

Why women watch the Olympics

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Forty years into the Title IX era, female athletes have risen to prominence and populate the sports landscape. Female viewership, however, has not witnessed the same rise. What sports are women watching (or not), and why? Of the many events in this summer's Olympics, which will be favored by women viewers?

A recent study conducted by Erin Whiteside (University of Tennessee) and Marie Hardin (Pennsylvania State University) explores these questions. The results, published in *Communication, Culture & Critique*, show that [women](#) prefer condensed sporting events like the [Olympics](#) to sports with longer seasons, and that in selecting which particular Olympic sport to watch, women often select events that are seen as traditionally "feminine," like gymnastics and figure skating.

"Our research provides some insight into why the Olympics remain popular with women," said Hardin. "It's not just about the types of sports that are featured, although that is certainly a big part of it. It's also about the way in which the Olympics is delivered: in bite-sized chunks that may require just a 10-minute commitment to see an exciting sporting event, during a time of day when women feel they can make that commitment."

The study looked at conversations from female focus groups to determine how women consume sports media. The findings show that female spectatorship is often tied to gender roles and related domestic work.

Nearly all women surveyed expressed preference for the Olympics, for patriotic reasons as well as for the fast pace. "Women preferred the condensed style of coverage, something they described as easy to follow," Whiteside explains. The frequency of events during the Olympics, as well as the omnipresent discussion around it—from television to radio to the news—made it preferable for women who otherwise did not identify as avid sports viewers or didn't regularly have the time to devote to watching sports.

Women in the study favored sports that were more traditionally feminine rather than masculine. Participants generally saw little value in following women's sports and were especially uninterested in watching or following women in sports such as basketball, which showcase athletic displays that challenge traditional gender roles. Rather, they expressed a passing interest in [sports](#) such as gymnastics, tennis, and figure skating."

The study included 19 women in 3 focus groups, with 90 minutes spent with each group. The average woman was married, had children, and was middle-class. They ranged in age from 26 to 43.

More information: Erin Whiteside and Marie Hardin, "Women (Not) Watching Women: Leisure Time, Television, and Implications for Televised Coverage of Women's Sports," *Communication, Culture & Critique*, Volume 4, Issue 2, DOI:10.1111/j.1753-9137.2011.01098.x

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