'We are more than just beautiful'

A thematic analysis on how female athletes self-represent on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, female athletes have become more involved in competitive sports. However, there remains a significant gap in media coverage between male and female athletes. Even when female athletes do receive media attention, it often focuses on devaluation, objectification, and reinforces gender stereotypes. This underrepresentation in the media diminishes the achievements of female athletes and perpetuates a narrative that prioritizes female athletes' bodies and attractiveness. The emergence of social media platforms like Instagram has empowered female athletes to seize control over how they are portrayed and shape their own narrative. Therefore, my main question is *how do female athletes self-represent on Instagram.* To answer the question, a thematic analysis was employed. This analytical approach allowed for a systematic examination of posts and captions from diverse Instagram profiles belonging to 50 female athletes. Through this analysis, five distinct themes emerged. The first theme, 'challenging promotional content,' is about female athletes actively combating gender stereotypes and the lack of representation in mainstream media. The second theme, 'sharing personal content', highlights female athletes sharing personal information and everyday life and presenting themselves as relatable. Third theme, 'challenging gender norms and objectification,' showcases female athletes striving to challenge the perception that their worth is solely based on their physical attributes. The fourth theme, 'interactive content', demonstrates female athletes engaging with their followers and presenting themselves as social individuals. The fifth theme, 'positioning themselves', reveals female athletes self-representing as social agents and expressing their opinion on various social movements. The findings highlight that female athletes strive for authenticity and relatability in their representation. They acknowledge their celebrity status, but they utilize that to be seen as figures that people can look up to and feel related to. Moreover, the identified themes suggest that female athletes actively challenge gender norms and show a willingness to defy societal expectations and therefore become inspirational individuals.

KEYWORDS: *Self-representation, female athletes, social media, mainstream media, Instagram*

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1. Introduction

As I embarked on my thesis research journey, I discover myself being particularly intrigued to intertwine the concepts of sports, gender, and social media. Since I am an avid advocate for gender equality and an enthusiast of sports, I want to look at how female athletes construct out their own identities and reclaim them on social media, particularly for this study on Instagram. It was my curiosity and my personal experience that led me to choose to write a thesis on how female athletes self-represent on Instagram.

Growing up, I witnessed firsthand the challenges faced by female athletes in social media. I played tennis for 17 years, and my four years as a semi-professional athlete at a university in the United States showed me how challenging it was for females to be perceived as a powerful, successful, strategic athlete. For instance, when the men's team won a game against another university, they showed the score, some highlights, the post-game celebration all over the men's team's Instagram, the university's official tennis page, and the athletic Instagram of the university. However, when the women's tennis team defeated another university, they just posted a billboard with the overall result in the official tennis page and the athletic page. Additionally, if a male and a female student-athlete received an award, the male posing with the award was always posted first and the female second. Therefore, the tennis female athletes were often sidelined, overshadowed by their male counterparts, and their achievements were given limited media attention despite their accomplishments and the overall surge in involvement in the professional sports business.

Since the adoption of a legislation, meant to prevent sex discrimination and make men and women equal in a variety of disciplines (Kaiser, 2017), including, most notably for this research, the athletics department, female athletes' involvement in competitive sports has expanded considerably throughout the decades (Aman, 2020). Nonetheless, despite the significant growth in involvement and accomplishment, various studies, such as Greer et al. (2009) one, who conducted a visual study on Track and Field's female Olympic teams during the 2004 Athens Olympics, and revealed that 66,3% of media coverage was devoted to male athletes and only 33.7% to females, have concluded that there exists a gap in coverage of female athletes (Toffoletti, 2016) and even during significant competitions and championships like Fifa Women´s World Cup or Tennis Grand Slams (Delorme and Pressland, 2016).

Women are also represented with "language and images that are predominantly heterosexualized, hyper-feminized, and infantilized¨ (Litchfield and Osborne, 2015, p. 1148). Vincent et al. (2007) studied various media coverage during Wimbledon, where he discovered that former tennis star Anna Kournikova was photographed for her private life

and European features rather than her tennis skills and accomplishments. Therefore, sexualization, body image, and femininity are heavily emphasized in media coverage; hence, female athletes who are more physically appealing and embody society's accepted feminine athletic image tend to receive more exposure (Cunningham, 2003), overshadowing their on-field performance.

Considering that has been an increase in involvement and equality, there still exists a gap in society's perception, where female athletes are still seen as sex objects, and less like a successful and strong athlete. To counteract these views, female athletes have tuned to social media where they can self-represent as athletic and as a non-sexual object (Liang, 2011) by creating different identities, one showing their athletic abilities and sports success, and the other by showing their personal lives as a non-athlete individual (Kane, 2013). For instance, Emmons and Mocarskis' (2014) investigation showed that female athletes self-represented themselves on Facebook as athletic and strong rather than with sensual poses. These findings suggest that social media allows female athletes to develop an identity, demonstrating that men are not the only ones who are strong, powerful, and intelligent.

Thereby, social media allows individuals to communicate freely, without the opinion of a public relations figure (Pegoraro, 2010). Social media platforms, such as Instagram, allow its users to develop a personal self to overcome the lack of representation in mainstream media and as well as a tool for female athletes, which have become influencers to share endorsed posts, with both activities intending to entice the audience to interact and share (Jenkins, et al., 2013). Apart from using Instagram to emphasize their own identity and using it for self-representation, Instagram can be used to spread messages on a variety of subjects since content can rapidly become trending and reach a large audience (Manju, 2019).

The question guiding this research is: *How do female athletes self-represent on Instagram?* To guide this paper, a theoretical framework has been composed that explores the following concepts: Female athletes in the media, gender barriers, social media, Instagram as a self-representation tool, athletes as social media influencers in Instagram, female athletes in social media, and self-representation theory. For this study, qualitative research will be conducted. Specifically, a thematic analysis was conducted on Instagram posts from 50 different athletes, since Covid, 19, from ten different sports: tennis, football, basketball, swimming, gymnastics, Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), field hockey, surfing, racing, and volleyball, and for the analysis a thematic analysis, which is an iterative, multi-stage process of coding and categorising data into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen as the most suitable analysis. Following the description of the study design, the

results and discussion are discussed, followed by the response to the research question in the conclusion.

1.1 Academic and social relevance

While the portrayal of female athletes in the mainstream media has been widely examined (Litchfield and Kavanagh, 2019; Schmidt, 2018; Cooky et al., 2015;), study on female athletes' self-representation on social media is an area of interest that requires further investigation. In contrast to conventional media, where the power of sharing is held by journalists, public relations professionals, or managers, social media empowers female athletes to determine what version of themselves they want to show and what sort of images they want to share (Geurin-Eagleman, 2016).

Several scholars have conducted studies on text-based platforms such as Twitter (Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2019; Shreffler et al., 2016) or blogs (Sanderson, 2008). Being one of the most rapidly growing social media networks (Lunden, 2014), Instagram has been selected as the most suitable platform for this study. For starters, Instagram is one of the most popular social networking apps globally, with over a billion active users (Statistica, 2023), secondly it has various features (Instagram stories, reels, and live videos, direct messages, shoppable tag, Search & Explore, image & video editing, Instagram creator studio, and so on), and thirdly, the emphasis of this platform allows the communication to be mainly through images, which several studies have stated that visual material has become a prominent mode of communication (Baron, 2008) since images are easier to recognize and remember than words (Dewan, 2015)

Since Instagram allows the post to combine visuals and text, this research conducted a thematic analysis as it is a method that specifies analyzing media content (Walters, 2016); this will defer from other researchers who conducted semi-structured interviews (Geurin, 2017) or content analysis (Grau et al., 2007). Because this study looked at images rather than text, a theme analysis gave a richer meaning, allowing for a more personalized interpretation.

Other papers have focused either on specific athletes (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018) or on significant events such as the Olympic Games (Godoy- Pressland and Griggs, 2014). Although some athletes receive greater social media exposure than others, stereotypes and lack of coverage affect all female athletes (Hyre et al., 2017), and competitions occur all year round. As a result, this study will look at more than only famous athletes or significant events.

Female athletes constantly appear in the media, consequently becoming a public

figure in the sports world (Smart, 2005). In particular for young people, physical activity has emerged as one of the most favorable aspects of society's health (Elmagd, 2016). Nonetheless, young females are still perceived as less ambitious and physically active (Heinze et al., 2017). Therefore, having same-gender role models can increase female engagement in sports (Zarrett and Veliz, 2020). Additionally, the lack of female athletes in the media conveys to society that "sport continues to be by, for, and about men" (Cooky et al., 2013, p. 3). As a result, females who want to pursue a specific sport may find it challenging to identify with success or strength since fewer female athletes have gotten this type of representation (Midgley et al., 2021). One kind of retaliation is to customize their social media presence and connect with society outside of mainstream media (Hambrick et al., 2010) since it is a platform that allows communication and promotion (Hutchins and Mikosza, 2010) of oneself. As a result, this study will first assist young females who want to be part of the professional sports industry in understanding the hurdles of becoming a female athlete and receiving mainstream media attention, however it will serve as an explanatory on how to overcome them using social media. Second, it will assist marketers and public relations professionals in better understanding what material female athletes like to post.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Representation of female athletes

Female athletes have long confronted significant challenges in their pursuit of recognition and equality in the world of professional sports. Despite substantial advancements over time and the enactment of Act Title IX law, stereotyping, degradation, undervaluing continues to affect female athlete's self-image. One prevalent preconceived notion depicts women as weaker and less athletic than men, perpetuating an inaccurate and damaging perception that hinders their acceptance as equal athletes. Moreover, media representation often reinforces this image by prioritizing women's physical attractiveness over their sporting successes and abilities. As a result, the purpose of this research is to investigate how female athletes counter such views.

In 1972, as a crucial component of the Education Amendments, the United States implemented Title IX, a landmark legislation that aimed to ensure equal opportunities for male and female in sports (Compton and Compton, 2010). This pivotal legislation effectively prohibited gender-based discrimination in the sports system and provided more equal opportunities within American sports. Despite the acceptance of the legislation being in the United States, the global involvement of female athletes was increasing. As a result, the other nations desired to create a truly egalitarian and inclusive athletic environment for both male and female athletes and following the Title IX legislation.

Since the implementation of Title IX and similar statues in various countries, there has been a notable surge in female participation in sports (De Borja et al., 2022). A compelling illustration of this trend can be seen in the 2012 London Olympic Games, where a substantial number of female athletes from diverse disciplines were called to represent their respective countries. As a result, for the first time, women accounted for nearly half of the total, with 44% participation, marking a significant milestone in gender inclusivity (Brennan, 2012). Additionally, during the exact same Olympic games, the public witnessed a groundbreaking development as women were granted the opportunity to compete in boxing, challenging societal perceptions and asserting their equal worthiness in this traditionally male-dominated sport (Nunes, 2019). In Australia, the Australian Football League (AFL) reported a remarkable 43% increase in female footballers withing a single year (2011-2012), highlighting the growing presence and talent of women in traditionally male-centric sports (Elite Sports Properties, 2012). These milestone achievements and empirical evidence serve as compelling demonstrations of the capabilities of female athletes, showcasing their power, competitiveness, and dispelling stereotypes and objectification.

2.2 Representation of female athletes in the traditional media

Fink (1998) highlights out the following:

As never before, women are making their presence felt in the world of sport, and there are a wealth of opportunities for the media to influence society's acceptance of all female athletes. . . (Fink, 1998, p. 40).

This statement holds significance as it was made in the aftermath of a major competition by the United States Olympics team, highlighting the notable high presence of female athletes during the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta. As a direct consequence, researchers during that era harbored a persistent sense of optimism, firmly believing in the eventual (Fink 2015). improvement of female coverage by the mainstream media, marketers, and advertisers. However, in spite of rising levels of female engagement and their imposing achievements, researchers identified persistent worldwide patterns of imbalanced media representation between male and female athletes (Messner et al., 2010). This discrepancy was observed not only in regular tournaments and competitions but also persisted during prestigious competitions like the FIFA Women's World Cup and the tennis Grand Slams (Delorme and Pressland, 2016). To illustrate these discrepancies, Greer et al., (2009) conducted a visual study focusing on the Track and Field female Olympic team of the 2004 Athens Olympics, which revealed that male athletes received 66% of media coverage, while only 33% was dedicated to their female counterparts. These interconnected findings collectively emphasize the persistent imbalance in media representation and highlight the need for greater equity in the coverage of female athletes.

Over the years, the influence of mainstream media in shaping societal perceptions has been widely acknowledged (Agrawal et al., 2022). Athletes who are prominently featured on magazine covers, news stories and various media platforms become powerful role models, demonstrating to society that individuals from diverse backgrounds, irrespective of their gender, race, type of body or sexual orientation, can achieve success in the professional sports world (Seyidolgu et al., 2022). Unfortunately, despite the progress made in the realm of gender equality, female athletes have consistently found themselves in the shadows when it comes to media representation, be it in magazines, newspapers, or television (Cooky et al., 2013, 2015). An in-depth analysis of two influential publications, ESPN the Magazine and Sports Illustrated, conducted between 2012 and 2016, revealed a glaring disparity: women appeared on the cover merely 10% of the time compared to their male counterparts (Frisby, 2017). This discrepancy underscores the persistent underfermention of female athlete sin mainstream media, highlighting the urgent need for a more equitable and inclusive portrayal of women in sports.

Through a comprehensive examination of multiple studies, Fink (2015) uncovered a consensus among scholarly journals that highlights the underrepresentation of female athlete in both quantity and, more significantly for this study, quality in media coverage. While this research acknowledges the broader topic, it specifically focuses on the aspect of quality representation. Extensive literature on the subject consistently reinforces the notion that female athletes not only receive less media coverage but, when they do appear, they are subjected to a degraded representation (Litchfield and Kavanagh, 2019). This representation is characterized by a narrow focus on physical appearance, objectification, and the reinforcement of traditional gender norms (Eagleman, 2015). The limited media coverage not only downplays the athletic achievements of female athletes but also perpetuates to societal stereotypes and undermines their overall value as athletes.

2.3 Gender Barriers

Furthermore, in addition to the issue of underrepresentation, female athletes often encounter prevalent stereotypes and objectifications within the realm of mainstream media. Their portrayal is frequently confined to a narrow range of predefined roles that reinforce societal gender norms, thereby downplaying their athletic achievements (Greer et al., 2009). These stereotypes often depict female athletes as less skilled, physically inferior, or prioritize their appearance rather than their sporting abilities. Additionally, the objectification of female athletes, through the use of sexualized imagery and commentary, serves to undermine their accomplishments and perpetuate ac culture that prioritizes their physical attractiveness and female gender roles over their athletic abilities. These portrayals not only perpetuate gender biases but also contribute to diminishing the image and character of the athlete.

Gender roles, defined as societal expectations regarding the attributes and behaviors associated with males and females, have shaped societal norms over time (Roth-Cohen et al., 2023). These roles prescribe certain qualities to women, such as kindness, compassion, and submissiveness, while assigning men traits dominance, intelligence, and competitiveness (Eagleman, 2015). Unfortunately, these gendered expectations have permeated the sports sector as well. In this context, the portrayal of female athletes has often been influenced by these preconceived notions and stereotypes since the media plays an important role on people's opinions and believes (Enikolopov & Petrova 2017).

Gender segregation has long been a prominent feature in the world of sports, with certain sports predominantly dominated by males, such as football, and wrestling, while others are primarily associated with females, like gymnastics and field hockey (Heidrich & Chiviacowky, 2015). This division is deeply ingrained in societal norms, therefore, men are represented participating in sports traditionally with masculinity, while women are

represented in activities that are considered to be for women (Pfister, 2010). Consequently, female athletes in male-dominated sport face significant challenges to showcase their achievements and successes and They are portrayed as having restrictions due to their physical characteristics, which result in a lack of muscularity and strength to compete. Gender dynamics and societal norms limit the opportunity for female athletes to have their talents and achievements showcase and celebrated on an equal footing with their male counterparts (Pocock and Skey, 2022). This lack of representation not only diminishes the accomplishments of female athletes but also reinforces gender stereotypes.

The representation of female athletes in the media is heavily influenced by sexualization, body image ideals, femininity, and gender roles, leading to a disproportionate emphasis on their physical appearance rather than their athletic accomplishments, therefore they are marked by objectification which reduces them to mere objects of visual pleasure rather than recognizing their athletic prowess and achievements. Objectification occurs when female athletes are portrayed primarily in terms of their physical appearance, with a focus on their bodies, clothing, and attractiveness, rather than their skills, dedication, and accomplishments (Reichart Smith, 2016). This objectification not only diminishes the value of their athletic abilities but also reinforces gender stereotypes and gender norms that prioritize the sexual appeal of women over their athletic talents. For instance, research conducted during Wimbledon revealed that tennis player Anna Kournikova, when she was an active player, received more attention for her beauty and attractiveness rather than her tennis abilities (Vincent et al., 2007). Additionally, male athletes are frequently seen on the front cover, either dressed in their team uniform or topless. and in an athletic pose, whilst female athletes are depicted in non-athletic surroundings or posing in a 'sensual' manner (Wasike, 2017).

In the world of sports, the unequal treatment and representation of female athletes in media coverage is evident in the types of comments and narratives surrounding their performance. A closer examination of the language reveals a striking disparity in the way women athletes are discussed compared to their male counterparts (Billings et al., 2010; Billings and Eastman, 2003). This representation of female athletes in media often revolves around their physical appearance, resulting in a hyper-feminization of their image. Instead of focusing on their athletic abilities and achievements, the language use to describe female athletes tends to emphasize their looks and conform to societal ideals of femininity (Litchfield and Osborne, 2015). This hyper-feminization perpetuates gender stereotypes and objectifies female athletes, reducing their worth to their appearance rather than recognizing their talent, skills, and dedication. Allen and Frisby (2017) and Fink (2015) analyzed the language of commenters during sporting events, and both concluded that

sexual objectification language towards female athletes' bodies was utilized more than language concerning their performance during sporting events.

In the realm of sports, female athletes are increasingly leveraging the power of social media as a means to authentically represent themselves and share their experiences, triumphs, and obstacles on the professional sphere. Social media platforms provide a unique opportunity for female athletes to control their own narrative. In accordance with this, it is first mandatory to introduce this new possibility that social media can offer.

2.4 Social Media

The representation of female athletes in the media often revolves around degradation and objectification, where their value is primarily based on their physical appearance and sexual attractiveness, rather than their athletic accomplishments. This objectification and degradation have led to a lack of meaningful media representation that truly reflects their skills and successes. Female athletes, faced with this limited portrayal in traditional media, have turned to social media as a means of self-representation and shaping their own narrative.

Defining social media can be a complex task due to its multifaceted nature. However, definitions collectively underscore the interactive and participatory nature of social media, emphasizing its role in shaping representations. Verdegem (2011) and Manning (2014) both define social media as a globally accessible platforms that enables users to actively participate in the development of multimedia content. Therefore, these platforms provide users with the ability to create and share content, and actively participate in the construction of narratives.

Its evolution has transformed it from a mere data retrieval tool into a dynamic platform where individuals actively engage in content creation and communication (Hall, 2012). This shift into a social web has given rise to social media platforms, which provides users with the ability to generate, edit, and share content, as well as engage in direct communication with other users (Berthon et al., 2012). Through social media, individuals have the power to shape and control their own representation, contributing to the construction of their online identity. This participatory nature of social media allows users to actively contribute to the narratives and discourses surrounding various topics, including representation in the context of sports. By leveraging social media platforms, female athletes can reclaim agency over their representation and challenge dominant narratives perpetuated by traditional media.

The evolution of the social media has transformed the way individuals interact with online content and each other, particularly in terms of representation. Initially, during the

Web 1.0 era, which spanned from 1980 to 2005, the internet operated in a mono-directional manner. Only a selected few had the ability to produce and disseminate information, while the majority of the users could only passively consume the content without any means of engagement or interaction. Therefore, Web 1.0 was characterized by a hierarchical structure, where a few individuals controlled the flow of information, and users were relegated to the role of spectators, unable to contribute or respond (Hiremath and Kenchakkanavar, 2016; Aghaei et al., 2012,).

However, the advent of Web 2.0 marked a significant shift towards a more participatory and interactive social media landscape. Web 2.0 platforms introduced the concept of user-generated content (UGC), empowering individuals to engage, produce, and share their own content (Oberhelman, 2007). Unlike its predecessor, Web 1.0 fosters an environment where female athletes are no longer passive consumers but active contributors and creators. Web 2.0 platforms have emerged as global, participatory, allowing each user to develop a customized profile where they may create whatever sort of material they decide on (Pegoraro, 2010). So, Web 2.0 provides female athletes with a platform that grants them autonomy and control over their online presence, showing their authentical identity, highlighting their achievements, challenges and experiences in the professional world and their lives.

Previous scholarly research have primarily focused on text-based social media platforms such as Twitter (Litchfield and Kavanagh, 2019; Shreffler, 2016) or blogs (Sanderson, 2008), thereby not showing the vast potential of image-centered platforms like Instagram within the Web 2.0 landscape. Instagram has emerged as one of the most dynamic and rapidly evolving platforms, characterized by its visual nature and unique features (Lunden, 2014). Recognizing the significance of this platform in the context of self-representation by female athletes, the present study aims to delve into the realm of Instagram and explore how female athletes utilize it as a tool for self-representation.

2.5 Instagram

Instagram, a prominent platform within Web 2.0, has emerged as a significant hub for image creation and marketing. Since its inception in 2010, Instagram has rapidly gained global popularity, surpassing the growth of other platforms such as Twitter and Foursquare (Lattiff and Safiee, 2015). The platform's emphasis on visual storytelling and user generator has transformed it into a space where individuals, like female athletes, can showcase their creativity and their desired identity (Mele et al., 2021; Romney and Johnson 2020; Serafinelli, 2018).

The power of images in conveying ideas, opinions, beliefs, advertise and facts should not be underestimated. Visual communication researchers have consistently concluded that

images capture more attention than words (Russmann and Svensson, 2016; Brantner et al., 2011). Visuals are easier for the audience to understand and retain, and they help female athletes capture their audience's attention. Additionally, images possess the ability to vividly capture everyday experiences and convey multifaceted meanings.

On Instagram, users can employ a combination of images and words to communicate their message (Zhao et al., 2022). The platforms support a combination of image and text in the same post, enhancing or changing the meaning of the photograph shared (Romney and Johnson, 2020). For instance, a female athlete can have a post of herself wearing a black mask and combined with a text explaining her solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. By blending visuals and textual narratives, female athletes can provide a deeper understanding of their post meaning.

The points detailed herein indicate the importance of Instagram as it contains several unique indications that allow the user to communicate a distinct message about oneself that can differ from the posts of another user, making it a valuable tool for visual self-expression, either for personal or commercial reasons, using social media (Wells, 2016). As Sponsor United (2021) pointed out, social media is an excellent instrument for increasing the popularity of female athletes and enhancing the worldwide awareness of companies and sectors.

Instagram plays a role in representing female athletes and enabling them to communicate their distinct identities through visual self-expression. The platform offers unique features that differentiate one user's post from another, allowing for personalized and creative content (Wells, 2016). In the context of female athletes, Instagram serves as a powerful tool for increasing their visibility and expanding global awareness for both individual athletes and their companies associated with them.

2.6 Athletes as Social Media Influencers in Instagram

This research paper delves into the representation of female athletes as social media influencers on Instagram, recognizing their increasing prominence and influence within the digital landscape. By exploring the intersection of sport sponsorship, social media influencers, and influencer marketing, this study aims to unravel the complex dynamics that shape the representation of female athletes on the platform.

2.6.1 Sport Sponsorship

Sports sponsorship is defined as an alliance between those involved in marketing and those who have enough social influence (Farrelly and Quester, 2005). The phenomenon of influencers gaining significant popularity among a vast number of individuals has attracted the attention of brands, leading them to explore opportunities for

sponsorship and collaboration, creating influencer marketers, explained in the next section. This strategic alliance aims to amplify sales, increase brand visibility, and foster engagement with the promoted brand (Stubb et al., 2019)

However, a noticeable disparity exists in the visibility of sportswomen compared to male athletes within the domain of sports advertising. This gender imbalance is reflective of larger societal dynamics and highlights the prevalent underrepresentation of women in sports media. As noted under the section *gender berries*, female athletes are frequently objectified, and gender stereotyped. Such objectifications occur not only in the context of mainstream media but also within the sports sponsorship domain (Grau et al., 2007). The overwhelming prominence of male athletes in sports advertising serves to reinforce traditional gender roles and perpetuate the notion that sports are primarily a male domain. Female athletes are often reduced to their physical appearance and sexualized in promotional campaign, thereby overshadowing their athletic prowess, and reinforcing gender stereotypes, however, male athletes are captured in powerful stances emphasizing their strength and dominance (Grau et al., 2007). This mode of representation not only undermines the achievements and abilities of female athletes but also reinforces gender stereotypes.

2.6.2 Influencer Marketing

In the marketing landscape, the utilization of social media influencers (SMIs has become a strategy for promoting products and services (Leung et al., 2022). This approach, known as celebrity endorsement or sponsorship, harnesses the influence and reach of these individuals to sway and impact a substantial number of costumers (Braatz, 2017; Woods, 2016). The way it works is that the brand or corporation delivers free items or services to the SMI in exchange for the SMI to generate content promoting the offerings (Leung et al., 2022) or the brand pays the SMI for using or wearing their items and post it on their social media profile (Leung et al., 2022). Because Instagram is a photo-based platform, it is a very efficient and simple tool for female athletes to publish sponsored photographs and reach a large amount of followers. Additionally, Instagram allows users to browse photographs from Individuals that they do not follow (Landsverk, 2014), increasing their chances of reaching a bigger audience.

The adoption of this strategic tool makes SMI's be seen as a genuine individual giving a genuine recommendation or experience about the product. This is because, wherein the advertised product or service seamlessly integrates into the influencer's narrative post (Matteo and Dal Zotto, 2015; Matthes et al., 2007). However, it is important to adopt a critical lens when analyzing the representation facilitated through SMI endorsements. While native advertising may appear more authentic, the covert promotional

nature raises concerns regarding transparency and consumer trust. It is imperative to question the extent to which influencer content genuinely reflects their own experiences and opinions.

2.6.3 Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers (SMI) can either be people who share their personal life and opinion or people with whom companies desire to work. While social media is often connected with communication (Wright and Miller, 2010), SMIs are distinct in their emphasis on fostering engagement (Uzunoğlu and Kip, 2014). Many scholars have defined social media influencers in various ways. However, in essence, academics recognize SMIs as individuals who produce high-quality content and possess the capacity to influence their audience (; Lu et al., 2012; Li et al., 2012; Abadin, 2016; Freberg et al., 2011). The realm of social media influencers encompasses a diverse array of individuals, including vloggers, bloggers, reality TV personalities and celebrities, such as female athletes, who have gain substantial recognition and social media followers. SMI are prolific in their posting habits, utilizing the platform to share their personal thoughts, insights, experiences on a broad or topics or marketable products or services (Harrigan et al., 2021).

The representation of social media influencers plays a role in shaping their perceived relatability and authenticity, which, in turn, influenced their credibility and trustworthiness (Wei et al., 2021; Bakshy et al., 2011). Through their continuous expression of personal views and experiences, female athletes are providing glimpses into their authentic character. So, this relatability of SMIs stems from their ability to share personal insights anecdotes, and relatable content, which creates a sense of authenticity (Valck et al., 2013).

The content representing the SMI is influenced by their unique personality traits and qualities, which shape the content they choose to publish (Li, 2021). There are two distinct categories of SMIs (Ren et al., 2023): informers and entertainers. Informers aim to create communicative content, providing their followers with knowledgeable, research-based opinions on various subjects (Amos et al., 2008). With this type of posts, Informers possess represent themselves has having the ability to persuade and convince, with images and text, (Lin et al., 2018). In contrast, entertainers focus on presenting their personal lives to showcase their real and authentic character (Ren et al., 2023). Through their posts, entertainers aim to express their authentic self and create an impression of genuineness. By sharing glimpses into their daily experiences, hobbies, and social interactions, entertainers show they are relatable individuals.

It is important to recognize that social media serves a broader purpose beyond the dissemination of sponsored messages. Users frequently engage in sharing personal

information. This practice of self-disclosure on social media allows individuals to construct and project their desired self-representation to a wide range.

2.7 Female Athlete and Social Media

The phenomenon discussed earlier, the transformation of social media influencers into entertainers, sheds light on the shifting focus of these individuals. While traditional mainstream media predominantly revolves around female athletes' professional personas, often limiting their on-field performance or public appearance, social media platforms like Instagram provide avenue for female athletes to disclose intimate moments, express their ideas, share their opinions, and feelings by showcasing their private lives (Kim and Song, 2016). This shift allows female athletes to present a multifaceted image of themselves, showcasing aspects of their personal lives that extend beyond their professional achievements. Therefore, through their use of social media, these athletes present a more holistic and multidimensional view of themselves beyond their athletic prowess, shaping and conveying their narratives (Lebel and Danylchuck, 2012). This departure from traditional media paradigm allows for a reclamation of their personal voices and therefore they are expressing themselves as more relatable, authentic, and genuine.

Therefore, social media platforms, like Instagram, provide users with the opportunity to create personalized profiles and share a wide range of content to express their thoughts, emotions, experiences, and interests. This freedom of self-expression grants female athletes a greater degree of control over their image and the content they disseminate (Luppicini, 2013). Research conducted by Geuring-Eagleman and Burch (2014) revealed that female Olympic athletes predominantly preferred to share private and non-sporting content through their Instagram profiles. Moreover, several studies (Toffoletti and Thorpe, 2018) have emphasized that female athletes strategically utilize these platforms to communicate aspirational ideals, such as empowerment, endurance, and entrepreneurial spirit. Continuously, social media also serves as a platform where athletes embody various personal subjects in the realm of sports, including showcasing their achievements, sharing game highlights, celebrating post-game moments, seeking support from their followers when their injured (Duncan, 2020; Romney and Johnson, 2020; Nankervis et al., 2018). Collectively, these kind of posts assist the athlete in representing themselves as someone who wants to communicate with their followers and share glimpses of their everyday journey.

Female athletes also use social media to become "agents of social change" (Pelak, 2005, p. 59), since their usage of platforms such as Instagram can be seen as activism (Vivienne & Burgess, 2012). For example, various players from the Women's National Basketball Association, published posts in protest to the treatment of African-Americans by

American police, as part of the "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) movement (Yan et al., 2018) or posts against homophobia might be shared, since homophobia is a kind of discrimination that still occurs (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021)

In addition, female athletes employ social media platforms as a vehicle for advocating social change and becoming "agents of social change" (Pelak, 2005, p. 59). They leverage the power of social media as a platform to actively engage in advocacy and express their opinion on a range of social movements. Through their digital presence, they position themselves as voices of change and use their influence to address important social issues. By participating in discussions, sharing their perspectives, and aligning themselves with various causes, female athletes challenge societal norms and contribute to the wider discourse surrounding these movements (Vivienne and Burgess, 2012). Their active involvement on social media demonstrates their commitment to social changes.

2.8 Self-representation Theory

Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, provide individuals with the means to curate and shape their own self-representation, enabling them to present themselves in a manner that aligns with their desired image.

The self-presentation theory originated from Ervin Goffman's seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Live,* published in 1959. Goffman argued that individuals, through verbal and nonverbal communication, construct personas based on what they aim to convey to their audience, effectively adopting the role of actors. This perspective suggests that people adapt their behaviors, qualities, and self-presentation depending on the specific audience and social context in order to present their best possible version (Goffman, 1959). Goffman introduced the concept of both backstage and frontstage performance. The backstage represents a space where individuals can reveal their authentic selves, temporarily braking free from the constraints of their constructed character. On the other hand, the frontstage refers to situations where individuals deliberately select and present specific attributes to create an idealized image of themselves. A more contemporary interpretation of this theory by Emmons and Mocarski (2014) suggests that frontstage performances occur when individuals are more cautious and deliberate in their online postings, carefully managing the impressions they create. In contrast, backstage performance postings are characterized by a more casual and spontaneous nature. This distinction highlights the varying levels of control and planning that individuals exert in different contexts of self-presentation.

Goffman's (1959) work highlights the strategic nature of self-presentation, where individuals actively choose the specific image, they want to portray, recognizing that different contexts may emphasize various aspects of their identity (Ellison et al., 2006).

Building upon this concept, Higgins (1987) proposed the existence of three realms of the self: the 'actual' self, the 'ideal' self, and the 'ought' self. The 'actual' self pertains to the authentic qualities of an individual, representing who they truly are. The 'ideal' self reflects the characteristics and attributes that an individual aspires to possess, serving as a vision of their desired self. Finally, the 'ought' self relates to the qualities that an individual feels obligated to possess based on societal or internalized expectations. Through social media platforms, individuals have the ability to curate and present version of themselves that align with their desired 'ideal' self or 'actual' self or societal expectations of their 'ought' self.

Additionally, the self-discrepancy hypothesis, is a theory relevant to the representation of self, encompassing various forms of self-presentation. Marshall (2010) identifies three distinct types of self-presentation within the online realm: the public self, the public-private self, and the transgressive intimate self. The public self corresponds to front stage acting, where individuals share content primarily of a professional nature, often managed by their team or public relations personnel. The public private self entails a limited sharing of personal information, providing glimpses into the private lives of individuals while maintaining certain boundaries. Transgressive intimate self represents a more backstage performance, where individuals openly share emotional and intimate aspects of their lives.

3. Methodology

In order to address the research question on how female athletes self-represent on Instagram, a qualitative analysis was employed as the preferred research approach. Qualitative analysis focuses on interpretation and exploration, aiming to uncover deeper meanings within the selected material. In contrast to quantitative analysis, which emphasizes numerical data, qualitative analysis delves into the underlying significance and context of the data (Schreier, 2014). By adopting a qualitative research design, a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, specifically in the realm of media studies, can be achieved (Emmons and Mocarski, 2014). Qualitative research methods are particularly valuable when interpreting visual texts and examining themes, patterns, and meanings within them (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These methods allow researchers to uncover implicit meanings and derive a deeper understanding from the dataset (Gammelgaard, 2017). Therefore, for this study, a thematic analysis was chosen as the specific qualitative method for conducting the analysis.

The subsequent units will go through the sampling method, sensitizing ideas, and in-depth coding procedure.

3.1 Sampling and Data Collection

To explore how female athletes utilize Instagram for self-representation, a critical and carefully considered sampling strategy was employed. In this study, non-random purposive sampling was deemed appropriate to ensure the selection of data that aligned with the research objectives (Babbie, 2020). This sampling approach involved a deliberate and intentional selection of Instagram profiles belonging to female athletes based on their suitability and relevance to the study.

First, Instagram was chosen as the platform for analysis. Instagram, a rapidly growing and visually oriented social network, provides users with the ability to create and share diverse forms of content (Belanche et al., 2019). In this study, the focus was specifically on the main profile image of female athletes' accounts. To ensure the selection of appropriate profiles and posts for analysis, four criteria were applied during the data collection process.

The first criterion employed focused on inclusivity and aimed to analyze any female athlete regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, or any other characteristics. The athletes studied were classified as female since they competed in the female division of their sport. Research has consistently shown that female athletes continue to face numerous challenges in the sports industry, receiving significantly less

media coverage compared to their male counterparts (Dafferner et al., 2019), and perpetuating gender disparities and limiting their visibility and recognition. Moreover, the sports industry remains predominantly male-dominated, with female athletes facing numerous barriers and inequalities (Salido-Fernández and Muñoz-Muñoz, 2021). A sample of 50 female athletes was carefully selected for this study ensuring enough data to achieve saturation. To capture a diversity, the sample included athletes from ten, individuals and team, different sports. These sports were deliberately chosen to represent both male-dominated (football, basketball, ultimate fighting championship (UFC), surfing, racing) and female-dominated (tennis, swimming, gymnastics, field hockey, volleyball), reflecting conventional gender expectations (Kennedy, 2010).

The second criterion was that the athletes picked had to be active in their respective sports and not retired since the researcher was curious about the content female athletes opted to publish while competing.

The third condition was that the analyzed posts had to be from the period starting from November 2019, when the Covid-19 epidemic emerged, until March 2023, when the data collection tool place. This time frame was chosen because it represented a significant and impactful for female athletes, marked by the temporary suspension of training and competitions due to the pandemic. The temporary suspension of sports may have influenced female athlete's self-representation. One possible effect is that athletes may have opted to share more personal content during this period or positioning themselves in favor of companies that fight Covid-19 rather than the ones who that are not. The data collection was carried out using the researcher's personal Instagram account, as accessing specific content requires being logged into an account. The posts from the selected athletes' profiles were carefully reviewed and stored in separate folders on Instagram to facilitate further analysis.

The fourth criterion was that female athletes must have a minimum of 50 posts on their Instagram profiles. With this requirement, the researcher aimed to ensure an adequate amount of data.

In addition to analyzing the visual content, the captions accompanying the images were also considered in this study. Captions play a role in shaping the meaning and interpretation of the images, as they can provide context, or present a different perspective altogether. By examining and addressing the captions associated with each image, the researcher aimed to gain deeper insights.

Instagram uses an algorithm to determine what content appears in someone's

newsfeed, and in what order (Bishqemi and Crowley, 2022). Accordingly, Instagram displays content based on your preferences and interests, making each profile unique. Since the researcher's Instagram account was used to choose the postings of the female athletes, this may have biased the data collection.

Because the study focuses on female athletes without a specialized country or language, some captions are written in languages other than English, and therefore, they were translated.

3.2 Operationalization

Thematic analysis, encompasses both inductive and deductive approaches, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of themes derives from the data while also considering preexisting concepts and theories. In the deductive approach, themes are guided by preexisting notions and themes from prior research, while inductive thematic analysis involves identifying themes that emerge directly from the data itself (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For this study, a hybrid approach combining both inductive and deductive methods was utilized. This approach allowed the researcher to draw upon existing literature and theories as starting points for the analysis, while also remaining open to the emergence of new codes and themes from the dataset during the analytical process.

The three main concepts of this research are challenging degradation, objectification, and self-representation. Despite the increase participation of women in competitive sports, the representation of female athletes in mainstream media remains significantly low. This disparity not only restricts their visibility but also reinforces gender stereotypes by representing them as weak, unsuccessful, impersistent. Therefore, it not only undermines their professional accomplishments but also reinforces narratives that hinder progress towards gender equality in sports. A post was categorized as challenging degradation when they actively confronted and subverted the gender stereotypes. For example, posts that emphasized the athletic achievements, skills, and dedication of the female athlete. This included showcasing their strength, determination, and expertise in their respective sports.

The second factor is challenging objectification. The representation of female athletes in mainstream media and media has long been marred by the issue of objectification, reducing them to mere objects of male gaze and perpetuating gender stereotypes. Meaning their athletic prowess and achievements are overshadowed by a focus on their physical appearance, sexualized poses, or provocative clothing. Such objectification not only diminishes the significance of their athletic abilities but also

reinforces the notion that their value lies primarily in their attractiveness and desirability. A post was considered challenging objectification when for example if it included visual elements like action shots, self-confident messages, powerful poses, or doing activities.

Thirdly, Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory was applied. The theory distinguishes between backstage and front stage performance. Post categorized as backstage performance were characterized by content that provided glimpses into the athletes' personal lives, offering insights into their 'true' selves. These post posts often revealed more intimate details, personal experiences, and emotions creating a sense of authenticity and genuineness. A post was categorized as front stage when specific and concrete imagery and language was used for a reason.

3.3 Thematic Analysis and Coding Phase

In order to answer the study's question, a thematic analysis was employed. Thematic analysis is a valuable tool for analyzing and identifying themes within a dataset, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of specific topics or phenomena. The decision to use thematic analysis was based on its effectiveness in uncovering and reporting meaningful themes within a dataset (Walters, 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method offers flexibility in working with large amounts of data by organizing and categorizing it into smaller, manageable groups, facilitating a systematic examination of the collected data (Boeiie, 2010; King, 2004). This analytical approach enabled a comprehensive examination of the Instagram posts, as well as the textual elements, represented by the accompanying captions.

The study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis. In phase one, *familiarizing with the data* is the immersion with the data where one is comfortable with the information (Nowell et al., 2017). The immersion was achieved by repeatedly reading the texts, seeking significance and patterns. As a result, the researcher became acquainted with the data by differentiating between the various posts. The shared posts were then collected and saved in various folders on the researcher's personal Instagram account. The Instagram content was actively analyzed, while searching for meanings and patterns.

Phase two, *generating initial codes*, involved the generation of preliminary codes from data. Codes indicate noteworthy spots for the analyzer. The initial codes revealed were open codes connected to sponsored content, personal material, and self-presentation, such as 'with athletic equipment', 'touristic view', or 'magazine covers'. All of these discernible patterns were recovered from the photos and captions.

Phase three, *searching for themes*, was about sorting and merging the open codes into overarching categories that were used to form potential themes and sub-themes. For this research, the open codes were combined to form sub-themes and later grouped into overarching main themes.

Phase four, *reviewing themes*, is about the setting, merging, or eliminating themes, ensuring that the topics were different and had distinct contrasts amongst them. Some themes were combined to create one overarching theme, while others were divided to create other clear themes.

In phase five, *defining and naming themes*, themes were settled to present and analyze the data within them. Meaning every theme and sub-themes, in combination with the academic literature from the theoretical framework, were fully established. Each theme is elaborated on in the results chapter of this research paper.

Phase six, *producing the report*, is when the worked-out themes are completed, and the final analysis and write-up report is done. Thus, five themes were eventually established: 'challenging promotional content', 'personal content', 'challenging gender norms and objectification', 'interactive content', and 'positioning themselves'. A table is created showing the themes, sub-themes, and exemplary open codes (see Appendix A).

3.4 Credibility and Ethical Considerations

For this study, the evaluation of reflexivity, credibility and ethics was necessary in order to achieve transparency. It is important to start by describing the researcher's background and positionality in relation to the female athlete's postings and captions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tracy, 2010). Since I am an Asian woman who was formerly a semi-professional athlete, I understand the struggles of being a woman in a patriarchal environment, which means that photographs and captions are open to my personal interpretation. My perspective on the world, as well as some of the photographs and captions examined for the research, are impacted by my positionality. As a result, subjective and biased positionality may be represented in the data; hence trustworthiness and openness must be ensured.

The precision of the approach is referred to as validity, whilst the consistency of the research process is referred to as reliability. Therefore, the data were treated as precisely and structured as possible to ensure validity and reliability. Hence, the research's sample and six-phased coding procedure were fully discussed and described, making it transparent, thorough, and credible, in order to achieve similar outcomes by repeating the study process through these six stages (Silverman, 2011; Tracy, 2010).

While I chose for a mixed method an inductive method is also used for the study, therefore, I sought to avoid preconceptions and prior information that would have hampered the objectivity of the analysis. After thoroughly discussing all aspects of the methodology section, the next chapter digs into the rewards: *the results.*

4. Results and Discussion

The aim of this section is to introduce and discuss the findings of the thematic analysis, which resulted in five identified themes that answer the research question *how do female athlete self-represent on Instagram.* The first theme, 'challenging promotional content,' shows the relationship between a brand's marketing plan and celebrity female athletes on social media. The second highlighted theme is 'sharing personal content,' which expands on the notion that social media platforms such as Instagram is utilized by people, like female athletes, to disclose personal information. The third theme, 'challenging gender stereotypes,' highlights how female athletes utilize Instagram to disseminate sport-related information. The fourth discovered theme, 'interactive content,' demonstrates that female athletes like interacting with other followers and celebrities through their posts. The fifth and final theme is 'positioning themselves', which expands on the concept of social media platforms being used for social activism. Each concept will be extensively laid out in the sections that follow.

4.1 Theme 1: Challenging Promotional Content

The first theme identified is 'challenging promotional content,' which firstly, corresponds to the idea that many marketers nowadays resort to online influencers, like female athletes, to sell their products and services on social media; a communication strategy in which businesses elect to cooperate with SMI to engage with their followers in order to promote the companies' offerings and engagement with the brand (Leung et al., 2022; Stubb et al., 2019; Braatz, 2017). And secondly, it pertains to the endeavors of women who are striving to counter the prevailing misrepresentation in the media. Traditional marketing practices frequently perpetuates gender stereotypes by predominantly featuring male figures and reinforcing societal norms. There were two sub-themes identified, 'brand promotion' and 'self-promotion'. Both sub-themes included social media influencer and Goffman's (1959) self-representation theory features described in the theoretical framework.

According to the findings, 'brand promotion' was one of the most common classifications extracted from the dataset. All of the female athlete Instagram accounts examined had brand endorsement postings, either advertising a brand product or a service. The fact that female athletes were used as promoters of products and services is in line with influencer marketing and sport sponsorship notions in which they explain that companies seek to work with social media influencers, like female athletes, to promote their products and services since they have a large number of followers and can influence a large number of people to engage with the company or either the product or service

promoted (Leung et al., 2022; Stubb et al., 2019).

Many of the posts were composed by the female athlete posing with the product or service. This type of posts' composition is one in which the product or service is effortlessly seen, indicating that they are constantly positioned in the forefront, making it straightforward to the viewer's eye what the main emphasis of the posting is. This type of postings does not include the statement 'paid partnership with [brand name]', meaning they may or may not have a commercial relationship with the brand advertised or received monetary remuneration.

The analysis of the dataset revealed that these athletes strive to convey their credibility and reliability as individuals and sources of information. Despite being influencers and celebrities, female athletes are mindful of posting without explicitly stating any paid partnerships. By doing so, they aim to appear more genuine and trustworthy in their posts and reviews. This approach is driven by the desire to differentiate themselves from traditional commercial advertisements and establish a perception of honesty and authenticity. The absence of a paid partnership statement allows female athletes to blur the lines between their personal experience and genuine endorsements, making it difficult for the public to discern whether they have received any monetary compensation for the shared posts. This strategy contrast with traditional marketing and advertising practices, which can be perceived as less honest and overly promotional (Valck et al., 2012).

Female athletes demonstrated their reliability and credibility by uploading photographs of themselves using the product or service. As a result, many of the posts included the female athlete drinking, jogging, or playing with the product or service. As seen in Figure 1 and 2 both athletes shared a picture actively utilizing the product. Alyssa Valdes, a volleyball player, is seen as if she is enjoying and liking the drink and Amanda Leoa, a UFC fighter, is seen pouring the protein powder into her bottle which the viewer can assume that she will be drinking later. Furthermore, the bulk of the captions accompanying the image were statements that came from personal experiences and may persuade the audience, since the positive experience comes from a celebrity, and therefore might be perceived as more credible. From the examples provided, Alyssa shares that she liked Pepsi because it makes her feel safe and at home and Amanda expresses that this protein shake will help her grow her muscles.

Based on the data, this sort of posts showed that female athletes shared their images and wrote their captions in a combination of Goffman's frontstage and backstage performances. Female athletes adopted a frontstage performance because the images' composition demonstrated that some elements and positions adopted were meticulously

chosen to maximize the visibility of the product or service to the viewer's eyes. Parts of the captions were also written from a frontstage standpoint since the words employed not only convey the experience but also suggest a convincing argument by using strong persuasive words and adjectives (e.g. love, nothing beats, the best, most wonderful, an amazing). However, they also employed a backstage performance when writing the captions since they also offer a more personal perspective (e.g. 'on my days off…@Pepsi…gives me the at home feels' (Alyssa_valdez2, 2022), 'I have a little obsession with interior design…so super excited there's @valyoufurniture to get stylish furniture'(Maliamanuel, 2020), 'hanging at my fav spot down the beach @billabongwomens' (Lauraenever, 2022).

Figure 1: *example of a female athlete actively utilizing the product being endorsed, specifically a Pepsi can.*

Note. Post retrieved from @alyssa_valdez2 on August 13th, 2022;

Figure 2: *example of female athlete actively utilizing the product being endorsed, specifically protein powder by Yamamoto Protein.*

Note. Post retrieved from @maliamanuel on January 5th, 2022

Promotional content tales various forms, including magazine features where athletes actively promote the magazine brand by being showcased in it. The study by Wasike (2017), observed a notable discrepancy in the representation of male and female athletes on magazine covers and advertisement. Male athletes are often featured, typically dressed in their uniforms or shown in an athletic pose, sometimes even shirtless to show their muscles. In contrast, female athletes are frequently depicted in non-athletic settings or in poses that are considered 'sensual'. To challenge this trend, most of the profiles examined included featuring advertising images that aimed to present female athletes in powerful and athletic stance. Celeste Plak, a volleyball player, shared her cover appearance on Women's Health magazine, showcasing her in athletic attire and striking a powerful pose and accompanied with the caption 'slayin the cover of @womenshealthnl' (Celesteplak, 2020). Similarly, Emma Mckeon, a swimmer, shared her Australia Marie Claire magazine cover showcasing her four gold Olympic medals and her swimsuit athlete attire. This portrayal aimed to showcase achievements and athletic abilities.

Through their posts, female athletes effectively challenge the gender biases perpetuated by the mainstream media, in magazine covers and advertisements. Instead of being solely portrayed for their physical features, these athletes demonstrate their worthiness to grace the covers based on their achievements and professional prowess. For example, A'ja Wilson, a basketball player, who posted her SLAM magazine front cover with her basketball uniform and holding a trophy or Alex Morgan, a football player, who also

posted her Sports Illustrated magazine cover with a t-shirt saying, 'world champions 2019' and holding a trophy. By sharing these posts, female athletes convey the message that they deserve recognition and attention not solely due to their appearances, but because of their accomplishments and successes in their respective sports (see Figure 3 and 4).

Figure 3: *Sue Bird striking a powerful and athletic pose showcased in the cover of a magazine, with the aim of challenging conventional gender norms prevalent in mainstream media.*

Note. Post retrieved from @sbird10 on July 27th, 2020;

Figure 4: *Laura Enever striking a powerful and athletic pose showcased in the cover of a magazine, with the aim of challenging conventional gender norms prevalent in mainstream media.*

Note. Post retrieved from @lauraenever on August 2nd, 2021

Another way of brand promotion that was identified was posting with the statement 'paid partnership [name of brand]' above the image. This type of post is in line with the notion of sport sponsorship that states that as influencers, like female athletes, have gained substantial popularity among a huge number of people, firms have become interested in sponsoring and collaborating with them in order to enhance their sales, awareness, and engagement with the brand (Stubb et al., 2019; Mazodier and Rezaee, 2013; Levin et al., 2004). This signified that the company rewarded the female athlete, whom they have a commercial connection with, in some manner to post with the brands product or service and share a positive review about it.

The image's composition is the same as the previous kind, a photograph in which the product or service, like the new Emporio Armani sports bra or Roxy table surf or Adidas hockey stick, is always in the foreground, making it easy for the audience to see the promoted item and normally accompanied by a caption with strong persuasive words and sometimes a personal story like when Malia Manuel, a surfer, wrote 'weekends are better with @athleticbrewing, your Monday morning will thank you' (Maliamanuel, 2020), or when Dame Sophie Pascoe, a swimmer, wrote 'I spy with my little eye something new that's

hitting the shelves…Powerade Pascoe Power @poweradenz' (Sophascoe1, 2021) or when Alex Morgan, football player, wrote 'Charlie and I are super excited about our brand new @VW' (Alexmorgan13, 2020).

However, with this type of posts, female athletes can come across as insincere or untrustworthy. This potential skepticism arises from the blurring of lines between genuine personal expression and promotional content in the realm of social media. While the athletes may genuinely believe in and support the products or services they promote, the presence of sponsored partnerships or brand collaborations can create a perception of biased endorsements.

Therefore, the photographs and captions studied reveal that female athletes adopted mainly Goffman's frontstage performance approach. The images' composition demonstrated that the position of the promoted items and services were meticulously positioned to maximize the visibility of the product or service to the viewer's eyes. For example, Garbiñe Muguruza, a tennis player, positioned the item in the lower front part of the composition, Sloane Stephens, a tennis player, blurred her body and focused the camera on the app she was promoting and Iga Swiatek, a tennis player, shared a picture where she was pointing at the promoted item. In addition, the wording used in the captions was also carefully chosen to highlight and positively maximize the benefits and greatness of the product and service. For example, when A'ja Wilson, a basketball player, wrote that '@mountaindew Major Melon! It's not just watermelon flavor, it's 'life changing'' (Aja22wilson, 2021) or when Sue Bird, a basketball player, expressed how excited she was for her new speaker and wrote 'JBL options are giving me lifeeee' (Sbird10, 2020) or when Simone Manuel, a swimmer, expressed to her fans that Bic Razors allowed her to feel 'confident and helped her perform her best when in any competition' (Swimone, 2021) (see Figure 5 and 6).

Figure 5: *A'ja Wilson posing with a product from Mountain Dew as a paid partnership arrangement*

Note. Post retrieved from @aja22wilson on January 15th, 2021

Figure 6: *Sue Bird posing with a product from JBL as a paid partnership arrangement*
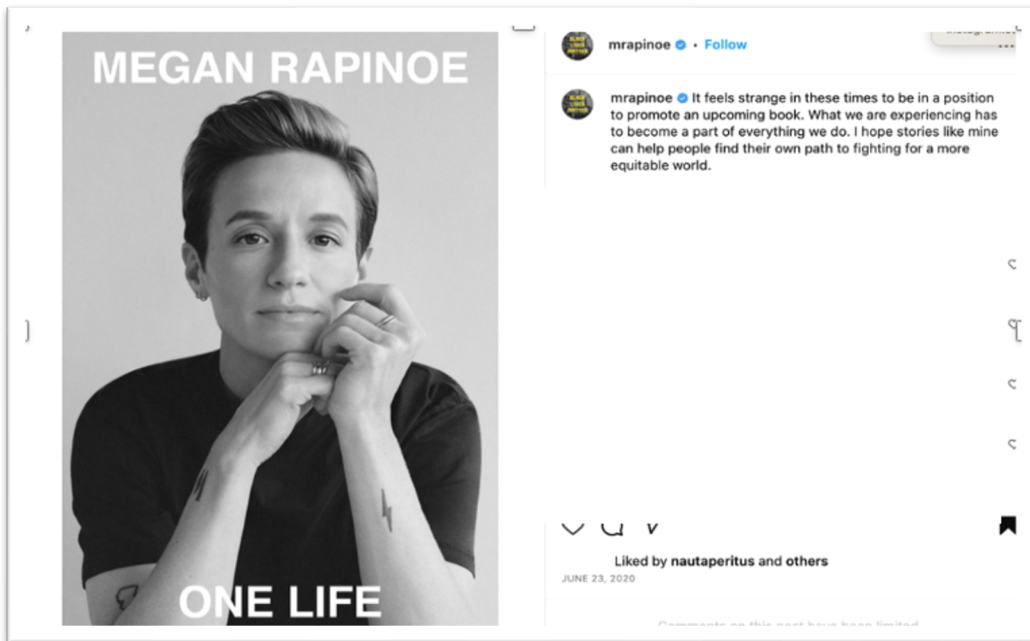

Note. Post retrieved from @sbird10 on February 14th, 2020

Promotional content also encompasses the advertisement of products, brands, or associations that female athletes have created or joined. In addition to their athletic careers, these athletes have extracurricular hobbies and ambitions tied to their personal beliefs and interests. By utilizing platforms like Instagram, they aim to promote their off the-court activities and showcase their goals and ambitions beyond their sports careers. For example, female athletes like Megan Rapinoe, a football player, decided to use Instagram as a way to promote her book or Elena Delle Donne, a basketball player, decided to promote her art designs. These athletes use their social media presence to share their passions and endeavors that extended beyond their athletic achievements. Like Candace Parker, a basketball player, who published a CD and shared the post in Instagram to promote it. By sharing these posts, they are showing their part of their character and what motivates them beyond their sport.

By actively participating in various organizations and associations and sharing these activities on social media, female athletes defy gender norms and challenge societal expectations. They show to the world that they refuse to conform to the traditional roles assigned to women, such as staying at home or solely focusing on their physical appearance. Therefore, they are conveying their unique character, motivations, and aspirations, and reshaping societal perceptions of what it means to be successful and empowered woman in posts and beyond.

For these posts female athletes adopted Goffman's frontstage and backstage performance just like the promotional posts but without the paid partnership statement (see Figure 7 and 8).

Figure 7: *Megan Rapinoe promoting her own book*

Note. Post retrieved from @mrapinoe on June 23rd, 2020

Figure 8: *Candace Parker promoting her own single*

Note. Post retrieved from @candaceparker on February 26th, 2020

4.2 Theme 2: Sharing Personal Content

In addition to promoting their personal interests and pursuits, female athletes also enjoy offering glimpses into their personal lives.

Personal content, the second subject, was one of the most often evaluated components on the Instagram profiles. Female athletes frequently hold a distinct and prestigious status in society. Despite their extraordinary physical ability and fame, they are also ordinary people who share common experiences, activities, and emotions with the general population.

The analysis of female athletes' personal content on Instagram reveals their ability to portray their authentic selves. Through the sharing of leisure activities, relationships, cherished memories, and personal reflections, these athletes provide glimpses into their lives beyond the realm of sports. For example, in volleyball players' Alyssa Valdez's post, we can see her rebuilding a room with the caption 'I suppose this is what they call adulting' (alyssa_valdez2,2023) leading her followers to believe she has purchased an apartment, or a house and she is now renovating it or in hockey players' Selin Oruz post, were we can see where and in what hotel she went during her free time or holidays. The act of posting their hobbies, aspirations, and motives helps them break away from society constraints, openly presenting their desired identity and showing their personal growth and development. This act of vulnerability allows their followers to perceive them as multi-dimensional individuals with passions and interests that extend beyond their athletic achievements.

Moreover, the publication of such content empowers female athletes to challenge gender stereotypes and societal expectations regarding traditional gender roles. Historically, women have been confined to the roles of homemakers or passive participants in various activities. However, by openly discussing their personal lives, female athletes defy these stereotypes and demonstrate that their lives extend far beyond their athletic career and societal conventions. For instance, Felice Albers, a hockey player, shared a post celebrating her 20th birthday in Capetown, indicating her engagement in leisure activities and exploration outside of her sport. Weili Zhang, a UFC fighter, posted about her the first-time surfing experience, showcasing her willingness to try new things and that Simone Biles, a gymnast, attended the 2021st Met Gala, demonstrating her participation in cultural experiences.

Goffman's backstage performance theory is visible in the images and captions of this section. The photographs chosen for this area are more diverse; some are at the

beach, some at the mountain, and yet others are with friends. It shows that they have more flexibility in determining what to include in the image's composition. The captions are likewise written in a more casual tone, with no persuading aim but rather with an informational one; 'to more unplanned matchy matchyyy!' (Alyssa_valdez2, 2022), 'shimmy shimmy coco puff' (sbird, 2022), 'don't let the smile fool you…It's about to get ON and POPPIN'!' (Swimone, 202).

Personal material is divided into four categories:

4.2.1 Free time

The posts categorized under this theme captured moments of the female athlete's leisure and free time, providing a glimpse into their lives beyond their sports careers. These posts showcased activities and experiences during vacations, weekends, public holidays, or moments after workouts. They offered a window into the personal lives of these athletes, highlighting their enjoyment of recreational activities and their ability to unwind and relax. As seen in 'Figure 4' Dame Sophie Pascoe, a swimmer, can be seen smiling while picking some berries and with hashtags used in the captions '#summer', and '#holiday' which It might be interpreted as she is thoroughly enjoying her vacation time. In pictures, free time was represented with symbolic elements like plates with or without food, cups and mugs, typical recreational locations, such as monuments, beach, hotels. In the captions free time the wording was alluding to the female athlete's leisure time like 'enjoying my time off', 'I never want summer to end', '#holiday', or 'sightseeing day'. By showcasing their leisure time, female athletes humanize themselves and demonstrate that they lead a balanced lives that extend beyond their sports career (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: *Sophie Pascoe picking berries during her holiday times*

Note. Post retrieved from @sophpascoe1 on December 29th, 2019

4.2.2 Social Relationships

Many of the personal material studied was associated with social relationships. This theme featured photos of couples (female athlete with her romantic partner), friendship (female athlete with her friend group), family (female athlete with her family), or acquaintances (female athlete meeting a celebrity for the first time). As seen in Figure 10 Madison Kocian, a gymnast, shared a picture of her celebrating and enjoying new years with a group of individuals that as the captions clarifies are her friends. The photographs were intended to convey an emotional connection between the female athlete and the individuals displayed with images and language and also showing what type of relationships they have. When it comes to captions female athletes utilized phrases like 'walking through life together', 'with my lovely family' or 'lucky I am to have these people' to express love towards the people depicted in the image. They also tend to express gratitude by putting words like ''#grateful', 'simply grateful to have you in my life' or 'no better way to celebrate…than by being together'.

Figure 10: *Madison Kocian and her friends celebrating New Years*

Note. Post retrieved from @madison_kocian on January 2ⁿᵈ, 2020

4.2.3 Nature

The posts in this category featured various natural vistas, as well as the female athlete's enjoyment and amusement at being surrounded by such scenery. As seen in Figure 11 Amanda Leoa, a UFC fighter, shared a picture of her peacefully enjoying, as stated in the caption, her time in nature. The compositions of the photographs ranged from nature being the main topic to images with the female athlete as the main subject surrounded by nature. On this posts nature is associated with being a place to stay ('find me here', 'always at home in the water', 'when nature is your 'nurturer'), or it gives peace ('leave it to nature to fill your soul', 'serenity', 'in this place, 'peace reigns').

Figure 11: *Amanda Leoa sorrunded positioned amidst nature's beauty.*

Note. Post retrieved from @amanda_leoa on January 4th, 2020

4.2.4 Physical Appearance

This category is defined as one in which the female athlete is the main subject of the composition. The data examined included a wide range of selfies, such as portraits, close-ups, and mirror selfies, in which the female athletes reveal only their face or a portion of their body. As seen in Figure 12, 13 and 14 Simone Biles, a gymnast, Paola Egonu, a volleyball player, and Christen Press, a football player, all three shared a selfie in which they are the major focus of the photograph, regardless of the surroundings.

However, in this category female athletes are not totally breaking down gender stereotypes. When sharing these selfies and portraits, female athletes are emphasizing their physical attractiveness and traits, since they are the main subject of the image. As shown in the Christen Press selfie, she applied make-up and styled her hair before taking the selfie and this is highlighted since it is easily evident to the observer. However, they upload it, though, because they feel attractive and seductive, not for the purpose of being a sexualized object. This is said because the majority of the captions' goal is to entertain or inform rather than alluring. For example, Celeste Plak, a volleyball player, Malia Manuel, a surfer, or Alexa Grasso, a UFC fighter, posted a portrayed in which they are the focal point of the image, with no mention of her personal appearance in the description, signifying they are not emphasizing their physique.

Figure 12: *Simone Biles shared a selfie*

Note. Post retrieved from @simonebiles on March 4th,2021

Figure 13: *Paola Egonu shared a selfie*

Note. Post retrieved from @paolaegonu on January 1st, 2023

Figure 14: *Christen Press shared a selfie*

Note. Post retrieved from @christenpress on April 6th, 2022

4.3 Theme 3: Challenging Gender Norms and Objectification

In line with 'personal content', female athletes also want to provide peeks of their professional athletic career. A large part of a female athlete's life revolves on their sport, and in addition to posting personal content, they want to share their athletic moments with their fans and followers.

The sub-theme '*related to the game'* emerged consistently throughout the dataset, indicating that female athletes aim to challenge the prevailing gender restrictions imposed by mainstream media and society. By sharing these pictures, they seek to demonstrate their equal capabilities to their male counterparts as professional athletes. Historically, sports have been predominantly male- dominated, with the media often prioritizing the physical appearance of female athletes rather than their athletic achievements and journey. The desire to challenge these norms and stereotypes is evident in study conclusions by Rasmussen et al. (2021), Kain (2017), or Litchfield and Osborne (2015), that highlights the prevailing perception of female athletes as inferior, weak, and infantile.

The composition of the posts evaluated had often the focus on the female athlete, with or without her team, posing in an athletic pose and surrounded by her sporting setting, such as a volleyball court, a hockey field, or a swimming pool. Paola Egonu, a volleyball player, posted a photo of herself in her athletic uniform, screaming in delight as if she had just won an important point, emphasizing her competitiveness desire to win and dominance.

Xan de Waard, a hockey player, also posted a photo of herself and her teammates celebrating after winning the global title, stated in the caption 'We did it! World Champs again!' (Xandewaard, 2022), emphasizing their endurance and perseverance since they won the world championship back-to-back.

In addition to using emojis, the images had a variety of caption ranging from informing the public about their game schedule ('it all starts tomorrow' (aja22wilson, 2020), 'diving into day 1 of the Toyota U.S.' (Swimone, 2019), 'EHL Semi-final today!' (ambre_ballenghien, 2022) to sharing news about their athletic journey ('transfer news', 'taking a step back', 'my first proper race in eSports'), to expressing emotions about their team ('surrounded by nothing but great people', 'so excited to play with these girls', 'our team, proud').

The dataset demonstrates that female athletes wish to express that, in addition to being able to compete in professional sports as males, they are capable of achieving multiple milestones and successes that the mainstream media fails to share with the general public, as seen in Kian's (2007) study. In Figure 15 and 16 both female athletes, Paola Egonu, a volleyball player, and Jamie Chadwick, a racer driver, shared a picture with the trophy they accomplished and accompanied it with a caption saying, 'W Series 2021 champion' and 'world champion', both being big milestones in their career.

Although these two images feature a female athlete holding a trophy, many shared their own small milestone victories to demonstrate they are capable of growing and accomplishing without the need of a trophy. Like Sarah Sjöström's post, where she published a photo of herself in her swimwear with a comment describing her accomplishments that week 'happy with some good swims in Moanco and Canet' (Sarahsjostrom, 2022) or Selin Oruz, a hockey player, she posted a photo of herself playing hockey and stated, "back home after 2 games in Hamburg and 4 points in the pocket," indicating that her team had won those important points (Selin_Oruz, 2020).

Figure 15: *Paola Egonu posing with her trophies*

Note. Post retrieved from @paolaegonu on December 8th, 2019

Figure 16: *Jamie Chadwick posing with her W Series 2021 Champion trophy*
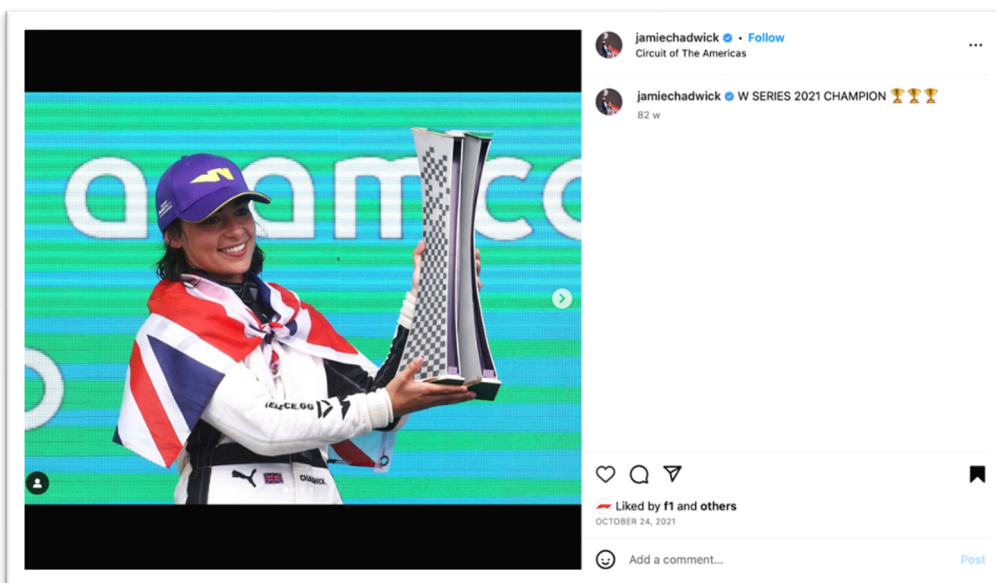
Note. Post retrieved from @jamiechadwick on October 24th, 2021;

Furthermore, by showcasing their successes, female athletes are putting the emphases on their accomplishments and successes instead of on their feminine body physique, because what it is important is to display their athletic journey to their fan rather than their physical traits.

Therefore, the analysis revealed a sub-theme within the dataset that highlighted how female athletes exuded empowerment through their Instagram posts. This was achieved

through various means, including striking powerful poses alone or with their team, expressing love and passion for their respective sports, regardless of being classified as a 'masculine' or 'feminine' sport, sharing inspiring words and messages, documenting their rehabilitation processes, and showcasing their athletic journey. By emphasizing these aspects, female athletes were able to shift the focus away from their physical appearance and characteristics. For instance, Xan de Waard, a hockey player, uploaded an action picture during training or a game with a caption acknowledging the challenge she had faced in the past months while expressing her dedication to improve and overcome obstacles, 'difficult couple of months, but still working hard to get better' (Xandewaard, 2021). Similarly, Alyssa Valdez, a volleyball player, shared a picture of her shoes and laying on a black litter, with one of her ankles wrapped and with a caption saying 'long way to go but slow progress is still progress' (alyssa_valdez2, 2023), demonstrating her desire to grow and eagerness to return to the field.

 The fact that female athletes disclose their successes suggests that they want to demonstrate their fans and the wider public that the way they are portrayed in the mainstream media is not totally who they are. For example, a strong stance is perceived as imposing, aggressive, and competitive, while generally males are defined in these terms. As seen in Figure 17, the female athlete is jumping with her first up and exuding happiness and accomplishment in a sport that is frequently dominated by males, football, and therefore, demonstrating to her fans that being a female professional athlete in a male-dominated sport is achievable and they can even succeed.

Figure 17: *Samantha Kerr jumping powerfully and euphoric*

Note. Post retrieved from @samanthakerr20 on January 30th, 2023

After analyzing the theme posts, in both of sub-themes female athletes adopted a mix of both Goffman's front stage and backstage performance. A frontstage performance because some of the pictures were strategically picked for the right occasion. Sara Sjöström, a swimmer who won numerous medals during the tournament, for example, chose a photo of herself standing with a strong stand and her medals clearly visible and Lexi Brown, a basketball player who recently won a championship, opted to upload a photo with the trophy as the focal point since she is staring at it, which draws the viewer's attention to it. A backstage performance because the athlete wrote more spontaneously and freely. For example, Megan Rapinoe, a football player, wrote 'scoring a goal in front of your Momma' or Crystal Dunn, a football player, wrote '…And Another One! [Dj Khaled Voice]'.

4.4 Theme 4: Interactive content

The previous section revealed that female athletes often include pictures featuring other individuals, indicating their desire to showcase their friendships and connections. This aspect reflects their intention to emphasize their genuine relationships and highlight the importance of personal connections. Additionally, the inclusion of such personal content also serves as means for female athletes to demonstrate their care and appreciation for their fans.

Therefore, another frequent aspect found within the data was '*interactive content*'. According to literature, interactive content is a common feature of social media, and it plays an important role in connecting people. As a result, Instagram strives to create an engaging and interactive environment in which users can actively engage and connect. By doing so, female athletes are trying to establish a stronger connection with their fans and demonstrate to them that they are interested and willing to learn more about their opinions, views, and experiences. A post was labeled as interactive when the image or text compelled the viewer to interact with them.

In all the interactive posts the interactivity came from the captions. The captions were always directed towards their fans and the wider public in order to capture their attention and promote engagement between the athlete and the audience. Some of the captions included affectionate symbols such as faces with hearts and hearts. Some of the other captions posed questions to their viewers, ranging from what their daily exercise routine was to what haircut they should try next. One post, for example, had Sarah Sjöström, a swimmer, standing in a swimsuit and she asked her followers what they thought about it, implying that she welcomes their input and wanted to know their opinion. Garbiñe Muguruza, a tennis player, also wanted to know how their followers felt after playing some tennis and Sloane Stephens, a tennis player, asked her followers what vibes her appearance was sending out: 'Is it giving queen of the north vibes?' (sloanestephens, 2022). By asking these questions, the female athlete hoped to convey to her audience that their opinions and views were valued and recognized.

However, a considerable number of posts were about expressing their appreciation and thankfulness whether it was to their fans or followers for supporting them and being there at their tournaments, games or challenging times, or to those involved in fighting against Covid-19th or organizations. For example, Germaine de Randamie, a UFC fighter, expressed thankfulness by sharing how she felt when her followers send her recovery messages. Alexa Grasso also thanked her followers for being there when she most needed them and for trusting on her on every fight. Through this post female athletes were able to exhibit their vulnerable side and express their sentiments with their followers. Female athletes were allowed to communicate to their feelings about certain groups of individuals through these posts. As seen in Figure 18 and 19 Maria Sakkari wrote on how she is doing during her quarantine and how grateful she is for the warriors against Covid-19, and it can also be seen in Madison Keys post where she is thanking everyone who stayed and supported her during her tennis game.

Figure 18: *Maria Sakkari thanking Covid-19 fighters*
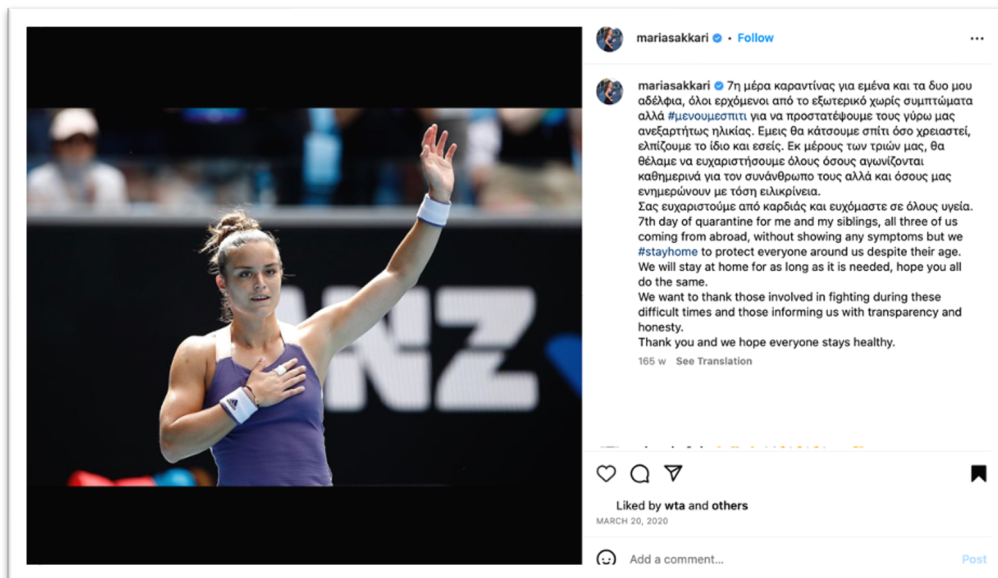
Note. Post retrieved from @mariasakkari on March 20th,2020

Figure 19: *Madison Keys thanking her fans for supporting her during the match*

Note. Post retrieved from @madisonkeys on March 12th, 2022

       Within the identified theme, it became evident that female athletes also desired to engage with individuals beyond their fanbase, including their teammates and other celebrities. This aspect of their social media presence allowed them to demonstrate their connection and interaction abilities with others. For instance, Dame Sophie Pascoe, a swimmer, shared a post featuring herself posing alongside a CEO, expressing gratitude in

the caption for the opportunity to be in their company. By sharing such moments, the female athlete revealed their vulnerable feelings and conveyed their genuine sentiments to both their followers and the individuals featured in the photos. Another example is Elena Delle Donne, a basketball player, who posted a picture of tennis player Frances Tiafoe, sending him a message of support and love through the caption. This instance showcases the willingness of the female athlete to express her emotions and establish a personal connection. Therefore, it was observed that female athletes often include images of the individuals mentioned in their captions, with the female athlete herself occasionally present. For instance, Stephanie Gilmore, a surfer, expressed her pride for the Irukandijs Australian Junior Team by tagging them in the caption, allowing for easy interaction between herself and the people tagged. This approach fosters a sense of community and engagement, demonstrating the athletes' support for and connection with those mentioned (see Figure 20).

Figure 12: *Stephanie Gilmore congratulating the Junior Team*

Note. Post retrieved from @stephaniegilmore on May 27th, 2022

Female athletes adopted a backstage performance approach, allowing them to share more casual and 'goofy' photographs that showcased their authentic selves. In these posts, they often deviated from the conventional poses and expressions typically seen in promotional or professional images. As an example, Alice Powell, a racing driver, posted a picture walking with two of her teammates in their athlete racing uniform and asked her followers to come up with a 'cool' name for the girl band as they appeared like they were forming a girl's band.

4.5 Theme 5: Positioning Themselves

Alongside their interactions with other individuals, female athletes also demonstrate a desire to engage with social movements.

'*Positioning Themselves'* refers to when the female athlete often uses their social media platform to express their opinion on social movements and specific topics, both through visuals and text. These posts are categorized as positionality when they address social issues like 'BLM (Black Lives Matter)', sustainability or the 'LGBTQ (lesbian, gays, bisexuals, transgender and queer) community'. This is consistent with the assumption that female athletes, who they have a large number of followers, utilize it to protest and discuss social concerns and social movements (Lu et al., 2012; Li et al., 2012; Pelak, 2005) that our culture is going through.

Through their active engagement on social media, female athletes assert their stance on various social issues, positioning themselves and expressing their beliefs to the wider public. These athletes utilize their platform to share their opinions, thereby revealing their genuine values and characters. Xan de Waard, a hockey player, and Amanda Nunes, a UFC fighter, both posted photos of themselves wearing a rainbow-colored clothing. The rainbow colors are a symbol associated with the LGBTQ community since their flag, the Pride flag, is made up of the rainbow colors. Therefore, these two athletes are demonstrating to their fans and the wider public, not only via the image but also through the captions, that they are in support of the LGBTQ community 'One Love' and against the homophobia 'say no to homophobia'.

The primary composition observed throughout the examined post was a picture highlighting the social movement (ex. a female athlete wearing a rainbow bracelet or a poster reminding the viewer to vote or an image with the female athlete wearing a face mask) and complemented with a personal narrative that added to the significance of the image. As seen in Figure 21 and 22, Simone Manuel shared a picture posing firmly with her eyes fixed on the camera, which intensifies the message, and wearing a t-shirt that referred to an incident related to the BLM, 'arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor'. To offer additional insight to the image Simone wrote her personal view on the subject and encouraged her followers to do the same in order to seek justice 'let's stay loud, keep demanding justice for Breonna and her family, and say her name'. Crystal Dunn posted a selfie, with her eyes also fixed on the camera, which intensifies the message, and wearing a t-shirt with the word 'equality'. She also shared her personal experience as a black woman, so that everyone who reads the blogs understands what black women, like her, go through.

Figure 21: *Simone Manuel advocating for Breonna Taylor*

Note. Post retrieved from @swimone on August 12th, 2020

Figure 22: *Crystal Dunn advocating for equality*

Note: Post retrieved from @cdunn19 on May 30th, 2020

Female athletes adopted a mix of Goffman's frontstage and backstage performance when posting opinionated pieces. Frontstage performance because the photographs and parts of the caption text we carefully chosen to represent the message they want to convey. From the two athletes above they both carefully selected the t-shirt and image frame to ensure that the complete word(s) were displayed. When it came to captions, athletes

carefully selected key words and phrases to ensure that the message was clear and effective. One of the athletes above wrote, in capital characters, 'I am so proud to be BLACK!' while the other appealed to all her supporters by stating, 'let's stay loud and keep demanding...'. Female athletes also used backstage performance since their captions included their personal experience and their true feelings. Crystal is an excellent example since she describes the difficulties she faced as a black woman.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the self-representation of female athletes on Instagram, focusing on the research question: 'how do female athletes self-represent on Instagram?'. In this concluding chapter, it provides a comprehensive response based on the findings obtained throughout this research. It also discusses the academic and societal implications of these findings and present some limitations of the study as well as suggestions for future research.

The analysis has identified five distinct themes, two which align with the concepts outlined in the theoretical framework. The first theme revolves around female athletes as social media influencers and marketers. Companies are interested in sponsoring athletes due to their influence and large following on social media platforms. The second theme centers on the use of social media as a platform for sharing personal details of their lives.

The first theme explored is 'challenging promotional content'. The analysis conducted shed light on how female athletes portray themselves when they are utilized as marketing tools. Findings revealed that the primary focus of such posts was to highlight the product or service being promoted, consequently, positioning the promoted item as the central element, easily noticeable to the viewer's eye. Accompanying the visual content, positive captions were commonly employed, in which the female athletes provided a review or experience. This aimed to convey a character sense of reliability and trustworthiness. However, a number of posts did include the disclosure statement 'paid partnership', indicating that the athlete received a monetary compensation for endorsing. Therefore, this disclosure raised concerns regarding the authenticity and credible character of the athlete.

Challenging promotional content also intersects with prevailing gender norms in advertising. Traditional advertisements have often objectified and 'sensualized' female athletes and relied on the use of idealized models to promote products and services, since they feared some female athletes were to masculine and potentially unappealing (Jalees

and Majid, 2009). However, there has been a noticeable shift, with female athletes being portrayed as more powerful, independent, and confident individuals (Kordrostami and Laczniak, 2022). This transformation is reflected in the findings of this study, which highlight the desire of female athletes to demonstrate their ability to endorse products and services regardless of their physique, sexual orientation, or race. All of the profiles analyzed in this study featured promotional content, showcasing the athletes' determination to be recognized as capable endorsers. Moreover, female athletes aim to challenge the perception that they are valued solely for their physical appearance. Many promotional posts prioritize showcasing the product over the athlete herself. Additionally, the athletes' deliberate choice of non-sensual poses in promotional content further supports their desire to redefine gender norms. And by sharing advertising campaigns or magazine covers where they are depicted in powerful stances, female athletes convey a message of strength and confidence, rejecting the objectification of their bodies.

The second aspect explored in this study, referrers to 'personal content', which delves into female athletes portraying their true character and authenticity. The interactive nature of social media platforms allows users to have direct engagement with their online profiles, giving them greater control over what they choose to share (Luppicini, 2013). Therefore, the images analyzed in this section exemplify the increased freedom female athletes have in expressing their genuine selves through the sharing of their thoughts, experiences, and everyday routines (Harrigan et al., 2021). By openly disclosing details about their personal lives, they are showcasing their authentic and genuine persona. With this freedom, there is a notable observation in the increase of diversity of posts compared to the previous section. The photographs are encompassing various aspects of the athletes' lives, including holiday trips, foods, monuments, family, friends. This expansion in content demonstrates how female athletes want to be more active in social media and share their everyday lives (Bengtsson and Johansson, 2022). This ability of share personal aspects of their lives is a manifestation of the power and freedom they possess over their own profile.

Furthermore, female athletes are also challenging gender norms through the display of diverse activities in which they actively participate. By showcasing their engagement in activities such as dining at restaurants, visiting monuments, trying new activities, travelling, they defy traditional gender stereotypes that confine women to domestic spaces and limit their participation in various activities (Yanovskaya and Lipovka, 2022). So, their portrayal on social media serves as a means of challenging the notion that women should lead restricted lives with minimal engagement in the world outside. However, it is important to note that within 'personal content' there is still an emphasis on physical appearance. All of the profiles analyzed contained selfies, mirror pictures, portraits. With these posts the emphasis primarily revolves around media gender norms, where the athlete's physique becomes the central focus. The focus on their physique can potentially reinforce societal expectations and objectify female athletes, reducing their value to mere physical attributes rather than recognizing their athletic abilities and achievements.

The third theme explored in this study, is referred to as 'challenging gender norms and objectification,' which focuses on female athletes self-representing as successful and powerful individuals. It is important to note that mainstream media has traditionally prioritized the physical appearance of female athletes over their athletic abilities, strategic thinking, achievements, and successes (Smith, 2015). Consequently, this emphasis on their physicality has resulted in a limited portrayal of their athletic journey, accomplishments, and potential, often reducing them to sensual objects and perpetuating the perception that they are unsuccessful and weak, but hot and sexy. This objectification and degradation of female athletes underscore the urgent need to challenge and subvert these damaging narratives, since the portrayal is still typically portrayed in a stereotypical fashion (Taylor et al., 2013).

In their pursuit of challenging existing gender norms and redefining representation, female athletes actively engage in self-representation by sharing images that highlight their physical strength, athletic achievements, successes, and determination. Importantly, this

self-representation extends beyond the boundaries of gender-dominated sports, as female athletes strive to assert their abilities and accomplishments in any sporting discipline. By shifting the focus away from their physical bodies, they aim to reshape the narrative surround female athletes. These images serve as powerful tool for showcasing the multifaceted nature of female athletes' identities and capabilities. Rather than perpetuating the traditional emphasis on their physical appearance, they assert their agency and reclaim control over their representation by sharing visuals that emphasize their athletic prowess and the hard work invested in their sport (Kordrostami and Laczniak, 2022).

Th power of empowerment and determination is most prominently exhibit through the captions accompanying their posts. Through these captions, athletes openly share their personal stories, including their rehabilitation journeys, the challenges they face, inspirational quotes. By utilizing these captions, female athletes demonstrate their resilience and determination, and the willingness to become a figure to look up too.

The fourth topic, 'interactive content,' is about female athletes portraying themselves as sociable. As celebrities on social media with substantial following and connections, female athletes are self-representing as individuals who care about their followers and connections. Therefore, they use interactive content to bridge the gap between themselves and their audience and portraying themselves a relatable individual. The interaction generally comes from the caption by engaging with followers through questions, direct tagging and mentioning that connection. By consciously portraying themselves as sociable individuals through interactive content, female athletes self-represent as caring and connected individuals.

The fifth topic, 'positioning themselves', is about female athletes becoming agents of social change. Female athletes actively position themselves as powerful figures who utilize their platform to advocate for social causes. As influential individuals in the media landscape, female athletes recognize the significance of their voice and the impact they can have on society. The interactive and networked nature of social media platforms provides

opportunities for the communication, channeling, and sharing of feelings, emotions, and opinions in greater depth and nuanced (Lee and Abidin, 2023). The study's findings strongly support the notion that female athletes actively express their opinions through social media. A significant number of profiles contained posts where athletes shared their perspectives, revealing their strong stance and position on important topics. These posts effectively conveyed a clear and strong message about the athletes' support and advocacy for the respective social movement since both visual content and text create a cohesive and impactful representation of the athletes' views.

By taking a stand and sharing their perspectives on social movements through platforms like Instagram, female athletes are actively challenging ingrained gender norms. Throughout history, societal expectations and traditional gender roles have often confined women to passive, submissive, or supportive roles, leaving little room for them to voice their opinion on broader societal issues (Kinati et al., 2023). However, female athletes are breaking free from these limitations and making their voices heard, as shown in the results. Through their active engagement on Instagram, female athletes defy the notion that women should remain silent or conform to the status quo. In doing so, female athletes are reshaping the narrative around gender norms and expectations and the willingness to share their perspectives inspire others to question and challenge gender norms and advocate their feelings.

Besides being little research about Instagram and its use on self-representation, altogether, the results of this study underscore the desire of female athletes to present themselves as authentic and relatable figures, rather than a distance athletic figure driven solely by paid partnerships and collaborations. Through their uncarefully and unplanned images and captions, female athletes strive to self-represent as individuals who genuinely want to share their true character with their followers. By primarily focusing on sharing glimpses of their personal lives and careers, female athletes aim to offer their followers a deeper understanding of who they truly are as individuals. Through these posts, they are

conveying their genuine emotions, feelings, and opinion. By sharing these opinionated and spontaneous posts they are representing themselves as more human, relatable and vulnerable. It is important to note that the authenticity and geniuses portrayed by female athletes in their social media posts are achieved through the concept of 'backstage performance', as introduced by Goffman (1959), which allows individuals to reveal a more unguarded and spontaneous side of themselves.

By sharing more their authentic and genuine character female athletes are also contributing to challenging gender norms. By sharing their athletic journey, or everyday activities or their magazine covers they demonstrate that they can be strong, determine, accomplished athletes while also being complex, authentic individuals with their own thoughts, emotions, and interests. By presenting their genuine character, female athletes inspire others to embrace their own authenticity and challenge gender norms. Their openness and willingness to share their true selves encourages individuals, particularly young females, and women, to break free from societal expectation and express themselves fully.

5.1 Limitations

While this research has provided valuable insights into the self-representation of female athletes on social media, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, the study's sample size and scope may have limited the diversity of the findings. Dure to the constraints of the research, a limited number of posts and athletes were included, potentially resulting in a narrower representation of the overall population of female athletes on social media. Secondly, the timing of the posts analyzed during the Covid-19 pandemic may have influenced the content focus. The pandemic brought about unique circumstances that impacted athletes' lives and the nature of their posts to a more emphasis on personal content. Another limitation, the semi-professional athlete background of the researcher may introduce bias in the analysis.

In future research, expanding the sample size to include a greater number of athletes from various sports would enhance the diversity and representation within the study. This broader approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, incorporating a wider range of Instagram features, such as stories or videos, would offer a more holistic view of the athlete's self-representation strategies and purpose.

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Appendix A

Coding tree with five themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Open Codes
		Paid collaboration
Challenging Promotional Content	Brand Promotion	Thanking the brand
		Posing with the product/service
		Campaign
		Magazine
		Positive language
		Personal experience
		#love
		Utilizing it
		Persuasive language
		New projects
	Self-promotion	Self-creations
		Joining a brand
		Ambassador
		Collaborating
		Hobbies
Sharing Personal Content	Free Time	Outdoor activities
		Humanitarian activities
		#holidays

		Food
		Hotels
		Social events
	Nature	Vegetation
		Views
	Social Relationships	Family
		Friends
		Love ones
		Old photographs
	Physical Appearance	Selfies
		Mirror pictures
		Portraits
		Close-ups
		Posing
		While doing an activity
		Training
Challenging Gender Norms and Objectification	Related to the Game	Schedules
		Locations
		Use of emoticons
		Humor images
		Posing with the uniform
		Selfies
		Expressing love

		#missing
	Empowerment	Inspirational quotes
		Powerful stances
		With trophy
		With award
		Action shots
		Wins
		Recovery journey
		Moving pass challenging times
Interactive Content	With Followers and Fans	#blessed
		Thanking them
		Questions
		Give aways
	With Celebrities	Celebrating their achievements
		Sharing their schedule
		Proudness
		Appreciation
		Expressing love
Positioning Themselves	Social Movements	Black community
		LGBTQ community
		Gender equality
		#femalenationalday

		Covid-19
	Specific Events	Ukraine war
		Sustainability
		#earthday
		vote

Appendix B

Overview of the 50 female athletes analyzed

Athlete	Sport	N. of Pictures	Instagram
Maria Sakkari	Tennis	858	@mariasakkari
Swiatek Iga	Tennis	601	@iga.swiatek
Sloane Stephens	Tennis	489	@sloanestephens
Madison Keys	Tennis	505	@madisonkeys
Garbiñe Muguruza	Tennis	911	@garbimuguruza
Alex Morgan	Football	1.120	@alexmorgan13
Megan Rapinoe	Football	1.275	@mrapinoe
Crystal Dunn	Football	1.035	@cdunn19
Samantha Kerr	Football	917	@samanthakerr20
Christen Press	Football	1.477	@christenpress
Lexie Brown	Basketball	437	@lexiebrown
A'ja Wilson	Basketball	1.436	@aja22wilson
Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis	Basketball	1.064	@kaleena23
Elena Delle Donne	Basketball	1.757	@de11edonne
Sue Bird	Basketball	862	@sbird10
Federica Pellegrini	Swimmer	3.456	@kikkafede88
Simone Manuel	Swimmer	750	@swimone
Emma McKeon	Swimmer	843	@emmamckeon
Sarah Sjöström	Swimmer	1.253	@sarahsjostrom
Dame Pascoe	Swimmer	1.047	@sophpascoe1

Simone Biles	Gymnast	2.669	@simonebiles
Gelya Melnikova	Gymnast	950	@gelyamelnikova
Jordan Chiles	Gymnast	310	@jordanchiles
Madison Kocian	Gymnast	348	@grace.mccallum
Laurie Hernandez	Gymnast	655	@lauriehernandez
Amanda Nunes	UFC	1.272	@amanda_leoa
Holly Holm	UFC	1.302	@hollyholm
Weii Zhang	UFC	1.247	@zhangweilimma
Germaine de Randamie	UFC	550	@ironladymma
Alexa Grasso	UFC	1.832	@alexa_grasso
Felice Albers	Field Hockey	553	@felicealbers
Róisín Upton	Field Hockey	614	@roisinupton
Selin Oruz	Field Hockey	644	@Selin Oruz
Ambre Ballenghien	Field Hockey	397	@ambre_ballenghien
Xan de Waard	Field Hockey	511	@xandewaard
Malia Manuel	Surf	1.249	@maliamanuel
Laura Enever	Surf	2.050	@lauraenever
Keely Andrew	Surf	577	@keelyandrew
Stephanie Gilmore	Surf	1.549	@stephaniegilmore
Justine Dupont	Surf	1.843	@justinedupont33
Alice Powell	Racing Driver	340	@allicepowellracing
Jamie Chadwick	Racing Driver	525	@jamiechadwick
Abbie Eaton	Racing Driver	1.229	@abbieeaton44

Belen Garcia	Racing Driver	534	@belengarciaes
Jessica Hawkins	Racing Driver	375	@1jessicahawkins
Alyssa Valdez	Volleyball	1.266	@alyssa_valdez2
Gabriela Guimaraes	Volleyball	1.141	@gabiguimaraes10
Paola Egonu	Volleyball	796	@paolaegonu
Celeste Plak	Volleyball	746	@celesteplak
Gina Mambru	Volleyball	2.166	@mambru17