in the media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Successful women athletes are not portrayed as national champions in the media or news agencies - There are successful and powerful women in sports but they are not paid attention - Heroism can be effective in motivating women athletes and society - Heroism in sports for the disabled can influence the attitude of public opinion, but the media does not pay attention to it
	Promoting gender injustice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discrimination in the media coverage of men's and women's sports promotes gender duality in society - A female athlete who is barred from going to international competitions by her father or husband is influenced by the promotional culture and disregard for women's sports by of media - The media reinforces gender discrimination in sports and families
	Influence on public opinion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The media introduces sports heroes to the community who do not have a successful sports record - There is no sense of trust and belief in women's sports - Reflection of success, builds trust in institutions and public opinion - Ineffectiveness of Islamic clothing of athletes in media coverage causes women to distrust values and laws - The inductive behavior of the media towards women affects the beliefs of families - Lack of attention of media to women's sports causes a lack of motivation for women in society
Disruption of sports management	Weaknesses in attracting capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poor media coverage weakens women's sports teams and reduces the quality of league competitions - The media ignores its revenue-generating capacity by not covering events - Poor media coverage has led to a lack of attention to women's sports and a lack of adequate facilities and equipment

Theme	Sub Theme	Quote
		- The reluctance of sponsors to support women's sports is due to poor media coverage
	Weaknesses in human resource management	- Women have no knowledge of active sports at the national and provincial levels in the field of women - Women's sports teams are losing their sports fans - The opportunity to find talented people for women's sports and training athletes is limited
Creating opportunity on social media	Heroism brand social media	- Instagram is the basis for the recognition of women athletes - Instagram has paved the way for attracting fans and developing women's sports - Audiences know more female athletes through social media than national media - Introducing sports to the audience is done through athletes' social media
	Media richness	- YouTube and the website of the World Federation pave the way for the development of complementary communications and media to cover media events - Instagram is a tool to pressure authorities to change the unfavorable conditions of women's sports and attract the attention of the media and officials - Streaming news from athletes' Instagram to media

By extracting the contents of the obtained codes, the consequences of media coverage in Iran have two aspects; one of which is directed at the media itself, and the other aspect is directed at the sports of women and women athletes. In fact, what emerges from the themes are the consequences of fostering a culture that opposes women's rights, disrupting sports management, and creating opportunities on social media. By ignoring women's sports and promoting gender stereotypes, the media creates a negative culture towards women and women's sports in society. Promoting a culture that undermines women's rights and devalues women's sports perpetuates gender inequality within society and households. Such a culture disregards the potential for female heroism and role modeling, leading to a detrimental impact on public opinion. This, in turn, fosters alienation, discouragement, and disillusionment among individuals, even eroding trust in the country's laws. On the other hand, according to the results of content analysis, in addition to the cultural consequences, this media negligence also affects sports management and leads to low growth or lack of development of women's sports. Women's sports have many problems in attracting investors, developing infrastructure and equipment, attracting human resources, finding talent for young athletes, and attracting fans due to media negligence. Consequently, the mismanagement of women's sports can be traced back to a shortage of media coverage.

Some of the statements of the interviewees also refer to these factors:

Person 1: “Everything that happens to women athletes is due to the lack of media attention to women's sports and the lack of importance for their success. Many female athletes who face various problems in the family or community to continue their sport or are barred from going abroad by their husbands and fathers to compete in international competitions are all due to gender stereotypes that are constantly taught and instilled by the media.”

Person 2: “Inadequate media attention to women's sports causes women's sports to miss advertising opportunities. In fact, women's sports have not been able to attract good fans during these years, and even active sports in the field of women have not been introduced for women. When women's sports have neither good fans nor good ticket sales nor advertising, how can a sponsor spend his or her capital on women's sports? For this reason, teams are not well enough in women's sports. Not all provinces can have a sports team, and league

competitions will decline. Also, the salaries of female athletes are not comparable to those of male athletes.”

Creating opportunities on social media is another consequence of this study, and given that mass media does not have a clear and desirable program and strategy for displaying women's sports, social media has become a good opportunity to brand and introduce the capabilities of women athletes and sports. In fact, due to the lack of mass media attention, social media has found a special place for women athletes and has been able to achieve a certain goal in introducing women as role models and heroes, attracting audiences, personal branding, boosting their motivation, expanding their fans, and attracting potential investors.

Some of the statements of the interviewees also refer to these factors:

Person 3: “Social media such as YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram are good opportunities for most female athletes to communicate with audiences and we can introduce our sport. We cannot communicate with foreign athletes, and it is true that personal pages are also under the supervision of the federation, we cannot publish any content, but we follow the training of foreign teams. But even on social media, you cannot stream new a lot and keep it constantly updated. The space of personal pages becomes more exciting and the participation of the audience increases during training sessions or during international competitions.

Person 4: “Due to the fact that international competitions cannot be broadcast in the national media, the families of women athletes follow the competitions through YouTube or the World Federation website. However, YouTube is a good platform it is difficult to access it due to filtering.

8. Conclusion

Most of the researches in the field of media, analysis of news content and sports programs in the field of men and women sports are comparative or they are a study of the current situation of women's sports and the researches have been done with the aim of identifying barriers to women's championship sports media coverage and its consequences are very limited. Therefore, it is not possible to make an accurate comparison with previous research. Thus, in the discussion of reviewing and comparing the results, analogy has been made in general.

Based on the findings of the content analysis of the interviewees, the barriers to poor coverage of women's sports media in Iran in this study were classified into four categories: cultural factors, lack of media planning strategy, sociability, and lack of sports marketing strategy. These findings are consistent with the results of research by Ponterotto (2014) and Graf (2013) who stated that the factors of poor media coverage are the existence of gender stereotypes and attention to gender factors in women's sports instead of attention to their performance. Eftekhari et al. (2017) also found in their research that by increasing belief in popular attitudes about women's sports, their tendency to participate in sports decreases as spectators. In other words, popular beliefs about women's sports and the harms they cause are considered as an important barrier to women's participation in sports activities.

The results of this study also show that poor media coverage of women's sports has various consequences such as cultural biases against women's sports and disruption of sports management. These findings are consistent with Clara Sainz-de-Baranda et al. (2020), Eftekhari et al. (2017), Cooky et al (2013), Gacka (2017), and Reghbati et al. (2019) according which media are mainly influenced by the economic logic of circulation and advertising revenue. Thus, newspaper owners and editors try to attract the most influential readers and audiences. Rather than functioning as an instrument for driving social change, they generally reinforce the mainstream of traditional values and culture. Also, Keshavarz et

al. (2017) showed in their studies that the weak attitude of government officials towards women's sports and in the socio-cultural dimension, the impossibility of broadcasting women's football on TV is the most important factor in the lack of progress in women's championship football at the macro level. But another consequence of the poor media coverage of women's sports is the change in the attitude and attention of women athletes from mass media to social media, which has been able to meet the expectations of women athletes from the media to a certain extent. Social media has made it possible for them to model and introduce sports figures, introduce sports, show training and competitions, and communicate with fans. These findings are consistent with the results of studies by Sherwood et al. (2019), Weimann-Saks et al. (2019), Hakim Ara et al., (2020), Talebpour et al., (2018), and Petca et al. (2013) who stated that the internet and social media have been able to increase gender equality worldwide and they do not cover the same view of women's sports as the mass media.

9. Suggestion

The results of the present study and the analysis of the content of the views of experts in the field of women's sports show the role and impact of media coverage in improving the situation of women's championship sports in Iran. By identifying the barriers to media coverage and its consequences, this study can be a perspective to remove these barriers and increase the interaction between women's sports and the media.

Cultural Promotion and planning in the field of women's sports is one of the first steps that while motivating athletes, increases the desire of women in society and affects the negative attitude of society towards women's sports and stereotypes. Creating specialized networks focusing on women's sports is another measure that is effective in sports marketing and planning and creating creativity and innovation, and can also attract sponsors and generate media revenue.

Training female sports journalists to participate in international competitions, appointing female media managers for women's sports programs, and increasing the authority of female managers are other factors that will improve media coverage of women's sports and increase interaction between athletes and the media.

10. Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is the lack of diversity in the groups of interviewees. In order to investigate the causes and obstacles of poor media coverage of women's sports, the presence of representatives of the media and the presidents of federations and officials can reveal other different dimensions that in future research it is suggested to use the presence of these people and analyze their opinions.

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