

Sport Theme Feature Films and Female Athletes: A Contemporary Analysis



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INTRODUCTION

Sport historians and sociologists alike have maintained that sport mirrors the rituals and values of its respective culture (Campbell, 2005; Coakley, 2015; Creedon, 1994). As a result, “Sport influences our language, clothing styles and concepts of heroes and heroines. Its athletes and teams become our symbolic warriors defending the honor of our schools, towns or nations” (Creedon, 1994, p. 4). Hence, sport is often perceived as a microcosm of society (Sage & Eitzen, 2013). Since the inception of Title IX, in 1972, there has been an exponential growth in the participation of girls and women in sport and exercise-related activities (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014), yet there does not appear to be a reciprocal increase in their sport film depiction and representation.

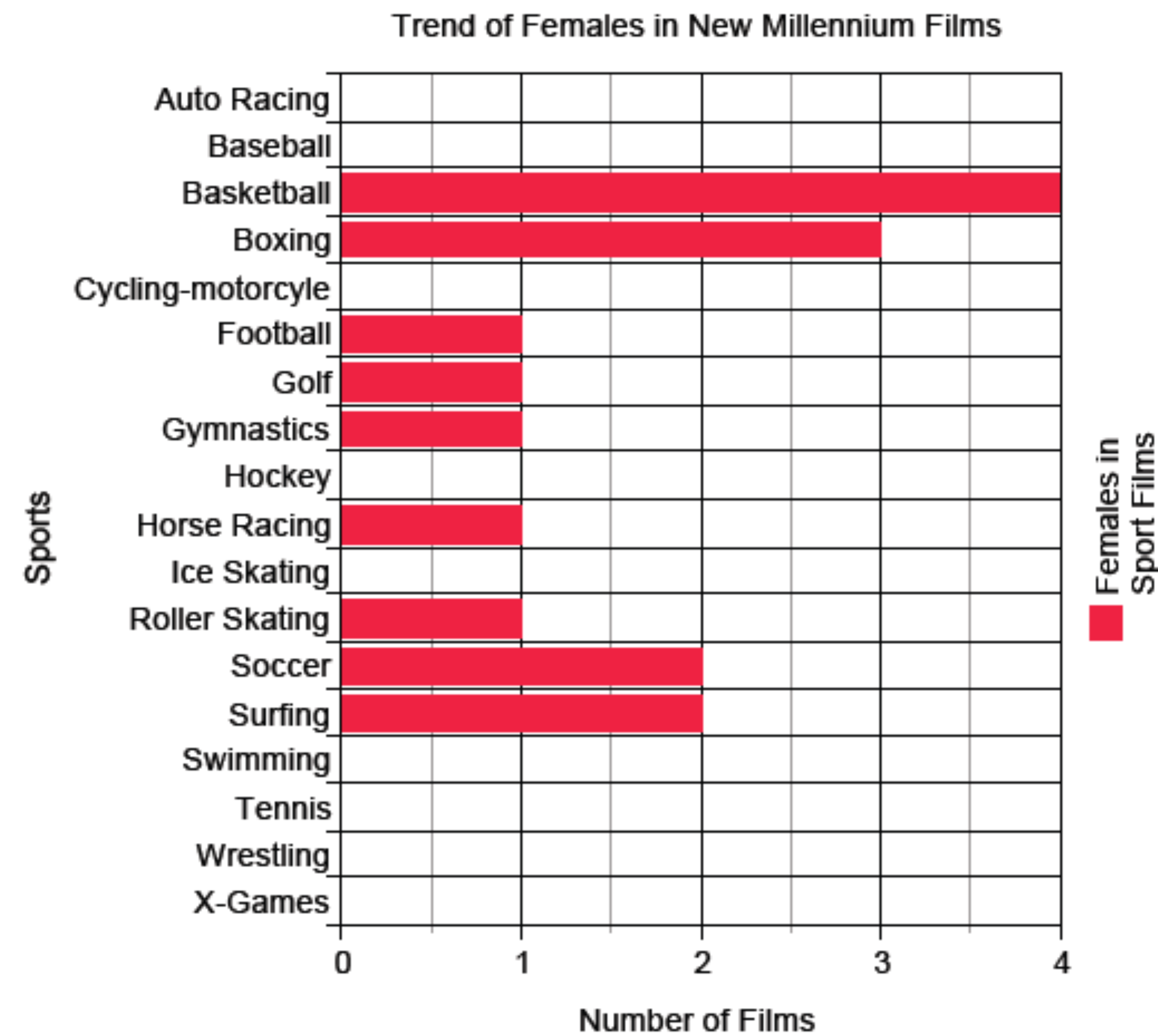
BACKGROUND/PURPOSE

Over the years women have not fared well in support or “protagonist” roles in sport films. Zucker and Babich (1987) noted this phenomenon and stated, “If Martians tried to find out what Earth women are like by watching the majority of sport movies, they would see them as selfish, vain, fickle, greedy, talkative and laughing stocks when they try to play sports” (p. 5). However, there have been some subtle changes in the depictions and characterizations, storylines, and number of sport films featuring female athletes since the latter decades of the 20th century. The purpose of this content analysis study was to trace and highlight salient socio-cultural aspects pertaining to the representation of female athletes in American sport films released during the new millennium. This inquiry was relevant because research suggests (Boyle, Mullington, & Vertisky, 2006; Caudell, 2008; Messner & Cooky, 2010; Pearson, 2010) that role modeling and emulation are often impacted via diverse media depictions (or the lack thereof).

METHOD

Content analysis and archival research methodologies were employed to systematically identify, examine, and code all American sport films depicting sport “heroines” from 2000-2014 (N=16), as well as the analysis of published critical reviews of each sport film from “reputable” media sources (e.g., New York Times, Roger Ebert.com, Rotten Tomatoes, etc.). The reviews were a viable data collection source and provided key insight into various aspects within certain sport films. They also served as a form of “data-source triangulation” for reliability and validity purposes (Pitney & Parker, 2009).

SPORT FILM GRAPH



RESULTS

Descriptive results indicate that of the 97 sport films released during the new millennium 16 (16%) depicted female protagonists. Of the 16 sport films 4 (25%) depicted African Americans, while only 1 (6%) depicted Hispanic females. The sport most represented was basketball (4), which comprised 25 percent of the films depicting female athletes. It was followed closely by boxing (3) and soccer (3) respectively. Interestingly, only one sport film depicted a female in a leadership capacity. And, as previously noted, several films depicted females in non-traditional sport roles. Lastly, emerging themes pertaining to “altruism” (self-sacrifice) and “ego threat” (questioned sport identity) were the most prominent within the study. Each was found in 15 of 16 sport films (94%).

CONCLUSION

Our research concurred with other pre-millennium studies addressing female athlete representation in sport films, yet differed also: a) few female depicting sport films were released; b) paucity of “bio-pics” featuring notable female sport figures (e.g., Billie Jean King, Babe Didrikson, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, etc.); c) very limited depiction of females in leadership roles; d) pervasiveness of comedic storylines; and e) the depiction of females in non-traditional sport roles. Thus, even though Title IX led to an exponential increase in female sport participation, their depiction via various media outlets has been limited. According to Bartyzel (2013), Hollywood has an obsession with real-life sport stories but this rarely extends to women.

EMERGING THEMES MATRIX

TOPICAL THEMES	Gender Discrimination	Dysfunctional Family	Gender Logic	Sport Inequality/Marginalization	Stereotyping	Stereotypic Socialization	Sport Ethic	Altruism	Ego threat	Non-traditional Sport Role	Deviance	Female Sport Athlete	Sport Sponsorship (lack of)	Race & Sport
Against The Ropes	X		X		X		X	X	X	X	X			X
Believe In Me	X			X	X	X		X	X			X		
Blue Crush	X	X	X	X				X	X				X	
Dreamer								X	X	X			X	
From the Rough	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X			X	X
Girl Fight	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Grace	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X			
Just Wright						X		X	X	X				
Love & Basketball	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			
Million Dollar Baby	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				
She's the Man	X			X	X	X		X	X	X	X			
Soul Surfer							X	X	X			X		
Stick It		X		X	X			X			X		X	
The Longshots	X	X			X			X	X	X	X		X	
The Winning Season	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X			X
Whip It			X	X	X	X			X		X	X	X	
TOTALS	11	6	9	10	12	8	8	15	15	10	9	3	7	4

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