

---

Citation:

Heaviside, HJ and Manley, AJ and Didymus, FF and Backhouse, SH (2018) "Going for Gold": Print and Digital Media Reports of Performance Expectations for Olympic and Paralympic Athletes. *Journal of Sports Media*, 13 (2). pp. 89-118. ISSN 1558-4313 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsm.2018.0010>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/4025/>

Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

---

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/721528>

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on [openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

“Going for Gold”: Print and Digital Media Reports of Performance Expectations for Olympic  
and Paralympic Athletes

12

Submitted: January 2017

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand how performance expectations conveyed within print and digital media manifest and how these expectations are reported at specific time points (i.e., before, during, and after a major sporting event). A total of 9,236 media reports were analysed using inductive content analysis, each of which made reference to one of eight Great British athletes ( $M_{age} = 23.00$ ,  $SD = 2.67$  years) who competed at the London 2012 Olympic ( $n = 4$ ) or Paralympic ( $n = 4$ ) Games. The results highlight that the media regularly reported content associated with performance expectations of high-performance athletes before, during, and after the 2012 Games. The formation of these expectations appears to be an evolving process that is subject to change dependent on athletes' previous performances. Factors that were highlighted by the media as influential in athletes meeting performance expectations included the athlete's ability to cope with pressure and the home advantage. The media's response to athletes' performance appeared to differ according to whether or not the athlete had achieved the initial expectation. The findings also suggested that expectations were related to the athlete's support staff (e.g., coaches) as well as the athletes. These results indicate that performance expectations of athletes are a key focus of media reports ahead of a major competition, and that these expectations are likely to influence the content presented within the media reports. The results also demonstrate the importance of performance expectations to key stakeholders (e.g., coaches, sport psychologists, athletes) within high-performance sport.

*Keywords:* media framing, pressure, expectancy effects, agenda setting

“Going for Gold”: Print and Digital Media Reports of Performance Expectations for Olympic and Paralympic Athletes.

According to McCombs and Shaw (1993), the media “not only tell us what to think about, but also how to think about it” (p.65). Consequently, content within media narratives can act as a powerful force in shaping the topics that media consumers think about, as well as their opinions and behaviours towards these topics (e.g., Burch, Frederick, Zimmerman, & Clavio, 2011). One topic that receives considerable attention within the media is sport (Andrews, 2005; Toney, 2013). The media’s power to shape sports consumers’ perceptions of sporting events has been advocated by numerous authors (e.g., Burch, Eagleman, & Pedersen, 2012; Eagleman, Clavio, & Kwak, 2011). This may be because the media (print, digital, radio, television) is the primary vehicle through which society accesses sport (Real, 2011).

Due to time, space, and content restraints, journalists must identify which topics to report, how much attention to give each topic, and how the topic is framed (McCombs, 2004; Dominick, 2009; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In sport, this means that journalists choose the athletes, teams, and sporting events on which to focus, as well as the language and narrative style that will be used when referring to them (Dominick, 2009; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Weaver, McCombs, & Shaw, 2004). The findings of published research (e.g., Claringbould, Knoppers, & Elling, 2004; Gee & Leberman, 2011; Hardin & Shain, 2006) suggest that the sports or athletes in receipt of the most media coverage relate to top sport performers, performers from the home nation, sports which receive high levels of audience interest, and sports with historical popularity. Numerous authors have documented that the more media coverage a topic receives, the greater perceived salience that topic has to the audience (e.g., Entman, 1993; Park, Chung, & Lee, 2012; Ragas & Kiouisis, 2010). Furthermore, the way in which a topic or individual is framed within the media is believed to influence readers’ interpretations, evaluations, and impressions of that topic or individual

(e.g., Kennedy & Hills, 2009; Lewis & Weaver, 2013; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009).

Consequently, the way the media frame athletes has the potential to influence sport consumers' perspectives of and behaviors towards these athletes (e.g., Lewis & Weaver, 2013), as well as the athletes' perceptions and behaviours themselves (e.g., Birrell & McDonald, 2000; Hardy, 2015; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). For example, research looking at the way females athletes are represented by the media has suggested that female athletes are susceptible to being labelled with masculine traits, especially in they participate in male dominated sports (Hardy, 2015). Such labels have resulted in these athletes feeling the need to engage in apologetic behaviours by emphasising their femininity in a variety of ways (i.e., engaging in defensive othering; e.g., Ezzell, 2009; Hardy, 2015).

The Olympic and Paralympic Games is a pinnacle point in many athlete's careers however, because this event only comes around every four years, few athletes are given the opportunity to gain experience of the unique psychological challenges that are associated with the Games environment (Gould, 2001; McCann, 2000). Furthermore, because the Olympics holds the highest global profile, it attracts a multitude of media attention (Billings, 2008). In proximity to major sporting events, including Olympic Games, the media appear to place increased emphasis on performance and winning (e.g., Chang, Crossman, Taylor & Walker, 2011; Kristiansen, Hanstad, and Roberts, 2011). For example, when exploring the media coverage of the 2008 Olympic and Paralympic Games, Chang and colleagues (2011) indicated that predicting Games results was the primary agenda of media reports (23.7%) that were published in a Canadian newspaper during the Beijing 2008 Olympics. Interestingly, this was not a theme that emerged in the Paralympic media coverage, however given that the media coverage of the Paralympic Games is increasing (e.g., Pappous, Marcellini, & de Léséleuc, 2011), it would be interesting to see whether expectations are now being evoked within media coverage around disabled sport. Given that the media represents a powerful

voice that can shape individuals' perceptions and behaviours (e.g., Burch, Eagleman, & Pedersen, 2012; Lewis & Weaver, 2013; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), it could be assumed that performance expectations constructed and reported through the media are likely to influence media consumers' and athletes' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. In fact, these media expectations are a particular stressor that has been highlighted in published sport psychology literature (e.g., Kristiansen et al., 2011; Mellalieu, Neil, Hanton, & Fletcher, 2009) but has not been fully explored. Indeed, there is a dearth of academic literature that attempts to better understand how expectations are reported. Gaining a better understanding of how media expectations are portrayed is likely to shed light on the media expectations that athletes' experience at important times during their careers (e.g., before, during, and after major sporting events). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand how performance expectations conveyed within print and digital media manifest, and how these expectations are reported at specific time points (i.e., before, during, and after a major sporting event).

## **Methodology and Methods**

### **Methodology**

The first named author's pragmatist perspective aimed to enhance understanding of the performance expectations that were reported by the media in the most practical way (Giacobbi, Poczwadowski, & Hager, 2005). In line with this perspective, a qualitative content analysis of print and digital media reports that were published in proximity to the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games was conducted. An inductive approach was chosen based on suggestions by Ekkekakis (2015) who indicated that researchers need to move away from relying on pre-established theories, to prevent narrow-mindedness in their research activities. Subsequently this study was conducted atheoretically.

### **Target Olympians and Paralympians**

Following receipt of ethical approval from the authors' institution, print (i.e., newspaper) and digital (i.e., internet) media reports that were published before, during, and after the London 2012 Games were collected. Each report made reference to one of eight athletes ( $M_{age} = 23.00$ ,  $SD = 2.67$  years;  $M_{experience}$  competing at international level = 5.5 years,  $SD = 2.56$ ) who represented Great Britain at the London 2012 Olympic ( $n = 4$ ) or Paralympic Games ( $n = 4$ ). Purposive criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to identify athletes who (a) competed for Great Britain in individual sporting events at the Games and (b) had expectations regarding their performances reported within digital and print media reports ahead of the Games. Surface-level qualitative content analysis of media reports was used to select the athletes and indicated that each of the eight athletes was expected to win one or more gold medals at the Games. For example, one online media report which referred to four of the athletes stated: "London 2012: Britain's 50 best medal hopes...We've looked at contenders across all 26 sports and ranked them on their likelihood of winning gold" (Allen et al., 2011). Similar content was alluded to in other articles relating to the other four athletes. Four of the athletes met the media expectations at London 2012 and four did not. Specifically, two of the athletes achieved one gold medal, one achieved two gold medals, and another achieved three gold medals. Of the four athletes who did not meet the expectation expressed by the media, one won a silver medal, two won a bronze medal, and the other athlete did not medal. A combination of athletes who met and did not meet the performance expectations conveyed through the media reports were included in the sample to obtain a broad understanding of how the media responded to athletes who did and did not achieve the performance expectation.

**Previous experiences of the target athletes.** All of the athletes had previous experience of competing at and winning a major sporting event prior to London 2012. Specifically, five of the athletes had previously participated in one or more Paralympic or

Olympic Games, with three of athletes winning one or more gold medals at these Games, seven of the athletes had won gold at the World Championships ahead of London 2012, seven of the athletes had won gold at the European Championships, and five of the athletes had competed at and won a medal at a previous Commonwealth Games. None of the athletes had been expected to win by the media at previous Olympic or Paralympic Games<sup>1</sup>.

### **Procedure**

A total of 9,236 media articles (i.e., newspapers, internet sources) were collected and analysed. Newspaper sources ( $n = 4,868$ ) were obtained from LexisNexis®, an online resource which allows access to full-text copies of major newspapers published within the United Kingdom. Within LexisNexis® the athlete's name was entered into the 'search term' field. Twelve newspapers (e.g., The Guardian, Daily Mail, The Sun) were included in the search. These consisted of a combination of tabloid, middle-market, and 'serious' (previously referred to as broadsheet) papers and were selected based on monthly circulation figures during 2012, as determined by ABC reports (The Guardian, 2012; see Figure 1). This approach has been advocated by numerous researchers (e.g., Hilton & Hunt, 2011; Wood, Patterson, Katrikireddi, & Hilton, 2013) who suggest that adopting such an approach ensures that various readership profiles are captured. The newspapers were selected using the 'sources' option in LexisNexis®. The date range used for the searches on Olympic athletes was the 27<sup>th</sup> January 2012 to the 12<sup>th</sup> September 2012, and for the searches on Paralympic athletes was the 29<sup>th</sup> February 2012 to the 9<sup>th</sup> October 2012. This period of time allowed newspaper articles that were published six months pre- and one month post-London 2012 Olympic or Paralympic Games to be collected. This time frame was chosen because

---

<sup>1</sup> This study is part of a programme of research of which subsequent studies involve interviews with some of these athletes. Therefore in line with ethical regulations several measures have been taken to protect the athletes' anonymity and confidentiality (i.e., no further information regarding these athletes could be detailed, pseudonyms have been given to the athletes).



expectation formation is believed to be an ongoing process (Olson, Roese, & Zanna, 1996). Therefore, it was appropriate to consider how the media present performance expectations during this distinct time frame. Each of the returned articles was downloaded and saved in preparation for analysis.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

Online news pages ( $n = 4,368$ ) were selected based on popularity during 2012. Popularity for this medium was determined using monthly website traffic data (Ofcom, 2012). To ensure consistency in the data selection method of newspapers and online media, the twelve online news pages (e.g., BBC news, Sky news, Guardian.co.uk) that received the greatest volume of website traffic were included within the search (see Figure 2). This approach has been supported in previous research (e.g., Patterson, Emslie, Mason, Fergie, & Hilton, 2016). Each news article was accessed directly through the specific online news source. Within each online news page, the athlete's name was entered in the search engine box. The same time frame to that which was used for print media was applied when searching online news pages. Articles obtained from the searches were saved in preparation for analysis.

<INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE>

### **Data Analysis**

Inductive latent content qualitative analysis (Bengtsson, 2016; Elo & Kyngas, 2008) was used to organise and analyse the text presented within the gathered media reports. This approach of data analysis was deemed as appropriate for addressing the aims of the study because it allows in depth interpretations of themes derived from large amounts of textual data to be analysed, allowing inferences to be drawn from the data (Clarke & Everest, 2006). This approach has been advocated within previous research which, like the present study, has aimed to understand content presented within written news media reports (e.g., Wood et al.,

2013). First, the data was prepared for analysis by reading each of the reports and removing data that was not relevant to the research aim (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Next, the four stages of qualitative content analysis outlined by Bengtsson (2016) were conducted (for more information about each of these stages please refer to Bengtsson, 2016). The first stage, decontextualisation, involved the first named author reading and re-reading the reports to familiarise herself with the data. During this stage, the data was broken down into manageable meaning units that each represented expectations about athletes' performances at the Games. Each meaning unit was then inductively labelled with a code that accurately reflected its content. During the second stage, referred to as recontextualisation, the original media reports were re-read alongside the list of meaning units to check that all aspects of the content that were relevant to the study aims had been considered. Following this, categorisation of the data was conducted, which involved codes being inductively grouped into sub-themes, then into broader themes, and finally into main themes. During data analyses, it was important to ensure that each of the themes were internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous, meaning that none of the data could sit between two themes or fit within more than one theme (Krippendorff, 2004; Patton, 2002). This was achieved by moving the meaning units back and forth between themes until the researchers were happy that each one was positioned in the appropriate theme. Once the themes had been developed, the compilation stage began, which involved writing up the data and drawing conclusions. During this stage, themes were considered in light of existing research to demonstrate how the findings support and extend current knowledge.

### **Criteria Used to Judge Research Quality**

There are contending perspectives about what is perceived to be 'good quality' qualitative research (e.g., Allen-Collinson, 2012; Cho & Trent, 2006; Tracy, 2010). A detailed discussion of these perspectives and their respective merits and shortcomings can be

found in Sparkes and Smith (2014). In accordance with existing literature and the purpose of the current study, the authors have suggested some criteria by which the quality of this study may be judged: (a) Does the research significantly contribute to our understanding of expectations in sport? (b) Is there coherence in the interpretations of the media reports that allows them to be compared and contrasted with one another as well as with previous literature? (c) Do the findings increase awareness of expectations reported in the media? (d) Does the research accomplish its intended aims? The authors encourage the readers to keep these criteria in mind when reading the following results and discussion sections.

### **Results**

Of the 9,236 newspaper and internet articles that were collected and analysed, 8,960 (97%) referred to performance expectations, which reflects the prominence of such expectations within the media. Of these 8,960 media articles, 7964 of them included information regarding the Olympic target athletes compared with 996 which alluded to the Paralympic athletes. Despite the difference in volume of media coverage, the way the media framed content associated with expectations was the same for the Olympic athletes (e.g., "Daniel Fields has revealed why he thinks Jennifer Thomas will win a gold medal at the London 2012 Games") to the Paralympic athletes (e.g., "She is an unsurprising favourite to win a second Paralympic gold medal"). Therefore, when analysing the articles, data referring to both Paralympic and Olympic athletes was analysed collectively as opposed to looking at comparisons between the two populations.

A total of 3481 meaning units that pertained to performance expectations emerged from the analysis. The meaning units were separated to represent three distinct time frames: 1) from six months before the Games until the time at which the athlete began competing in his or her event; 2) while the athlete was competing in his or her event, and 3) after the athlete had finished competing in his or her event until one month after the Games. Figures 3

(pre-Games), 4 (during-Games), and 5 (post-Games) each provide an overview of the data that were extracted from the media reports. Thus, the figures provide typologies of the performance expectations that were present in published media reports in close proximity to London 2012. The remainder of this section focuses on how performance expectations appeared within the gathered print and digital media reports. Due to similarities in the themes that emerged for each distinct time frame, the narrative focuses on the findings for reports that were published before and after athletes competed at the Games. Each of the referred to athletes has been assigned a pseudonym to protect his or her anonymity.

### **Six Months Before the Games**

A total of 4,486 media articles that reported content about the eight athletes in the six-month period before the Games were gathered. Of these, 4,360 articles made reference to the performance expectations of the athletes. The number of articles that made reference to athletes' expected performances increased as the start of their event drew nearer. For example, six months before the Games, 536 articles were published that referred to performance expectations of the eight athletes compared to 1,802 articles that were published one month before the Games. For the six-month time period before the athletes started competing, the analysis identified eight main themes: 1) labels, 2) expectation for athlete to medal during London 2012, 3) information source of expectation, 4) expectation of success in events prior to London 2012, 5) expectation temporality, 6) potential determinants to athlete meeting expectation, 7) how the athlete can achieve expectation, and 8) team staff (see Figure 3). What follows is an accompanying narrative for each of these main themes.

<INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE>

**Labels.** All of the media reports used terms such as “golden girl,” “favourite,” and “hero” to describe the athletes. These terms were often accommodated by the media making reference to how well they expected the athlete to perform at the Games. This is depicted in

the following quotations from a digital media report, a serious newspaper article, and a tabloid newspaper report respectively: “teenage sensation Diane Falls looks in contention for two medals,” “British attention is set to fall on poster boy Tom Williams who will be big to reclaim [event] title,” and “she will not be taking anyone by surprise this time and will have to deal with the pressure of being one of the host nation's big hopes.”

**Expectation for athlete to medal during London 2012.** The principal expectation that was communicated through the majority of the media reports was for the athletes to win gold, or at least to win a medal, at the Games. For example, a digital media article stated that one of the target athletes was “one of the favourites to win gold,” and a serious newspaper article referred to another of the athletes as “one of their greatest medal hopes.” The following quote from a digital media article reflects the apparent demands placed on the athlete: “because of the expectation and pressure, anything but gold will be viewed as a failure.” Through previously winning the gold medal, two of the athletes were expected to make or repeat history which is illustrated in the following quote from a digital media report: “Fields out to make history at London 2012.” Furthermore, all of the athletes were expected to make the final of their event(s) before the Games had started, and in some cases, before the athletes had even been selected to compete at the Games. For example, in the middle of August, one tabloid newspaper article focused on a Paralympic athlete and reported that: “Britain’s Tom Williams, world No 1 with 10 international golds, hopes for another in the final at 17.15.”

**Information source of expectation.** The predominant source of information that appeared to be used to create the expectation for all eight athletes was the athletes’ previous performances. Many reports advocated that performance expectations were constructed as a result of the athlete’s previous achievements at major sporting events (e.g., Beijing 2008), which made them an “unsurprising favourite to win.” This is demonstrated in the following

excerpt from a middle-market newspaper: “Out of all the athletes at the Olympics, Katie Scott is under the most pressure. It is the pressure of a double Olympic champion coming into a home Games. All the others have never won a gold medal so the levels of expectation are considerably less but for Katie, even one gold may not be seen to be enough.”

**Expectation of success in events prior to London 2012.** Journalists also conveyed performance expectations of the target athletes for events prior to the Games (i.e., other international and national events). Specifically, the content within the media reports implied that five of the athletes were expected to dominate events in the period of time immediately before London 2012, and that their performances during these events would be indicative of how they would perform during the Games. For example, a digital media article displayed: “Jennifer Thomas believes Alison Fields will break the British [sport] record in [event] this weekend,” whilst another digital media report claimed “[sport] in [location] may become a preview of what will happen in the British capital.” One reason for this expectation could be that all eight of the athletes were expected to be selected to compete at the Games, and they had to perform well in some events prior to the Games to ensure that they did this.

Some articles suggested that successful performances in events before London 2012 would provide psychological benefits to the athletes, such as a “confidence boost,” a “psychological lift,” and opportunities for “stamping authority.” However, as depicted in the following quotation from a digital media report, others suggested that performances perceived by journalists as unsuccessful would be psychologically detrimental to the athletes: “losing in [event] would be a huge psychological hammer for her.” Despite this, quotes from two of the athletes within media reports indicated that they were not concerned with their performances during events prior to the Games because there was “no point in peaking during these events.”

**Expectation temporality.** The performance expectation appeared to be reinforced or

adapted dependent on how well the athlete performed in events prior to the Games. Updates regarding all of the athletes' performances (e.g., positions in events, personal bests, world rankings) in the lead-up to London 2012 were frequently reported. In cases where an athlete was perceived to have performed well in these events, reports included positive comments such as "stunning lifetime best" and "best ever points tally." For three of the athletes, such reports were accompanied by a reinforcement of performance expectations to win at London 2012, which is demonstrated by the following quote from a tabloid newspaper: "the weight of the expectation on the shoulders of Alison Fields will be inconsiderable following the major victory she achieved at the expense of her Olympic rivals."

However, in the case of four of the athletes who allegedly underperformed in events prior to the Games, media reports typically described their performances as "disappointing." This was sometimes accompanied by reduced performance expectations of the athlete in question for London 2012, as illustrated in the following excerpt from a tabloid newspaper:

The odds against Nathan Lowe repeating his triumph at last year's world championships on the Olympic stage in London are shortening...The trajectory looked perfect for London and he was up there with Tom Jones and Dylan Hart as one who the British imagined they would be acclaiming on the podium come August. Instead this summer his form has been as uninspiring as the weather.

These sentiments were reinforced by quotes from retired athletes who have previously been successful at a major Games: "After losing her titles, there will be doubts, no matter what she says publicly." This temporality of the expectation reinforces the notion that past performance is a primary determinant of expectation formation within sports media reports.

Quotes from three of the athletes within media reports demonstrated their awareness of the potential impact that their pre-Games performances could have on expectations for London 2012. Specifically, in a number of the reports where the media perceived that the

athlete had underperformed, the athletes alluded to positive perceptions regarding the reduced performance expectations. This is demonstrated in the following quotation from a tabloid newspaper: “It’s going to take the pressure off me in London. Holmes (opponent) is the favourite now, there to be shot at.”

Despite this, some journalists suggested that underperformance resulted in increased pressure for the athletes to return to winning ways. For example, a serious newspaper reported: “After coming second, Alison Fields is under pressure to return to winning ways and meet challenges set by Jennifer Thomas (previous successor).” Regardless, there were suggestions from some media reporters that underperformance could act as a motivational factor which would make the athletes “tougher.” This notion is reinforced by a quote from one of the athletes in a digital media report: “I had a bit of a wake-up call at this event and though I was disappointed with myself for losing, it actually did me a favour, because it has now inspired me to work even harder.” Quotes from four athletes within the media articles described these below-par performances as an “opportunity to learn.”

As well as the athletes’ performances influencing the temporality of expectation, for three of the athletes, their opponents’ performances also appeared to change or reinforce the expectation. If their opponents had performed well in events prior to the Games, this reduced the expectation placed on the athlete; if the opponent did not perform well, the expectation was reinforced. For example, one digital media source reported “Lowe’s chances of gold are decreasing following the performance of Josh Black.”

**Potential determinants of athlete meeting expectation.** Five themes were identified as potential determinants of athletes’ performances in line with the media expectation. These were: 1) ability to cope with pressure associated with the expectation, 2) difficulty and intensity of competition, 3) home advantage or disadvantage, 4) opponents, and 5) unrealistic expectations.



***Ability to cope with pressure associated with expectation.*** The performance expectations were revealed to be a stressor which all eight athletes were required to manage. A tabloid newspaper report indicated that “Alison Fields will have to deal with the pressure of being one of the host nation’s big hopes,” whilst a middle-market newspaper stated: “. . . you are going to have 60 million people expecting you to win a gold medal. And if you don’t, even if you have the performance of your life and get silver, people are going to see that as a failure.” In line with this, reports regarding seven of the athletes claimed that the likelihood of the athlete achieving the expectation would depend on their ability to cope with the associated pressure. This is illustrated through the following quotation from a digital media report: “You either struggle with the expectation or it spurs you on. It depends what sort of person and athlete you are. The pressure is so enormous.” As demonstrated by one middle-market newspaper report, some journalists suggested that the athletes could struggle with such pressure: “ten percent of athletes could buckle under the weight of expectation which would mean 54 nightmares.”

***Difficulty and intensity of competition.*** Quotes from three of the athletes within the reports alluded to how difficult and intense they felt it would be to achieve the expectation. For example, quotes from a digital media article claimed that one athlete was: “put up there on a pedestal and . . . expected to be the star of the Olympics and win a gold medal. But nobody really knows how difficult it is.” This notion was reinforced by a quote in a serious newspaper from an athlete:

People think the gold medal is yours and they say you're going to win, but they have no idea how hard it is. People aren't doing it negatively – they're mostly lovely and they really do want you to win – but they don't understand the difficulty and intensity of competition.

***Home advantage or disadvantage.*** The analysis of the reports indicated that the home

Games could be advantageous for the target athletes in terms of achieving the media-reported expectation. One tabloid newspaper report suggested that “stars such as Alison Fields will perform better because Brits will be cheering them on” and another reported “to compete on home soil is what every athlete dreams about. To feel the crowd are completely behind you just increases your performance.” However, a quote from one of the target athletes who was competing in her first Games appears to contradict this assertion: “I’m finding it a little scary because it’s my first Games, it’s a home Games, I’ve never [competed] in front of this many people before and people have a lot of expectations of me.” This was further reiterated by a middle-market newspaper journalist who referred to an athlete who was competing in a precision-based discipline and claimed that: “[the] home advantage is not necessarily the best thing for all athletes.”

***Opponents.*** The athletes’ opponents were often referred to as “rivals” within the media reports and were considered to be a “threat” to four of the athletes’ chance of winning a medal. This is demonstrated in the following quotation from a tabloid newspaper report: “Sheila Wade will provide the greatest threat to Alison’s hope of gold.” One reason for this was because, in a small number of media reports, these four athletes’ opponents were perceived as the “gold medal favourite,” instead of the target athlete. Regardless, within these reports the expectation on the target athlete was still to win at London 2012 and the media reporters expressed their hope that these opponents would crack under pressure. This is demonstrated in the following example quotes from a digital media article: “British hope Hall believes ‘robot’ Steele could buckle under pressure in London,” “Hall is one of Great Britain’s hopes for gold in London and will compete in two events this summer,” and “Rivals: Steele will be the favourite for gold in London.”

***Unrealistic expectation.*** Some reports implied that the expectations constructed and reported through the wider media may not have accurately reflected athletes’ actual ability.

This potential for the media to create unrealistic expectations was reinforced by reports that specifically alluded to one of the target athletes. Whilst the majority of journalists predominantly advocated expectations for this particular athlete to achieve a gold medal, at the same time, a small number of reports suggested that a gold medal could only be achieved if the athlete's opponent was to "crack under pressure." Quotes from a digital media report from this athlete's team staff claimed: "we fully agree that the British public expectation is too high around David Hall. James Steele is very much the gold medal favourite."

**How the athlete can achieve the expectation.** Several of the news reports referred to some of the ways in which the athletes could achieve a gold medal. These included achieving a personal best, beating the British and or World record, ignoring external factors (e.g., rivals, the audience), putting in good performances during the heats and/or in their weakest events, putting pressure on opponents, remaining focused, and working hard. For example, a digital media report regarding one athlete claimed: "David Hall will have to produce the performance of his life to beat James Steele." For five of the athletes, it was predicted that they would need to "push their limits" and perform well under pressure to meet the performance expectations.

**Team staff.** As well as the performance expectations for the athletes, the media alluded to expectations for three of the target athletes' team staff (i.e., coaches, performance director) to ensure that the athletes delivered medals. For example, one tabloid newspaper article stated: "David Jones, legendary coach of world champion Nathan Lowe, came into Olympic year targeting a medal." Whilst a digital media report claimed: "David Hall's performance director is also under pressure to deliver medals." It was suggested within one digital media report that these expectations made the team staff "nervous."

<INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE>

**After the Athlete had Finished Competing at the Games**

A total of 3433 media reports were published after athletes had finished competing at the Games with 2437 making reference to performance expectations. The analyses identified three key main themes: 1) labels, 2) athletes' performance in relation to expectation, and 3) future expectation (see Figure 5). To avoid unnecessary repetition, the remainder of this section describes the two latter themes, which were distinct from those outlined in relation to the data from before London 2012.

<INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE>

**Athletes' performance in relation to expectation.** The majority of media articles that were published after the Games considered how the athletes had performed in comparison to the expectations that had been reported prior to the Games. Media reports that referred to four of the athletes claimed that they had met or exceeded the expectation, and were framed positively. This is depicted within the following quotation from a tabloid newspaper: "Emily Jones was among the hot favourites going into last night's . . . final - and lived up to the expectations by clinching gold." In cases where athletes did not meet the media's previously-reported expectations, post-Games reports tended to use more negative terms such as "Team GB low," "disappointment," "failed," and "had to settle for silver." Three of the four athletes who did not achieve pre-Games expectations still achieved a podium position. For these athletes, there was a mixed response within the media as to whether their performances were perceived to be a "disappointment" or whether they should be acknowledged as an achievement. For example, one digital media article claimed: "getting bronze isn't losing. Far from it. Being second, third or even tenth in the world is an incredible achievement." One serious article reported: "Katie Scott secured for Britain its first medal of the [arena], but for a nation greedy for gold, it was the wrong colour."

In addition, a quote from a previous successor illustrated that the expectation placed on one of the athletes before the Games was "unrealistic," a notion supported by the

following excerpt from a tabloid article:

It was always going to be hard to live up to the expectation. Most people had assumed that she would cruise to the finals to defend both titles. People would stop her in the street to say so. But she had not been at her peak all season.

One of the athletes did not make the podium despite a widely published expectation that he would win a gold medal. The majority of the subsequent reports that referred to this individual were framed negatively. For example, one digital article reported that “. . . there were some big disappointments – most notably the failure of Nathan Lowe.” Furthermore, the media appeared to lose interest in this athlete, as he received considerably less media attention following his performance compared with other athletes who exceeded the media’s initial expectation. Specifically, this athlete was mentioned in only 81 of the articles that were published between the time the athlete had finished competing in their event until one month after the Game, compared to 1547 articles referring to another athlete who exceeded the media’s initial expectations. Quotes from this athlete in media reports demonstrated that he felt he had “let down the country, my family and friends and myself.”

**Future expectation.** Within days of the conclusion to the Games, the media made performance predictions about the next major challenge for the athletes, suggesting that the performance expectations constructed and reported by the media are recurrent. This was exhibited within the following quotes from a digital media report and a serious article respectively regarding one athlete who did not achieve gold: “now on to Rio 2016 and redemption” and “Lowe’s search for gold will have to continue to Rio 2016.”

### Discussion

Using inductive qualitative content analysis, this study aimed to understand how performance expectations conveyed within print and digital media manifest, and how these expectations are reported at specific time points (i.e., before, during, and after a major

sporting event). The findings of previous research in this area have identified that expectations of athletes were a primary agenda of newspaper reports during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games (Chang et al., 2011). The present study builds on this work by providing a novel insight into the type of print and digital media content that is associated with performance expectations for Olympians and Paralympians at a major competition. Specifically, 97% of the articles analysed referred to performance expectations and therefore the results demonstrate that the media regularly reported content associated with performance expectations of both Olympians and Paralympians before, during, and after the London 2012 Games. Further, the formation of these expectations was an evolving process that changed in line with athletes' previous performances. Factors that were highlighted by the media as influential in athletes meeting the expectation include the athlete's ability to cope with pressure, the presence of a home crowd, the athletes' opponents, lane positioning, the difficulty of the expectation, and how realistic the expectation was. Furthermore, the way the media responded to the athletes' performances at the Games seemed to differ according to whether or not the athlete had achieved the initial expectation. The results also demonstrate that as well as the media reporting performance expectations of the athletes themselves, they also report performance expectations of athletes' team staff.

The results indicate that athletes' performances at previous competitions are the most influential sources of information used by the media when reporting expectations of athletes. Specifically, the findings demonstrated that the expectation reported by the media can develop, change, or be confirmed by athletes' past performances. This finding supports the claims of previous expectation literature (e.g., Batten, Birch, Wright, Manley, & Smith, 2013; Manley et al., 2008) in that dynamic cues (e.g., past performances) are an influential source of information when it comes to forming impressions and expectations of others. While this finding has been demonstrated in expectations formed by coaches (e.g., Solomon, 2016),

students (e.g., Batten et al., 2013), and athletes (Manley et al., 2008), it has not previously been reported in relation to media expectations. Based on this content analysis, the performance expectations conveyed through the media appeared to evolve over time depending on the target athlete's performances in events that occurred prior to the Games. This suggests that the formation of media expectations regarding athletes' upcoming performances is an evolving process that is influenced by athletes' past performances.

The labels that were assigned to the target athletes, as well as the ways in which the athletes were described when achieving or not achieving the expectations, provide novel insight into media-framing and agenda-setting processes in sport. The findings illustrate that the ways in which journalists frame their articles could be associated with the expectation that they report. Specifically, where the media reported expectations of an athlete to win, or when an athlete had achieved the initial expectation, the journalists labelled and described the athlete using positive language such as hero, golden, and favourite. However, often in cases when an athlete had not achieved the initial expectation, the media framed the language more negatively by using terms such as failure and disappointment. This finding supports previous media literature that has suggested that journalists create frames about target athletes (e.g., Lewis & Weaver, 2013). While the findings of the current study lend support to this suggestion, they also demonstrate the role that expectations can have within the media-framing process, which is something that has not previously been acknowledged. Specifically, they demonstrate that performance expectations of athletes and athletic performance in relation to these expectations, may influence the way the media frame articles regarding these athletes.

As well as illustrating the influence of expectations on media framing, the findings of the current study also demonstrate the role of expectations in agenda setting. Specifically, when an athlete achieved or exceeded the expectation, she or he received considerably more

media attention than an athlete who did not. Although this finding has not previously been associated with expectations in sport, it does support some previous suggestions (e.g., Gee & Leberman, 2011) that top sport performers are likely to receive the most media coverage, whilst contradicting other research which has suggested that winning a gold medal does not mean that an athlete will receive more media attention (Hong & Oh, 2017). Furthermore, this finding contradicts research by Kristiansen and colleagues (2011), who suggested that the media can place an immense amount of attention on perceived failures. Receiving media attention is believed to be essential to meet expectations of the federation which the athlete belongs to and the athletes' sponsors (Kristiansen et al., 2011). Consequently, the reduced media attention associated with a failure to meet the expectations originally reported within the media may have detrimental implications for an athlete's future profile, which may influence financial income (e.g., sponsorship, decisions regarding funding).

By illuminating determinants that the media believed could influence athletes' abilities to achieve performance expectations, the results of this study support and extend previous research that has outlined factors which may lead to the confirmation and or disconfirmation of expectations. In line with Snyder and Stukas (1999), Madon and colleagues (2011), and Horn and colleagues (2010), the findings reported here outline a number of personal characteristics and situational contexts that the journalists believed would influence whether the athlete would confirm or disconfirm the performance expectation. For example, unrealistic expectations have previously been noted by Horn and colleagues (2010) to have problematic effects on performance, particularly if such expectations align with the target individual's beliefs. It was not surprising that this factor also emerged from the analysis of the present study, particularly considering recent suggestions (see Hanstad & Skille, 2010) that the media should be more realistic about medal expectations if they are to avoid exposing athletes to unnecessary pressure. The present study's findings extend previous



work (Madon et al., 2011; Snyder & Stukas, 1999) by highlighting some of the factors that have not formerly been identified as determinants of expectation confirmation, including the athlete's ability to cope with pressure, the home advantage or disadvantage, and the athlete's opponents. Although, due to the study design, it is difficult to conclude whether these factors directly influenced the confirmation or disconfirmation of the media expectations, such findings enhance understanding regarding potential factors that may influence a high-performance athlete's ability to meet such expectations. Further consideration of how these factors impact expectation confirmation is a potential avenue for future research. Cases where athletes did not perform in line with media expectations might be explained by the notion of choking under pressure, since research has suggested that expectations from others can result in increased perceptions of performance pressure and subsequent choking (e.g., Hill & Shaw, 2013). Raising awareness of the above implications is particularly important for athletes' support staff because they can be used to enhance understanding of how expectations in high-performance sport may influence athletes and, in turn, facilitate the development of strategies (e.g., raising athletes awareness of expectations that are unrealistic and putting them into perspective) for addressing these factors when appropriate.

Furthermore, like previous research (e.g., Chang et al., 2011; Tynedal and Wolbring, 2013), there was a greater volume of media content referring to the Olympic athletes compared to the Paralympic athletes. That being said, the volume of media coverage of Paralympic athletes appears to be increasing. For example, 11% of the articles analysed in the present study focused on Paralympians, compared with 3.5% of the articles that referred to Paralympians in Chang et al.'s (2011) study which considered media framing of the Beijing 2008 Games as published in *The Globe and Mail* media outlet. Therefore, future research may want to consider the impact of this increase in media attention on Paralympic athletes, especially because historically they have received substantially less

media than this and are therefore unlikely to be accustomed to this level of media attention. An interesting finding of the present study is that the media framed content associated with performance expectations in a similar way for Olympians as they did for Paralympians. Numerous researchers have suggested that Paralympic media reporters often present disabled athletes differently to able bodied athletes (e.g., by focusing predominately on the athlete's disability; Brittain, 2010; Thomas & Smith, 2009). However, the findings of the present study support and extend Chang and colleagues (2011) who found that performance related content within media reports were reported in a similar way for able bodied athletes as it was for disabled athletes. The added contribution of this study is the identification of media expectations placed upon Paralympic athletes, previously the focus had just been on Olympic athletes. Such findings suggest that there may be a shift in the discourse of media content for Paralympic sport. From a position of diversity, equality, and inclusion in sport, this is a promising finding because there has been concern in previous years that disability sport is framed by the media as being different, secondary, and lesser to able bodied sport (e.g., Bruce, 2014). However, it is important to note that this finding could be explained by nationalism, because all of the athletes were representing GB and the media reports analysed were British. Bruce (2014) has indicated that disabled athletes are more likely to be framed as being different to able bodied athletes within reports about international para athletes compared with home athletes. These points notwithstanding it is important to recognise that the present study only focused on the expectation content of the media articles and therefore it is plausible that the framing of disabled athletes as supercrips may still have been present in the rest of the media article content, however, going into detail on this was beyond the scope of the present study.

This study offers a unique and detailed analysis of the content associated with performance expectations within athlete-referent media reports using a method that ensured

permanence of the data. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight some potential limitations of the research. First, media reports can be susceptible to a multitude of biases that range from journalists who may have misquoted athletes to athletes withholding information for self-presentation purposes (Kristiansen & Hanstad, 2012). Since the findings of this study are dependent on accounts provided within media reports, it is important to be aware of the possible biases that may be present in the data. It is also important to consider that the present study only examines expectations that were presented as written news items. Expectations reported in the media may also be conveyed through images (e.g., photographs) and verbal stimuli (e.g., radio and television). With this in mind, future research should examine the nature and impact of media expectations across a variety of different presentation formats. Despite these limitations, our study design facilitated real-time analysis of performance expectations that were reported in the media before, during, and after the London 2012 Games while safeguarding against common methodological challenges (e.g., recall bias). In addition, the research accurately identified changes in performance expectations over distinct time frames in relation to a major sporting event.

The present study has enhanced understanding of how performance expectations conveyed within print and digital media manifest at different points in time in relation to a major sporting event. The findings of this study can be used to raise practitioners' awareness of the expectations that athletes may experience, which is likely to be beneficial when helping athletes to prepare for a major competitions. For example, an athlete's ability to cope with expectation-related stress was perceived to be a potential determinant that could influence his or her chances of winning a gold medal. Thus, one recommendation is that applied practitioners should encourage Olympians and Paralympians to develop coping strategies that equip them to effectively manage performance expectations that are publicized by the media. A fruitful avenue for future research is to explore the consequences of media

expectations for high-performance athletes. In addition, because performance expectations were also reported for athletes' team staff, researchers should consider the potential implications that media expectations have on the individuals who operate as part of athletes' support personnel. This is a topic that has not previously been considered and, since coaches play a pivotal role in athletes' success and development (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007), research that explores coaches' experiences of media expectations may be beneficial in supporting both high-performance athletes and the professionals who work with them.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study advance knowledge of expectations in sport by considering the expectation-related content that is constructed and reported by the media. The findings highlight the prominence of performance expectations in print and digital media reports ahead of, during, and following a home Games. The formation of media expectations appears to be an evolving process that changes according to athletes' actual sport performances. Expectations, as well as an athlete's performance in relation to these expectations, seem to influence the framing of media reports and the agenda that is set within such reports. The study reveals certain factors (e.g., opponents and ability to cope with the pressure associated with the expectation) that the media believe may be influential in determining whether an athlete achieves the reported performance expectation at an Olympic or Paralympic Games. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the media convey expectations of athletes' support staff as well as expectations of athletes themselves. Further research is now needed to explore the cognitive, behavioural, and affective consequences of performance expectations that are reported about athletes and their support personnel (e.g., coaching staff). In addition, it is important to note that this study only considered expectations presented within media reports for a home Olympic and Paralympic Games, and therefore future research may want to consider how these expectations compare to those that athletes experience in proximity to an

670 away Games (e.g., Sochi, 2014; Rio, 2016).

671 **References**

- Allen, P., Bull, A., Fotheringham, W., Gibson, O., Kessel, A., Michell, K., ... Bloor, S. (2011). *London 2012: Britain's 50 best medal hopes*. Retrieved from The Guardian website: <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/interactive/2011/jul/26/olympics-2012-british-hopefuls-interactive?intcmp=239>
- Allen-Collinson, J. (2012). Autoethnography: Situating personal sporting narratives in socio-cultural contexts. In K. Young & M. Atkinson (Eds.), *Qualitative research on sport and physical culture: Research in the sociology of sport*. Bingley, United Kingdom: Emerald Press.
- Andrews, P. (2005). *Sports journalism: A practical introduction*. London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Batten, J., Birch, P.D.J., Wright, J., Manley, A. J., & Smith, M. J. (2013). An exploratory investigation examining male and female students' initial impressions and expectancies of lecturers. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 19. 113-125. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2013.827645
- Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *NursingPlus Open*, 2, 8-14. doi:10.1016/j.npls.2016.01.001
- Billings, A. C. (2008). *Olympic media: Inside the biggest show on television*. London, UK: Routledge
- Birrell, S., & McDonald, M. G. (2000). *Reading sport: Critical essays on power and representation*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Brittain, I. (2010). *The Paralympic Games explained*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Bruce, T. (2014). Us and them: the influence of discourses of nationalism on media coverage of the Paralympics. *Disability & Society*, 29, 1443-1459.

doi:10.1080/09687599.2013.816624

Burch, L. M., Frederick, E. L., Zimmerman, M., & Clavio, G. (2011). Agenda-setting and la copamundial: Marketing through agenda-setting on soccer blogs during the 2010 World Cup. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 10, 213-231. doi:10.1504/IJSM.2011.044791

Burch, L.M., Eagleman, A.N., & Pedersen, P.M. (2012). New media coverage of gender in the 2010 Winter Olympics: An examination of online media content. *International Journal of Sport Management*, 13, 143-159. Retrieved from <http://www.americanpresspublishers.com/IJSMContents2012.html>

Chang, I. Y., Crossman, J., Taylor, J., & Walker, D. (2011). One world, one dream: A qualitative comparison of the newspaper coverage of the 2008 Olympic and Paralympic Games. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 4, 26-49. doi: 10.1123/ijsc.4.1.26

Cho, J., & Trent, A. (2006). Validity in qualitative research revisited. *Qualitative Research*, 6, 319-340. doi:10.1177/1468794106065006

Claringbould, I., Knoppers, A., & Elling, A. (2004). Exclusionary practices in sport journalism. *Sex Roles*, 51, 709-718. doi:10.1007/s11199-004-0720-3

Clarke, J. N., & Everest, M. M. (2006). Cancer in the mass print media: Fear, uncertainty and the medical model. *Social Science and Medicine*, 62, 2591-2600. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.11.021

Dominick, J. R. (2009). *The dynamics of mass communication* (10th ed.). New York City, NY: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.

Eagleman, A.N., Clavio, G., & Kwak, D.H. (2011). Treading the political media waters: Coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games in U.S. and Chinese news outlets. *International Journal of Sport Management*, 12, 1-15. Retrieved from

<http://www.inderscience.com/jhome.php?jcode=IJSMM>

Ekkekakis, P. (2015, July). *Escape from cognitivism: Exercise as a hedonic experience*.

Keynote presented at the European Congress of Sport Psychology, Switzerland.

Elo, S., & Kyngas, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62, 107-115. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.x

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43, 51-58. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x

Ezzell, M. B. (2009). “‘Barbie Dolls’ on the Pitch: Identity Work, Defensive Othering, and Inequality in Women’s Rugby. *Social Problems*, 56, 111–131. doi: 10.1525/sp.2009.56.1.111

Gee, B. L., & Leberman, S. I. (2011). Sports media decision making in France: How they choose what we get to see and read. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 4, 321-343. doi:10.1123/ijsc.4.3.321

Giacobbi, P. R., Poczwadowski, A., & Hager, P. F. (2005). A pragmatic research philosophy for applied sport psychology. *The Sport Psychologist*, 19, 18-31. doi: 10.1123/tsp.19.1.18

Gould, D. (2001). Sport psychology and the Nagano Olympic Games: The case of the U.S. freestyle ski team. In G. Tenenbaum (Ed.), *The practice of sport psychology* (pp. 49-76). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.

Hanstad, D. V., & Skille, E. A. (2010). Does elite sport develop mass sport? A Norwegian case study. *Scandinavian Sport Studies Forum*, 1, 51-68. Retrieved from <http://sportstudies.org/>

Hardin, M., & Shain, S. (2006). "Feeling much smaller than you know you are": The fragmented professional identity of female sports journalists. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23, 322-338. doi:10.1080/07393180600933147

- Hardy, E. (2015). The female 'apologetic' behaviour within Canadian women's rugby: athlete perceptions and media Influences. *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics*, 18, 155-167. doi: 10.1080/17430437.2013.854515
- Heywood, L., & Dworkin, S. I. (2003). *Built to win: The female athlete as a cultural icon*. Minnesota, USA: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hill, D. M. & Shaw, G. (2013). A qualitative examination of choking under pressure in team sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 14, 103-110. doi: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2012.07.008
- Hilton, S., & Hunt, K. (2011). UK newspapers' representations of the 2009-10 outbreak of swine flu: one health scare not over-hyped by the media? *Epidemiology & Community Health*, 65, 941-946. doi: 10.1136/jech.2010.119875
- Hong, S. C., & Oh, K-S. (2017). Determinants of sports coverage: Newsworthiness in US media coverage of foreign athletes during the London 2012 Olympic Games. *Journalism*, 1-17. doi: 10.1177/1464884917699034
- Horn, T. S., Lox, C. L., & Labrador, F. (2010). The self-fulfilling prophecy theory: When coaches expectations become reality. In J. M. Williams (Ed.), *Applied sports psychology: Personal growth to peak performance* (6th ed.). New York City, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Jowett, S., & Poczwardowski, A. (2007). Understanding the coach-athlete relationship. In S. Jowett & D. Lavallee (Eds.), *Social psychology in sport* (pp. 3-14). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Kennedy, E., & Hills, L. (2009). *Sport, media and society*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Berg.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kristiansen, E., & Hanstad, D. V. (2012). Journalists and Olympic athletes: A Norwegian



- case study of an ambivalent relationship. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 5, 231-245. doi:10.1123/ijsc.5.2.231
- Kristiansen, E., Hanstad, D. V., & Roberts, G. C. (2011). Coping with the media at the Vancouver winter Olympics: "We all make a living out of this". *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 23, 443-458. doi:10.1080/10413200.2011.598139
- Lewis, N., & Weaver, A. J. (2013). More than just a game: Sports media framing effects on attitudes, intentions and enjoyment. *Communication and Sport*, 3, 219-242. doi:10.1177/2167479513508273
- Madon, S., Willard, J., Gyll, M., & Scherr, K. C. (2011). Self-fulfilling prophecies: Mechanisms, power and links to social problems. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 5, 578-590. doi:10.1111/j.1751-9004.2011.00375.x
- Manley, A. J., Greenlees, I., Graydon, J., Thelwell, R., Filby, W. C. D., & Smith, M. J. (2008). Athletes' perceptions of the sources of information used when forming initial impressions and expectancies of a coach. *The Sport Psychologist*, 22, 73-89. doi:10.1123/tsp.22.1.73
- McCann, S. C. (2000). Doing sport psychology at the really big show. In M. B. Andersen (Ed.), *Doing sport psychology* (pp. 209-222), Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- McCombs, M. E. (2004). *Setting the agenda: The mass media and public opinion*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1993). The evolution of agenda setting research: Twenty-five years in the marketplace of ideas. *Journal of Communication*, 43, 58-67. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01262.x
- Mellalieu, S. D., Neil, R., Hanton, S., & Fletcher, D. (2009). Competition stress in sport performers: Stressors experienced in the competition environment. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 27, 729-744. doi:10.1080/02640410902889834

- Ofcom. (2012). *The communications market report 2012*. Retrieved from Ofcom website:  
[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0013/20218/cmr\\_uk\\_2012.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/20218/cmr_uk_2012.pdf)
- Olson, J. M., Roese, N. J., & Zanna, M. P. (1996). Expectancies. In E. T. Higgins & A. W. Kruglanski (Eds.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (pp. 211-238). New York City, NY: The Guildford Press.
- Pappous, A., Marcellini, A., & de Léséleuc, E. (2011). From Sydney to Beijing: The evolution of the photographic coverage of the Paralympic Games in five European countries. *Sport in Society, 14*, 345-354. doi: 10.1080/17430437.2011.557271
- Park, N., Chung, J., & Lee, S. (2012). Explaining the use of text-based communication media: An examination of three theories of media use. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior & Social Networking, 15*, 357-363. doi:10.1089/cyber.2012.0121
- Patterson, C., Emslie, C., Mason, O., Fergie, G., & Hilton, S. (2016). Content analysis of UK newspaper and online news representations of women's and men's 'binge' drinking: a challenge for communicating evidence-based messages about single-episodic drinking? *BMJ Open, 6*, 1-9. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2016-013124
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ragas, M. W., & Kioussis, S. (2010). Intermedia agenda-setting and political activism: MoveOn.org and the 2008 presidential election. *Mass Communication and Society, 13*, 560-583. doi:10.1080/15205436.2010.515372
- Real, M. R. (2011). Theorizing the sports-television dream marriage: Why sports fit television so well. In A. C. Billings (Ed.), *Sports media: Transformation, integration, consumption* (pp. 19-39). New York City, NY: Routledge.
- Scheufele, D. A., & Tewksbury, D. (2007). Framing, agenda setting, and priming: The evolution of three media effects models. *Journal of Communication, 57*, 9-20. doi:

10.1111/j.0021-9916.2007.00326.x

- Snyder, M., & Stukas, A. A. (1999). Interpersonal processes: The interplay of cognitive, motivational, and behavioral activities in social interaction. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 50, 273-303. doi: 10.1146/annurev.psych.50.1.273
- Solomon, G. B. (2016). Improving performance by means of action-cognition coupling in athletes and coaches. In: M. Raab, B. Lobinger, S. Hoffman, A. Pizzera, & S. Laborde (Eds.), *Performance psychology: Perception, action, cognition, and emotion*, 88-101. London, UK: Elsevier Academic Press
- Sparkes, A., & Smith, B. (2014). *Qualitative research methods in sport, exercise and health*. Oxon, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Tewksbury, D., & Scheufele, D. A. (2009). News framing theory and research. In B. J. Oliver (Ed.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (3rd ed., pp. 17-33). Hillsdale, MI: Erlbaum.
- The Guardian. (2012). *ABCs: National daily newspaper circulation March 2012*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/table/2012/apr/13/abcs-national-newspapers>
- Thomas, N., & Smith, A. (2009). *Disability, sport and society: An introduction*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Toney, J. (2013). *Sports journalism: The inside track*. London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury.
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16, 837-851. doi:10.1177/1077800410383121
- Tynedal, J., & Wolbring, G. (2013). Paralympics and its athletes through the lens of the New York Times. *Sports*, 1, 13-36. doi: 10.3390/sports1010013
- Weaver, D., McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. L. (2004). Agenda setting research: Issues, attributes

and influences. In L. L. Kaid (Ed.), *Handbook of political communication research* (pp. 257-282). New York City, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Wood, K., Patterson, C., Katikireddi, S. V., & Hilton, S. (2014). Harms to ‘others’ from alcohol consumption in the minimum unit pricing policy debate: a qualitative content analysis of U.K. newspapers (2005-12). *Addiction*, 4, 578-584. doi: 10.1111/add.12427

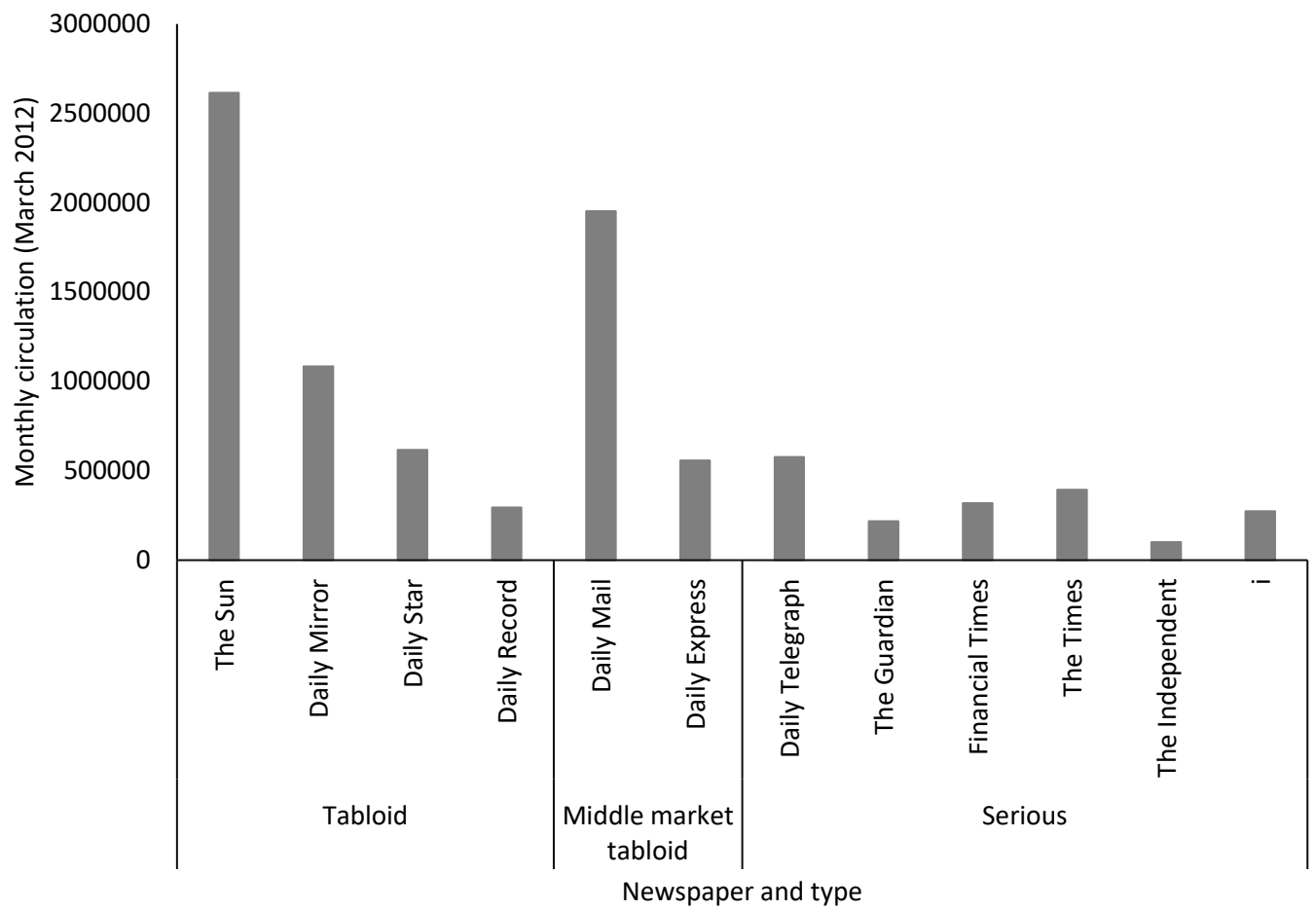
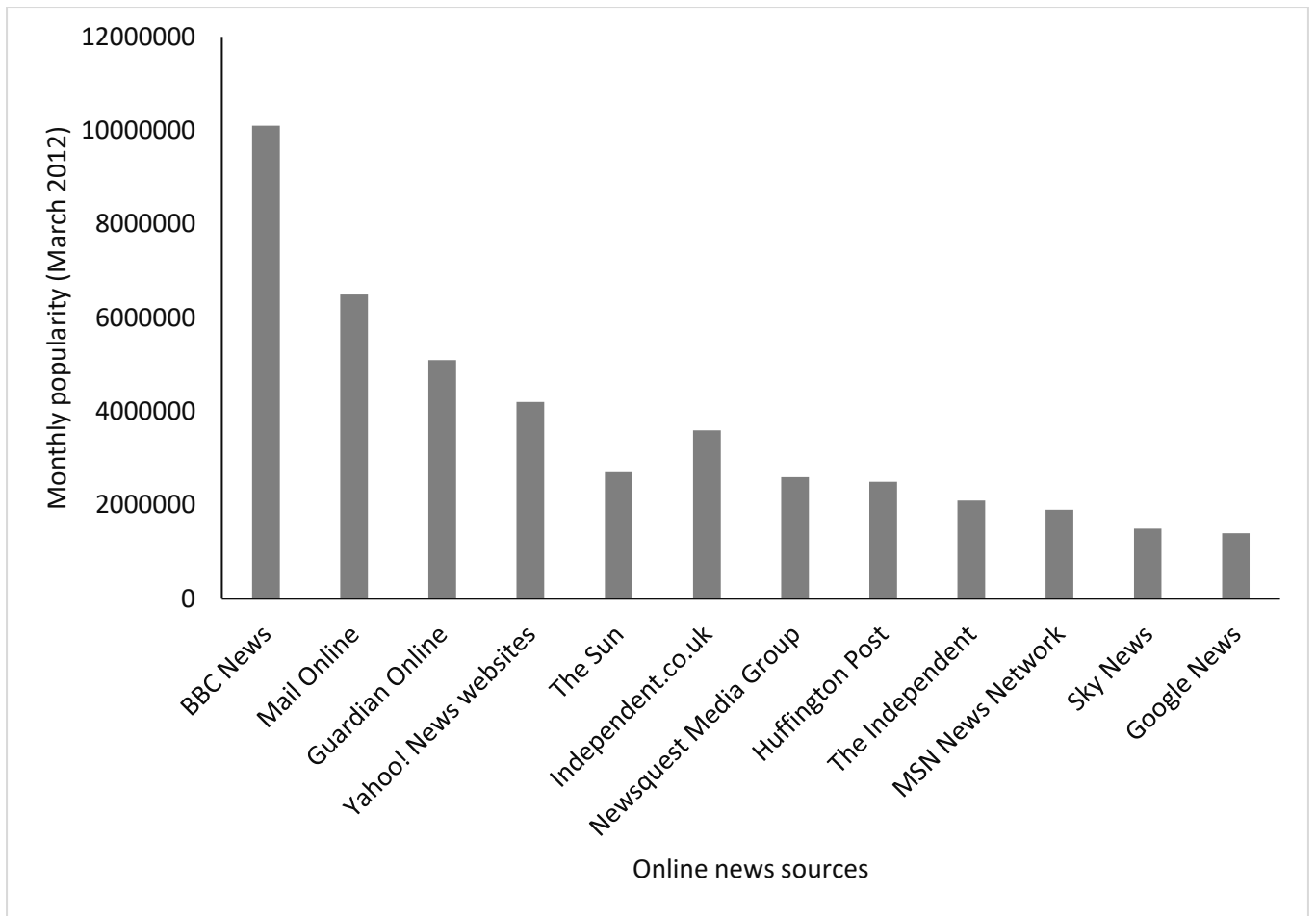


Figure 1: Newspaper monthly circulation rates for March 2012 (ABC, 2012)



*Figure 2:* Most popular online (computer and laptop) news sites during March 2012 based on unique audience numbers (adapted from Ofcom, 2012).

“Poster boy David Hall is on a mission to bedazzle at the Olympics” (journalist)	5	Poster boy/girl	Labels	Content associated with expectation in reports published before athlete competed at the Games
“London Olympics: Golden Girl Katie Scott desperate to repeat her Beijing haul” (journalist)	4	Golden boy/girl		
“The Paralympic hero set to win our hearts”(journalist)	4	Hero		
“one of GBs greatest medal hopes”, (journalist) “gold medal greatness” (journalist)	3	Greatest		
“Britain’s medal hope Sarah Williams is one of the favourites to take gold at London 2012” (journalist)	8	Hope		
“She will be going into the [event] as world champion” (journalist)	8	Champion		
“Gold medal favourite Jade Evans” (journalist)	8	Favourite		
“one of sports mails magnificent seven games prospects” (journalist)	1	Magnificent		
“the queen of British [sport]” (journalist)	2	Queen		
“sensation Katie Scott is one of our greatest Olympic hopes” (journalist)	1	Sensation		
“Golden girl Alison Fields is ready for her shot at immortality” (journalist)	1	Sporting immortality		
“GB... star...withdraws from Rome Diamond League meeting” (journalist)	6	Star		
“Meet the super human’s” (journalist)	1	Superhuman		
“David Hall targets medal at London” (journalist), “Five women set to win a medal in the Paralympic Games for Team GB” (journalist)	8	Expectation to win a medal	Expectation for athlete to medal during London 2012	
“she should win both titles” (journalist), “Alison Fields will be a strong candidate to win a big medal” (journalist)	8	Expectation to get gold in London		
“04 September...4pm...The reigning [event] champion is looking to defend her Paralympic title” (journalist)	8	Expectation to be in the final		
“history has a chance of repeating itself for Katie Scott at a home games this summer” (journalist)	2	Expectation to make or repeat history		
“anything but gold, everyone would view that as a failure” (athlete)	3	Anything but gold perceived as a failure		
“Jade Evans....begins the defence of the title she won in Beijing and does so as favourite having won gold at the 2010 Delhi Commonwealth Games” (journalist) “Britain’s strongest prospects include Sarah Williams who took two golds an a silver at the previous Games” (journalist)	8	Past performance	Information source of expectation	
“bid for selection close to a guarantee”(journalist), “the defence of her title on July 29” (journalist)	8	Expectation to be selected for the Games	Expectation for success in events before London	
“Alison Fields had to settle for silver” (journalist), “This is the perfect weekend to put her two losses firmly behind her” (journalist), “ This event is perfect platform for Briton to show she has what it takes to claim London gold” (journalist)	5	Expectation to win events prior to the Games		
“could emulate Jennifer Thomas and follow a British record with a...Olympic gold” (journalist)	3	Score expectation		
“Should she win in Austria, it will confer a major psychological advantage on her” (journalist)	4	Psychological effects		
“performance director is also under pressure to deliver medals”(journalist)	3	Expectation on team staff	Team staff	

“no longer favourite to win his event following the untimely re-emergence of Daniel Black” (journalist)			3	Opponents’ performances influences expectation	Expectation temporality
“leaves as the new UK record-holder and now the overwhelming favourite for...gold” (journalist)			3	Success – increased expectation	
“[opponent],is now the favourite for Gold”, (journalist)“no longer favourite to win” (journalist)			4	Underperformance – reduced expectation	
“there is now less pressure on me for London” (athlete)		Reduced pressure	3	Possible consequences of reduced expectation on athlete	
“Nathan Lowe, no longer has to block out and manage the distraction of a home games expectation” (journalist)		Less distraction			
“after his performance at [event] David is under pressure to win in [event]” (journalist)		Increased pressure to return to winning ways			
“sometimes losing is a better motivator than winning” (athlete)		Increased motivation			
“will not crumble under the weight of the nation’s expectation” (team staff), “expects the pressure of the public expectation to weigh heavily on Alison Fields” (opponent)			7	Ability to cope with the pressure associated with the expectation	
“it’s going to be a massive ask” (athlete)			3	Difficulty and intensity of competition	
“Tom Williams is hoping with support of the home crowd to win gold this time” (journalist), “I know I can use the whole home crowd to spur me on” (athlete)			5	Home advantage versus disadvantage	
“it’s going to be difficult for him...to stop the American’s from winning in 2012” (opponent), “James Steele will provide the greatest threat to David Hall’s hope of gold” (journalist)			4	Opponents	
“the expectation is too high around David Hall” (team staff), “unrealistic expectations of David Hall” (team staff)			1	Unrealistic expectations	
“David Hall will have to produce the [performance] of his life to beat James Steele” (journalist)			5	Achieving a personal best	How the athlete can achieve the expectation
“Alison Fields believes she will have to break the British record to stand a chance of winning Olympic gold at London” (journalist)			3	Beating records	
“Diane Falls will have to ignore external distractions if she is going to win” (journalist)			6	Ignoring external factors	
“Alison Fields will not win a gold medal as a matter of right. She will win if it all goes exceptionally well, if she can find the inspiration, is she can get topsides of her weaknesses” (other athlete)			6	Putting in good performances	
“Pressure sometimes gets to him. You have to be able to perform as well as him to put pressure on him. Because if you don't put pressure on him he's not going to buckle” (journalist)			3	Putting pressure on opponents	
“Nathan Lowe will need to remain focused” (journalist)			4	Remaining focused	
“David Hall will have to work hard if he is going to medal” (journalist)			5	Working hard	
“Alison Fields will have to deal with the pressure of being one of the host nation’s big hopes” (journalist)			5	Perform well under pressure	
Content associated with expectation in reports published before athlete competed at the Games					

*Figure 3.* Expectations (with representative quotes) regarding elite athletes’ performances reported by journalists prior to the London 2012 Games. *Note:* Numbers represent the number of individual athletes in relation to whom each theme was reported; labels in parentheses indicate source of raw data examples. The same note applies to figures 2 and 3.



"So the nation's sweetheart was not, this time, to get her fairy tale ending" (journalist)	1	Nations sweetheart	Labels	Content associated with expectation in reports published while the athlete was competing in his or her event
"Diane was racing as favourite" (journalist)	5	Favourite		
"Alison's appearance has been one of the most anticipated...with many tipping her to be the track star of the Games" (journalist)	5	Star		
"Poster boy Lowe survived a desperately close call before scraping into today's final" (journalist)	4	Poster boy/girl		
"media hope" (journalist), "golden hope" (journalist)	5	Hope		
"golden girl needs to give fans what they are craving" (journalist)	2	Golden boy/girl		
"Diane Fall is a teen star, a national hero" (journalist)	2	Hero		
"Queen of the [event]" (journalist)	1	Queen		
"Britain will roar golden girl on to victory tonight" (journalist) "serious gold medal hopeful" (journalist), "the [event] will be a tight final, but she goes into the final as favourite" (journalist)	5	Expectation for gold	Expectation to medal	
"expected to get at least a medal" (journalist)	3	Expectation to medal (bronze or silver)		
"hopefully she can make history" (journalist)	1	Expectation to make history		
"his status as medal contender downgraded" (journalist)	2	Performance under expectation – reduces expectation	Expectation temporality	
"on evidence of her performance during this [event], and her world No1 ranking over [event], Alison Fields is now a compelling favourite to win Britain's first gold medal" (journalist)	2	Performance beyond expectation – increases expectation		
"if she wants to win she must not repeat the mistakes she made in the quarter final" (journalist)	2	Not repeat mistakes	How athlete can achieve expectation	
"so long as she does not fail in her weakest event...she should win" (journalist)	1	Perform well		
"I'm aiming for 100 points on it as there aren't many [athlete's] who can do that" (athlete)	2	Achieve a certain number of points		
"golden girl didn't just live up to expectations, she smashed them out of the stadium" (journalist), "Coming into this, I knew I was in good shape, but to be honest I couldn't have imagined performing like this, I've definitely exceeded my expectations today" (athlete)	2	Athlete performing beyond expectation	Athletes 'performance in relation to expectation	
"Lowe was expected to advance into the final with a confident statement of intent but he did not" (journalist), "that's no way to perform if you're a world champ, in my mind. I feel like I've let everybody down" (athlete)	3	Athlete performing under expectation		
"Hall needs hot favourite Steele to buckle under pressure" (journalist)	4	Opponent	Potential determinants of athlete meeting expectation	
"the home crowd will help carry Fields to success" (journalist)	4	Home advantage		
"she rarely fails to deliver under pressure" (journalist)	2	Ability to cope with pressure associated with the expectation		
"If anyone comes up to you, they're just like 'bring home the gold, go and grab it!' just as if it's the easiest thing. And any athlete will tell you that it's actually not that easy" (athlete)	1	Difficulty and intensity of competition		
"Katie will be [competing] from lane four, where she can control the race" (journalist), "Lowe will be in the bad lane in the final" (journalist)	2	Lane expectation		

"[sport] heroine Katie Scott will open up about coping with the pressure of the Olympics"(journalist)	2	Heroine	
---	---	---------	--

Figure 4. Expectations (with representative quotes) regarding elite athletes’ performances reported by journalists during the London 2012 Games.

“Falls was one of the hot favourites going into last night’s final and lived up to expectations by clinching gold” (journalist)	5	Favourite	Labels	Content associated with expectation after the athlete had finished competing at the Games
“Unbowed by the pressure of being the poster girl of London 2012, she stormed to victory” (journalist)	1	Poster boy/girl		
“Britain’s golden girl at London 2012” (journalist)	2	Golden boy/girl		
“The so called ‘face-of-the-games’ has become the darling of the nation” (journalist)	2	Face of the Games/ darling of the nation		
“GB’s Jade Evans dealt with the expectation to successfully defend her Paralympic [sport] title with a 6-4 win” (journalist) “Sarah Williams lived up to the expectation that was put on her shoulders” (journalist)	5	Achieved expectation	Athletes’ performance in relation to expectation	
“In the end the expectation at the London Games proved too much for her” (journalist), “Katie Scott secured Britain its first medal in the [arena], but for a nation greedy for gold, it was the wrong colour” (journalist), “Nathan Lowe had been tipped for Olympic gold at London 2012. In the end he did not even get a medal” (journalist), “The unexpected had happened. One of Britain’s best hopes for gold in the Olympic stadium, had just performed horrific” (journalist)	3	Did not achieve expectation		
“Now on to Rio and redemption” (journalist) “Jade Evans is now looking to Rio in 2016” (journalist)	8	Expectation to medal in future events (e.g., Rio 2016, world championships)	Future expectation	

*Figure 5.* Expectations (with representative quotes) regarding elite athletes’ performances reported by journalists after they competed in the London 2012 Games.