Making it in a Man's World

A Thematic Analysis of Olympic Women Athletes Self-representation on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

Online content provides valuable insights into patterns and trends that shape contemporary gender issues. This qualitative content analysis examines the portrayal of Olympic women athletes on Instagram, contributing to the literature on self-representation in social media. The study explores how Instagram perpetuates and challenges traditional gender norms and societal perceptions of women athletes, emphasizing its role in shaping public discourse. By focusing on women athletes' self-representation, the research illuminates broader societal trends regarding gender and media representation, contributing to discussions about gender equality in sports and the portrayal of women in the media. The study analysed 25 posts from each of five top women Olympic athletes' Instagram accounts to explore variations in self-objectification, self-sexualization, empowerment, and strength. Visual content analysis identified recurring themes and patterns, offering insights into how women athletes present themselves online. Many posts emphasize nurturing connections, highlighting athletes' roles beyond sports by sharing moments with family, friends, and teammates. Athletes also showcase their style and fashion in an empowering manner, asserting individuality and confidence, while wholesome settings depict engagement in healthy lifestyles, training, and promoting well-being. However, alongside these positive themes, objectification and self-sexualization are evident, possibly influenced by societal expectations and personal choices, illustrating the dual pressures female athletes face in managing public personas. While many posts emphasize strength, empowerment, and a commitment to healthy living, self-sexualization remains significant. This duality in representation highlights the complexity of women athletes' public personas on social media. They use their platforms to showcase athletic prowess, dedication, and achievements while navigating societal pressures towards self-sexualization and objectification. Ultimately, women athletes' self-representation on Instagram represents an ongoing negotiation between empowerment and objectification, balancing messages of strength, empowerment, and healthy lifestyles with societal norms promoting self-sexualization. This study provides insights into the gender dynamics of digital interactions, emphasizing the need for future research with larger, diverse samples and longitudinal studies to capture the evolving nature of online self-representation over time.

KEYWORDS: *Instagram, women athletes, self-representation, objectification, empowerment*

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Introduction

1.1 Background

Sports serve as a major form of physical activity during leisure time, encompassing a wide array of disciplines played both nationally and internationally, however, participation in sports varies widely and is not uniform across different sports or among various demographic groups, including differences in region, age, and gender (Eime et al., 2022, p. 545). Notably, women experience significant inequality in sports participation and representation, highlighting the need to address these disparities and ensure equitable opportunities for all: throughout history, women and girls have not been granted the same opportunities as boys and men to participate in sports (Eime et al., 2022, p. 545). This disparity has resulted in significant gender inequality within the field, which has traditionally existed and continues to persist today. Despite some progress, the gap in access and representation remains substantial, reflecting deep-rooted societal biases and structural barriers that have long favoured male involvement in sports (Spaaij et al., 2015, p. 405). Nevertheless, women continuously try to overcome existing gender-bound barriers within professional sport and to gain respect, equality, and control over their bodies and over the opportunities granted to them compared with their male counterparts (Sherry et al., 2016, p. 301). In the United States, the passing of Title IX in 1972, which prohibited sex-based discrimination in education programs such as sports and physical education, saw nationwide female high school athletics participation jump from 295,000 in 1971 to 2.8 million in 2001 (Bell, 2007, p. 7). Subsequently, the modern sporting landscape is dominated by names such as Serena Williams, Simone Biles, and Caitlin Clark. Furthermore, public interest in women's sports is now at an all-time high, as evidenced by the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup final becoming the most-watched women's sport event of all time, drawing in 21.2 million viewers (Carp & Dixon, 2023). As women continue to assert their presence and influence in sports, studying their online representation provides insights into their efforts to challenge stereotypes, gain recognition, and advocate for gender equality in athletic arenas worldwide.

In spite of the seemingly growing popularity of women's sports and increased participation seen in recent years, women athletes are still subjected to inherently sexist treatment both institutionally and within press coverage (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018, p. 362). Media coverage of women sporting events continues to pale in comparison to men's sports, with less than 2% of all sporting media coverage pertaining to women's sports (Mu & Lennon, 2018, p. 1). Furthermore, women athletics continue to be presented in overly sexualised ways in traditional media (Sherry et al., 2016, p. 301). For example, 77 analyses of print media coverage of the London 2012 Olympic Games found that women athletes were significantly less likely than men to be depicted actively

engaging in their sport but more likely to be shown posing (Godoy-Pressland & Griggs, 2014, p. 14-16). Knoppers and Anthonissen (2008, p. 98), meanwhile, provide evidence that Dutch sporting management and policies pertaining to women's sport are influenced by gender perceptions and that these perceptions systematically restrict progress and change within women's sport. Thus, the present study seeks to add to the emerging and expanding body of research that explores how women athletes portray themselves on Instagram. It aims to provide insights into the various ways these athletes utilise the platform for self-representation, contributing to the broader understanding of their online presence and its implications. By examining their digital self-representation, this study aims to illuminate how women athletes navigate and reshape their public images in a landscape where traditional media often fails to provide equitable coverage. Understanding these dynamics not only enhances our knowledge of how athletes harness social media for empowerment and advocacy but also underscores the ongoing challenges and disparities they face in achieving equal recognition and respect within the sports industry.

The current study is rooted in and closely aligned with feminist theories. Feminism at large advocates for gender equality by highlighting the systematic discrimination and challenges that women face due to their sex (Delmar, 2018, p. 15-18). Meaning that women's specific needs and concerns are frequently overlooked and underserved in societal structures and institutions. Thus, feminism brings awareness about these disparities and promotes meaningful changes to ensure that women receive equitable treatment and opportunities. To consider traditional media and feminism, one can observe that media plays a significant role in maintaining male dominance within sports, not only through the underrepresentation of women athletes but also through various subtle and often unnoticed methods (Fink & Kensicki, 2002, p. 21-23). One such method involves the persistent and disproportionate focus on the non-sporting activities of women athletes, diverting attention away from their athletic accomplishments: this tactic effectively minimises their professional achievements by highlighting personal or lifestyle aspects instead (Fink & Kensicki, 2002, p. 33). Furthermore, television commentators often employ language that diminishes the performance of women athletes, subtly undermining their abilities and reinforcing gender biases (Shugart, 2003, p. 2). In printed media, the selection of overly sexualized images of women athletes exacerbates this issue, as it places greater emphasis on their physical appearance rather than their sporting skills and achievements (Cranmer et al., 2014, p. 159). Collectively, these practices contribute to the trivialization of both women athletes and women's sports overall, perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing a culture that undervalues women's contributions to athletics (Sherry et al., 2016, p. 305). Research indicates that the oversexualization of athletes has a particularly detrimental effect on the perceived competence of female athletes, more so than their male counterparts, further entrenching gender disparities in sports: these patterns of representation not only affect public perception but

also influence the self-perception and career opportunities of women athletes (Nezlek et al., 2015, p. 8).

Talking about feminism and online media, it would be simplistic to assume that social media platforms are inherently aligned with feminist principles, whether considering their technological capabilities, the individuals who use them, or the content that circulates there. Instead, the platforms that foster popular feminist movements exist within a broader landscape where sexism persists, and where the clash between feminist ideals and opposing forces is starkly evident (Willem & Tortajada, 2021, p. 68). Thus, social media serve as arenas where both feminist activism and misogynistic rhetoric coexist and intersect, with observations indicating a simultaneous rise in online communities promoting women's rights alongside groups espousing misogyny (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 264). On the other hand, social media can act as a crucial support network for women who are committed to promoting the overarching goals of acceptance, respect and gender equality, thereby indicating its significant potential to facilitate and amplify feminist discourse within the digital realm (Willem & Tortajada, 2021, p. 70). The act of women portraying themselves online through self-representation can be a powerful tool of empowerment, particularly when it is employed with deliberate political objectives in mind, as noted by Caldeira et al. (2020, p. 2). This intentional utilisation of digital platforms to assert their identities and advocate for social and political change underscores the transformative potential of self-representation in fostering empowerment among women.

As the use of social media continues to rise (Alley et al., 2017, p. 91), many scholars believe that the Internet, and social media in particular, expands and transforms traditional offline communities. It enables people to maintain connections with a greater number of friends, family members, and acquaintances than would have been possible otherwise (Vriens & van Ingen, 2018, p. 2433). One of the most widespread social media platforms is Instagram, which in recent years has been going through a tremendous surge in global popularity, achieving the milestone of over 1 billion active users each month by the beginning of 2018 (Caldeira et al., 2020, p. 1): this rapid growth reflects the platform's extensive appeal and its significant impact on social media landscapes around the world. Platforms like Instagram allow users to generate and share their own content directly with a global audience. Researchers such as Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018, p. 360) have pointed to the feminist potential of such platforms over traditional media, since they allow for the self-representation of women athletes without external influences and on their own terms. Furthermore, women athletes are able to leverage their social media platform to generate income by means of paid promotion and the promotion of any entrepreneurial endeavours (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018, p. 360). More widely, social media platforms such as Instagram therefore have the potential to even the current pay gap between male and female athletes and to allow athletes to foster and enjoy more

intimate connections with their fans (Sherry et al., 2016, p. 306).

As women athletes increasingly turn to social media as a platform for self-promotion and identification, there is a growing need for analytical appraisal of these representations. Such an analysis may shine a light on the pressures that contemporary women athletes face; whilst the platform certainly serves to allow women athletes control over their self-representation, social media posts by women athletes may also inherently reflect societal norms and expectations (Santarossa et al., 2019, p. 30). Self-controlled platforms such as Instagram provide an opportunity for understanding how contemporary women athletes respond to the contradictory freedoms of self-expression versus an understanding of the inherently sexist and misogynistic landscape of the professional sporting landscape (Santarossa et al., 2019, p. 30). In short, by analysing the Instagram posts of women athletes, this research may gain insight not only into the structural and societal pressures they face, but also the way in which they chose to navigate these hurdles.

1.2 Research Questions

This study attempts to contribute to the nascent yet growing body of research (Santarossa et al., 2019, p. 30) examining the way in which women athletes self-represent via Instagram, and will address the following research questions:

Primary Research Question

How do women athletes choose to self-represent via Instagram posts?

Secondary Research Questions

1. How do Instagram posts by women athletes reinforce prevailing gender roles?

2. How do Instagram posts by women athletes contribute to the over-sexualisation of women in sport?

3. How do the Instagram posts of women athletes challenge traditional gender stereotypes within sports?

The above research questions will explore the concepts of objectification, sexualisation, and gender stereotypes within the context of women athletes' portrayal through Instagram. The

subsequent analysis seeks to uncover the extent to which social media, specifically Instagram, perpetuates or challenges traditional gender norms and how it influences societal perceptions of women athletes.

1.3 Research Design

To conduct this analysis, the study will focus on 5 Instagram accounts of top women athletes who have participated in the Olympics. The sample will include 25 posts from each athlete's account to explore variations in the degree of objectification and sexualisation present in these images. In this qualitative study, visual content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79; Walters, 2016, p. 109) will be employed to identify common themes, patterns, and potential variations in the portrayal of women athletes. This approach allows for a detailed examination of visual content to understand how women athletes represent themselves and how they are perceived by their audience.

1.4 Academic and Social Relevance

The study aims to undertake a comprehensive exploration of how contemporary social media platforms, specifically Instagram, serve as crucial arenas for observing and analysing the (self)portrayal and (self)perception of women athletes. This investigation is particularly timely and significant given the documented underrepresentation and sexualization of women athletes in traditional media landscapes (Mu & Lennon, 2018, p. 1; Sherry et al., 2016, p. 305). By shifting the lens to Instagram, a dynamic and rapidly evolving platform, this research seeks to contribute nuanced and up-to-date insights into the evolving gender dynamics within sports media (Darvin & Sagas, 2017, p. 179; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018, p. 360).

In the broader social context, this study holds relevance by shedding light on the persistent challenges faced by women athletes in achieving equitable visibility and recognition in sports (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008, p. 98). Social media platforms play a pivotal role in shaping public narratives and perceptions (Caldeira et al., 2020, p. 1), making it essential to understand how women athletes strategically present themselves in this digital space. Insight into these dynamics not only informs efforts to combat entrenched sexism and promote gender equality within sports but also offers valuable lessons for media literacy and advocacy initiatives aimed at challenging harmful stereotypes and biases.

Academically, this research aims to expand the theoretical and methodological toolkit for studying gender representation in digital environments. By examining how women athletes navigate and negotiate their online identities, the study contributes to advancing our understanding of digital

self-presentation strategies and their implications for feminist discourse and activism. Moreover, it underscores the transformative potential of social media as platforms for empowering marginalised voices and fostering inclusive representations in traditionally male-dominated domains like sports (Locke et al., 2018, p. 4).

By emphasising the intersection of social media, gender dynamics, and sports representation, this study not only addresses current gaps in academic research but also offers practical insights for stakeholders invested in promoting equity and social justice within the sporting community and beyond.

<center>**2. Theoretical framework**</center>

In defining the upcoming chapter focused on theoretical background and relevant theories concerning the self-representation of women athletes on Instagram, this research begins with a thorough exploration of theoretical frameworks and empirical studies pertinent to media representation and gender studies. This comprehensive review encompasses multiple selected theories that offer diverse perspectives, enriching our understanding of how women athletes are portrayed on Instagram, specifically examining issues such as objectification and sexualization, versus self-expression and empowerment. This chapter aims to provide a robust theoretical foundation that will guide the analysis of how women athletes navigate and shape their digital identities within the evolving landscape of social media.

2.1 Background

Considering the relevant theoretical background to the present research, Media and Cultural Studies are important, as these provide valuable insights into the cultural context within which media representations are situated (Brooks & Hébert, 2006, p. 297). Media, in short, is central to what ultimately comes to represent our social realities (Brooks & Hébert, 2006, p. 297). Additionally, in line with the studies of media and culture, we define self-representation as creating media texts: it is a series of conscious choices where we select only the wished aspects to be portrayed (Caldeira et al., 2020, p. 3). Previous empirical research has examined how cultural narratives and societal norms influence the portrayal of gender in media, including sports media: by drawing on media and cultural studies, we can contextualise the portrayal of women athletes on Instagram within broader cultural discourses surrounding gender and athleticism (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018, p. 360). Women are stereotypically associated with self-photography and online self-representation, which can be observed - women are the most active Instagram users and have long been categorised as visually pleasing—"something to look at" (Caldeira et al., 2020, p. 3).

The act of self-representation on social media is multifaceted and does not solely encompass negative intentions and outcomes. In fact, for professional women athletes, social media can serve as a powerful tool for positive self-expression and personal empowerment. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018, p. 360) emphasise that these athletes frequently utilise social media to express self-love, engage in self-disclosure, and promote self-empowerment. By doing so, they assert their agency and independence, carving out a space where they can control their narratives and identities. Empowerment on social media can take many forms. It can be seen in the way athletes openly accept and love their bodies, despite societal pressures and standards. By celebrating their

physicality and unique attributes, they challenge traditional norms and redefine what it means to be a successful and attractive woman in sports. This acceptance and celebration are not merely personal victories but also public declarations that inspire others to embrace their own bodies. Additionally, social media provides a platform for these athletes to celebrate personal choice and individuality. As Banet-Weiser (2017, p. 266) points out, empowerment through social media involves recognizing and exercising one's freedom to make choices that reflect personal values and beliefs. For women athletes, this might mean sharing their training routines, discussing the challenges they face, or highlighting their achievements both on and off the field. Through these acts of self-disclosure, they create authentic connections with their audience and foster a community of support and encouragement. Furthermore, the proactive cultivation of brand visibility on social media allows women athletes to gain greater control over their professional and personal lives. By curating their online presence, they can attract sponsorships, build a loyal fan base, and establish themselves as influential voices within and beyond the sports community (Wiebach, 2022, p. 5). This visibility not only enhances their career opportunities but also empowers them to advocate for causes they believe in, using their platforms to drive social change and promote positive messages. In essence, representing themselves on social media enables professional women athletes to transform what might be perceived as self-objectification into a source of empowerment. It becomes a way to own their narratives, celebrate their individuality, and assert their autonomy in a highly public and influential arena.

In sum, three major theoretical concepts are discussed, which help us gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between individual agency, societal norms, and media representation in the self-representation of female athletes on social media platforms. The concepts include objectification theory which highlights how women are often treated as commodities for the gratification of others, leading to their prioritisation of physical appearance over functional abilities, especially in media portrayals such as sports coverage, which tends to focus on women athletes' attractiveness rather than their skills (Stock, 2015, p. 192). The second major theory of feminism and representation, particularly cyberfeminism, examines how digital spaces perpetuate gender injustices, while intersectional feminism emphasises the interconnected nature of social identities, urging a critical analysis of how different identities shape experiences of objectification (Toto & Scarinci, 2021, p. 137). Lastly, performative gender theory, broadly based on Judith Butler's work, explores how individuals enact and negotiate their gender identities on platforms like Instagram, revealing the performative aspects of gender identity and its implications for objectification and sexualization (Butler, 1988, p. 519-531). Together, these concepts underscore the complex dynamics of gender representation, objectification, and identity in contemporary digital media.

2.2 Objectification theory

Objectification theory, as discussed by Stock (2015, p. 192), provides a crucial framework for understanding how women are often objectified and treated as commodities for others' gratification. This theory emphasises that objectification goes beyond mere treatment of someone as an object; it also involves the power to impose a particular view on them. Sexual objectification is a significant aspect of this, where women are often depicted as submitting to men's sexual needs, and both men and women may eroticize this perceived sexual inferiority (Stock, 2015, p. 193). Stock (2015, p. 194) as well explores another dimension of objectification: treating an individual as an instrument devoid of autonomy, capable of being owned, and disregarding their feelings. This viewpoint connects sexual objectification to gender roles, suggesting that it is not inherently harmful if it occurs within a consensual context where overall autonomy is respected and promoted. For instance, a temporary surrender of autonomy during sex, if consensual, may involve objectification but remains acceptable as long as the individual's overall autonomy is upheld. In terms of studying women athlete self-representation on social media, these concepts of objectification are profoundly important. Objectification theory posits that women frequently experience sexual objectification, with various mechanisms in Western culture subjecting women's bodies to constant scrutiny. This pervasive scrutiny leads many women, including female athletes, to prioritise their physical appearance over the functionality of their bodies (Darvin & Sagas, 2017, p. 180). The repercussions of this emphasis on appearance can be significant. For instance, the sexual objectification of women contributes to the "frailty myth", a concept explored by Darvin and Sagas (2017, p. 180), which suggests that the focus on sexualized portrayals of female bodies results in physical oppression and reinforces feelings of physical limitations among women. Female athletes, who are expected to maintain high physical performance, may find themselves caught between the demands of their sports and the societal pressure to conform to specific beauty standards. By understanding these dynamics, researchers can better appreciate the complex ways in which women athletes navigate their identities on social media. Social media platforms offer these athletes a space to assert their agency, celebrate their bodies, and challenge traditional norms. However, they must also contend with the risk of being objectified and the pressure to present themselves in ways that align with societal expectations of femininity and attractiveness.

In the realm of social identity, an individual's self-concept is significantly influenced by their affiliations with various social groups. This idea, initially put forth by Tajfel and Turner in 1979 (p. 59), highlights the integral role that group membership plays in shaping one's sense of self. For women athletes, this theory can provide insight into how they may navigate and negotiate their identities,

blending elements from both the sports community and the broader societal context. Additionally, in terms of objectification, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), provides a crucial lens through which to examine the experiences of women in society. They suggest that women are often socialised to internalise an observer's perspective on their own bodies, a phenomenon known as self-objectification. Women, including female athletes, may come to view themselves primarily through the lens of how others perceive their physical appearance. This internalisation can have profound implications for their self-esteem, body image, and overall psychological well-being (Klein, 2013, p. 82; Perloff, 2014, p. 375). In the context of women athletes, self-objectification can manifest in various ways, particularly in how they present themselves on social media platforms. Social media has become a prominent stage for self-presentation, offering athletes a direct channel to engage with fans, sponsors, and the public. However, the pressure to conform to societal standards of beauty and femininity can lead women athletes to emphasise their physical appearance over their athletic achievements in their online presence. This might involve sharing images that highlight their attractiveness or adhering to certain beauty standards, sometimes at the expense of showcasing their sports-related skills and accomplishments. The interplay between social identity and objectification underscores the complex dynamics that women athletes navigate in their self-representation. While they strive to be recognized for their athletic talents and contributions to their respective sports, they are simultaneously influenced by societal pressures that prioritise physical attractiveness. This duality can create tension and challenges as women athletes endeavour to maintain a balanced and authentic representation of themselves that honours both their athletic identity and their individual sense of self-worth.

Darvin and Sagas (2017, p. 179) observe the patterns in the sport industry where men and their masculinity are favoured by objectifying women athletes. Here they employ objectification theory which explores the women athlete objectification through sexist language or sexist imagery. In Western society there is a tendency to scrutinise women's bodies which leads them to focus more on their appearance rather than their other abilities. Thus, Darvin and Sagas (2017, p. 180) state that focusing on the looks can lead women athletes to physical oppression, and this practice can be highly detrimental to the realm of sports, as women athletes are frequently lauded for their looks rather than their athletic prowess. They are often depicted in sexualized poses that have no connection to their athletic feats. Female objectification extends into the production of sports events. Women athletes are often depicted with fewer camera angles, special effects, and shot types compared to their male counterparts, as noted by Darvin and Sagas (2017, p. 179). This disparity in representation leads to several harmful outcomes. For instance, the limited and less dynamic portrayal of women athletes negatively influences viewers' perceptions of the events, teams, and the athletes themselves. This skewed portrayal can contribute to reduced media coverage of women's sports,

perpetuating a cycle of underrepresentation. The portrayal of women athletes in a limited and often sexualized manner can have detrimental effects on their self-perception and mental health, as discussed by Grabe et al. (2008, p. 462): these negative representations can lead to the development of a negative body image among women athletes. The constant emphasis on appearance rather than athletic competence encourages them to invest more in their looks, often at the expense of their physical and mental well-being. Moreover, the pervasive objectification and its associated pressures can increase the risk of women athletes endorsing disordered eating behaviours (Grabe et al., 2008, p. 463). The societal and media-driven focus on maintaining a particular body image can lead to unhealthy eating habits and an overemphasis on weight and appearance, which not only affects their performance and health but also reinforces harmful stereotypes about female athletes and women in general (Grabe et al., 2008, p. 463). The consequences of such objectification are far-reaching. They extend beyond individual athletes to impact the broader perception and valuation of women's sports. By portraying female athletes through fewer and less varied visual techniques, media producers contribute to a narrative that undervalues their athletic prowess and achievements: this underrepresentation and misrepresentation can discourage young girls from participating in sports, perpetuating gender disparities in athletic involvement and recognition (Darvin & Sagas, 2017, p. 181).

Research into female (self)representation on social media is important: as Darvin and Sagas (2017, p. 181) point out, while policies are being implemented to prevent differences between judging women and men in sports, media coverage and representation, as well as perceptions, have not changed and still push forward the harmful narrative and focus on women athlete appearance. Researchers also mention that prior studies have found that the gendered portrayal in sports media and the use of discriminatory language can dissuade women from engaging in spheres historically controlled by men, meaning that by using sexist language one gives way for others to act in ways that further male preference and subordination of women, as well as perpetuate gender stereotypes and status differences (Darvin & Sagas, 2017, p. 179; Goffman, 1959). In the end, sexist language discourages women from feeling comfortable entering the area of activity altogether (Darvin & Sagas, 2017, p. 181). Sporting event broadcasts, described as mediated experiences, use commentary, visual production, and special effects to shape viewers' perceptions (Cummins, 2009, p. 386). Stuart Hall's (2010) encoding and decoding theory explains how media messages are created by producers and interpreted differently by viewers, affecting how they perceive the quality of athletes and teams. High-quality production can enhance perceived athletic ability, while poor production can diminish it. This disparity is crucial when studying women athlete self-representation on social media. Women athletes often receive less sophisticated production in traditional media, which can undervalue their performances (Darvin & Sagas, 2017, p. 180). On social media, they have the

opportunity to control their narratives, using self-presentation to counteract these biases (Wiebach, 2022, p. 4). Understanding these mediated experiences underscores the importance of social media as a platform for women athletes to assert their agency and challenge traditional underrepresentation.

Studies have found that women's sports coverage has declined over the years, with significant gender gaps in the type and amount of coverage (Sainz-de-Baranda et al., 2020, p. 5199). For example, male sports dominate lead stories in broadcasts, and female athletes are often relegated to non-contact sports, reinforcing gender stereotypes. When women athletes do receive coverage, it often focuses on their appearance, femininity, and heterosexuality; in contrast, male athletes are portrayed as powerful and independent (Darvin & Sagas, 2017, p. 185). This type of coverage perpetuates gender stereotypes and affects public perception of women athletes. Additionally, the use of sexist language in sports media contributes to the marginalisation of women in sports: terms like "girl" or "lady" can infantilize and demean women athletes, while male athletes are typically referred to by their last names, signifying maturity and authority. Such language reinforces traditional gender roles and undermines the status of women athletes. Overall, the media's portrayal of women athletes, through biassed production techniques and sexist language, maintains gender inequality in sports and shapes public perception in ways that disadvantage women (Darvin & Sagas, 2017, p. 192).

In addition to the objectification theory, Hoffman (2012) defines self-objectification as treating oneself in some way as just an object or a machine – a thing to manipulate rather than reason with. According to Hoffman, self-objectification is morally problematic: it devalues and disrespects the person. This can be seen as a problematic definition, because whatever one does to oneself is an instance of exercising one's autonomy and self-determination (Wiebach, 2022, p. 6). However, we can adhere to Hoffman's assertion that self-objectification entails treating oneself in a manner reminiscent of actions typically directed towards mere objects. Hoffman (2012), though as well considers the possibility of seeing self-objectification as denial of autonomy, which makes it seem contradictory to the above, as it entails treating oneself as lacking autonomy, since exercising any form of self-treatment is an act of autonomy. Similarly, denying one's subjectivity seems impossible because such denial presupposes the existence of one's mental states. However, by revising the definition of objectification of Hoffman (2012), its limitations can be addressed, as objectification can also involve treating specific aspects of one's mental features as mere objects. This graded approach makes self-objectification feasible. Thus, self-objectification can be defined as treating oneself in a manner that tends towards treatment appropriate only to mere objects.

While athletes may find it freeing to share more of their personalities on social media, Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory suggests that individuals are often strategic in how they

present themselves, balancing their personal objectives with the expectations of their audience (Smith & Sanderson, 2015, p. 350). The public image of athletes is critical, as it significantly influences their ability to secure endorsements and negotiate contracts (Smith & Sanderson, 2015, p. 354). Female athletes on Instagram can combine visual elements with textual narratives to effectively convey their image, enhancing their personal brand. This approach not only extends their influence beyond their athletic careers but also makes them appealing to sponsors and business opportunities, promoting empowerment and countering objectification (Wiebach, 2022, p. 5). Research indicates that women athletes use their platforms to convey empowering messages and serve as role models, rather than focusing solely on social justice issues: their personal brands and the associations linked to the "athlete brand" amplify the visibility and impact of their messages (Wiebach, 2022, p. 5). Instead of focusing on body image, these athletes use visual content to present a successful and multifaceted feminine identity through heroic portrayals and personal stories. This demonstrates that social media representation can be positive and beneficial, serving as a powerful tool for self-empowerment and influence. The current research into women athlete self-representation on Instagram underscores how these athletes navigate their public image to empower themselves and others, showing the potential for social media to challenge objectification and promote positive self-representation.

2.3 Feminism and representation in the media

It is essential to highlight the concept of cyberfeminism, which explores the intersection of feminism and technology (Toto & Scarinci, 2021, p. 137). Cyberfeminist scholars investigate how digital spaces influence gendered norms and perpetuate gender injustices, shaping the portrayal of women athletes on media platforms like Instagram (Newell, 2022, p. 31). This perspective provides valuable insights into the technological dimensions of objectification and sexualization online, revealing how media can create new forms of both objectification and empowerment (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012, p. 307). Given the extensive use of technology and social media, it is crucial to understand how these platforms perpetuate and exacerbate self-objectification and representation issues. As women are increasingly fixated on their sexual appearances that are driven by the unattainable standards promoted by image-sharing platforms, social media websites encourage women to strive for an unrealistic "perfect" look, shaped and reinforced by technology (Gul et al., 2020, p. 13). Research also indicates that virtual worlds are gendered spaces: women continue to be portrayed as interactive sex objects in virtual environments, leading to increased self-objectification and broader negative attitudes toward women (Fox et al., 2014, p. 195). Pech-Garrigou (2015) adds

that the objectification of women in virtual spaces results in higher chances of sexual harassment. Delving deeper into the issue of women's sexual objectification on social media, the concept of intersectional feminism enriches our analysis by emphasising the interconnected nature of social identities (Cho et al., 2013, p. 785). Empirical research underscores the importance of considering intersecting factors such as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status in understanding the experiences of women athletes (Newell, 2022, p. 35). Additionally, the representation of queer athletes enhances relatability for a broader segment of society (Locke et al., 2018, p. 4). By incorporating intersectional feminism into our theoretical framework, we acknowledge the diverse ways in which objectification and sexualization manifest for women with different social identities. In relation to our research on women athlete self-representation on Instagram, these perspectives highlight the multifaceted challenges and opportunities these athletes face. While they navigate the pressures of self-presentation and potential objectification, they also have the power to reshape narratives and empower themselves and others. Understanding the dynamics of cyberfeminism and intersectionality is crucial in analysing how women athletes use Instagram not only to build their personal brands but also to challenge gender norms and promote positive self-representation.

Postfeminism (Rumens, 2017; Ortner, 2016) and Third-Wave Feminism (Snyder, 2008) intersect in their examination of contemporary gender dynamics and women's agency. Postfeminism encourages a critical analysis of claims regarding gender equality in modern society, questioning whether improvements in media representation, including sports media, have led to genuine progress or if they merely obscure ongoing gender inequalities (Ortner, 2016, p. 121). This perspective compels us to scrutinise how notions of empowerment intersect with the objectification and sexualization of female athletes on Instagram. In contrast, Third-Wave Feminism emphasises the importance of individual agency and diversity within feminist thought, focusing on the active role of female athletes in navigating and negotiating their gender identities in digital spaces like Instagram (Snyder, 2008, p. 189). Third-Wave Feminism recognizes that women are not a monolithic group and highlights the varied and nuanced ways they engage with feminism, allowing for a more personalised and intersectional approach to gender issues. Integrating both Postfeminist and Third-Wave Feminist perspectives enables a comprehensive exploration of how women athletes both navigate and challenge traditional gender norms: it allows for a nuanced understanding of how women athletes on Instagram can both reinforce and resist postfeminist discourses. On one hand, these athletes may reinforce traditional gender norms through self-objectification and sexualization in pursuit of social validation and commercial success. On the other hand, they can resist these norms by using their platforms to promote messages of empowerment, authenticity, and diversity. The present research on women athlete self-representation on Instagram is deeply informed by these feminist perspectives. Women athletes are at the intersection of powerful cultural and commercial forces that

shape their public personas. Through self-presentation on Instagram, they can both conform to and challenge societal expectations. This duality is evident in how they use their platforms: while some posts may cater to traditional beauty standards and commercial interests, others may highlight their athletic achievements, personal struggles, and advocacy for social causes. Postfeminism helps us critique the superficial aspects of empowerment that might mask deeper gender inequalities, while Third-Wave Feminism offers a lens to appreciate the individual agency and diversity of women athletes' experiences. This integrated approach allows for a critical yet empathetic examination of how women athletes on Instagram manage their public images, offering insights into the broader implications for gender equality in sports media. By recognizing and analysing these complexities, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways in which women athletes use social media to navigate and potentially transform gender norms in the sports industry.

Considering these progressive feminist views, it begins with a well-documented observation: across diverse countries and cultural contexts, traditional media outlets such as print, television, magazines, and sports news have consistently favoured male athletic endeavours over women's sporting pursuits (Darvin & Sagas, 2017, p. 191). Research indicates that compared to their male counterparts, female athletes and women's sports receive limited exposure and lower-quality coverage (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2008, p. 98). When women's sports are covered, women athletes are often aestheticized, sexualized, and trivialised, and such representational tactics reinforce gender differences, as well as uphold masculine privilege in sports by positioning women athletes as inferior to a male standard (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 364). Yet, recent studies suggest that social media offers a unique platform for women athletes to take control of their representation, enabling them to challenge and subvert entrenched stereotypes in sports media (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 364; Wiebach, 2022, p. 6). In the context of our research on women athlete self-representation on Instagram, these progressive feminist views underscore the importance of understanding how women athletes navigate and negotiate their identities in digital spaces. Instagram can then provide women athletes with the tools to craft their narratives, highlight their athletic achievements, and promote messages of empowerment. The platform gives space to present themselves in ways that challenge traditional gender norms and resist the objectifying tendencies of traditional media. By examining the content women athletes share on Instagram, our research aims to explore how they utilise this platform to represent themselves. This includes analysing how they balance personal and professional aspects of their lives, and how they use visual elements to assert their agency. This research allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences of women athletes and how they navigate their identities in a digital age. In conclusion, integrating these feminist perspectives into the research on women athlete self-representation on Instagram highlights the potential of social media as a tool for empowerment. While traditional media has often

failed to provide equitable and respectful coverage of women athletes (Darvin & Sagas, 2017, p. 179), platforms like Instagram may offer new opportunities for women to take control of their narratives, challenge objectification, and promote a more inclusive and diverse representation of women in sports. Through this research, the aim is to contribute to the broader discourse on gender equality in sports media and highlight the transformative potential of social media for women athletes.

Social media serves as a pivotal platform for women athletes to converge and forge a collective identity rooted in their athleticism: digital presence enables them to challenge and dismantle entrenched perceptions that sports primarily belong to men (Heinecken, 2015, p. 15). Concurrently, Third-Wave Feminism seeks to disrupt the rigid constructs of earlier feminist theories, advocating for embracing complexity, multiplicity, and a non-judgmental approach to women's cultural expressions (Snyder, 2008, p. 194). This perspective urges a departure from traditional gender, sexuality, and race binaries, highlighting the limitations imposed by narrow definitions of feminism that fail to accommodate its diverse and personal meanings to individual feminists (Snyder, 2008, p. 191; Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 366). In the context of media representation, Third-Wave Feminism also explores how visual imagery can simultaneously empower and constrain, acknowledging that images can convey both agency and objectification depending on the context and intent behind their creation (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 366). As contemporary young women navigate a landscape dominated by mass media and digital technology, they perceive themselves as more adept and knowledgeable in media literacy compared to previous generations of feminists, and this awareness underscores the evolving role of social media in shaping feminist discourse and challenging traditional norms of representation (Snyder, 2008, p. 194). For our research on women athlete self-representation on Instagram, Third-Wave Feminism is particularly pertinent. It advocates for an inclusive feminism that embraces diversity in race, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status, while celebrating individual uniqueness (Snyder, 2008, p. 194). This approach fosters social change by offering a post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality, emphasising the intersectionality of cultural identities (Kavanagh et al., 2019, p. 554). By integrating Third-Wave Feminism into our framework, we aim to explore how women athletes on Instagram navigate their public personas, challenge stereotypes, and assert their agency in a digital era. This exploration not only contributes to understanding the complexities of feminist theory in contemporary contexts but also sheds light on the transformative potential of social media for promoting gender equality and diversity in sports representation.

2.4 Performative gender

Final theoretical framework concept of this research highly relies on Judith Butler's performativity theory (1988). This view offers insights into the performative aspects of gender identity online. By integrating performative gender theory into the present analysis, it is explored how women athletes perform their gender on Instagram. The concept of performative gender is central to understanding women athlete self-representation on Instagram. Studies indicate that social networking sites promote a sexualized self-representation through photographs, subjecting young women to conflicting pressures, and this may result in them presenting themselves attractively to avoid negative judgement, thereby performing societal gender expectations (McGregor, 2015). This idealised self-presentation aligns with gender norms, cultural narratives, and societal discourses. Research, particularly by McGregor (2015), highlights that young women strive to achieve an "ideal self" based on traditional femininity. In the context of our current research on women athlete self-representation on Instagram, these insights are crucial, as they reveal how gender performance and societal expectations shape the way women athletes present themselves online. Instagram, with its visual emphasis, becomes a stage where these athletes navigate and negotiate their identities, balancing between personal authenticity and societal pressures. This exploration contributes to understanding the complexities of gender performance in digital spaces and highlights the role of social media in both reinforcing and challenging traditional gender norms. In addition, Judith Butler (1988, p. 526) argues that gender is not a stable identity but rather an ongoing performance, constituted through repeated acts, which posits that gender identity is created through the continuous stylization of the body, making it appear as a natural and stable identity. In terms of women athletes on Instagram, when we consider performativity theory's claim that gender representation is constructed through their posts which are performative acts, we observe that these acts for women are not merely expressions of a pre-existing gender identity but are the very means through which such identities are constituted and believed by both the audience and the athletes themselves (Butler, 1988, p. 27). Therefore, the way women athletes present themselves on Instagram, including instances of objectification and sexualization, can be understood as part of the stylized repetition of acts that constitute their gender identity. The relevance of this performative gender concept lies in its potential to reveal the constructed nature of gender norms and the ways they can be challenged and transformed: since gender identity is seen as a series of repeated acts, there is room for subversive performances that can disrupt traditional gender norms (Butler, 1988, p. 527). For women athletes, this means that their Instagram posts, which often conform to societal expectations of femininity and attractiveness, could also be avenues for resisting and redefining these norms. Performative gender theory is important to consider for our study, as it shifts the focus from viewing gender as an inherent attribute to understanding it as a performative and socially constructed identity: it is crucial to consider how women athletes might use their social media

presence to either reinforce or challenge objectification and sexualization (Butler, 1988, p. 525). By acknowledging the performative nature of gender, researchers can better analyse the complexities of self-representation and the potential for cultural change through individual and collective acts of gender performance. In conclusion, the performative gender concept underscores the constructed and potentially mutable nature of gender identities. For women athletes on Instagram, this means their representations are not just reflections of their gender but active constructions that can both perpetuate and challenge objectification and sexualization norms. Understanding this can help in developing strategies to promote more empowering and diverse representations of women athletes (Butler, 1988, p. 530).

Performative gender theory underscores the significance of social sanctions and taboos in shaping gender identity, highlighting that gender is a construct maintained through repetitive actions (Butler, 1988, p. 27). Thus, gender presentation is inherently performative, suggesting that the potential for gender transformation lies in the ability to challenge and subvert these established norms (McGregor, 2015). By viewing gender as a performative accomplishment, we can scrutinise how entrenched and naturalised gender concepts are created and how they can be altered. Feminist and phenomenological perspectives enhance this understanding by differentiating between sex and gender, emphasising that gender is a cultural interpretation of bodily existence: the body is not merely a biological entity but an active participant in embodying cultural meanings, influenced by historical and societal contexts (Mikkola, 2024). Consequently, gender identity is not fixed but is continually realised through bodily acts, which are constrained by historical conventions and social expectations (Lennon & Fischer, 2024). In the realm of women athlete self-representation on Instagram, performative gender theory provides a crucial framework for understanding how these athletes navigate and negotiate gendered expectations. Their self-representation on this platform reflects a complex interplay of societal norms, personal agency, and cultural perceptions of gender (Mikkola, 2024; Lennon & Fischer, 2024). This dynamic process offers both positive and negative outcomes. On the positive side, Instagram allows women athletes to assert their identities, showcase their achievements, and challenge traditional gender norms. By curating their own content, they can present a multifaceted image that goes beyond the stereotypes often perpetuated by mainstream media. This self-representation can empower women athletes, providing them with a sense of control over their public personas and enabling them to inspire others by breaking gender barriers in sports. However, there are also negative aspects to consider. The pressure to conform to societal standards of attractiveness and femininity can lead to self-objectification and the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. Women athletes may feel compelled to present themselves in ways that align with traditional gender norms to gain social approval or attract sponsorships, thereby perpetuating the very stereotypes they seek to challenge. The performative nature of social media can sometimes

reduce complex identities to simplistic visual narratives, which might not fully capture the athletes' true selves (McGregor, 2015). The focus on visual aesthetics and consumer tastes can overshadow their athletic prowess, shifting the emphasis from their skills and achievements to their appearance and lifestyle. Ultimately, performative gender theory offers a nuanced lens through which to analyse the self-representation of women athletes on Instagram. It reveals the intricate and ongoing negotiation between societal pressures and individual agency, illustrating how gendered identities are both constructed and contested in digital spaces.

2.5 Summary

This chapter has examined the self-representation of women athletes on Instagram through the intertwined background of Media and Cultural Studies, objectification theory, and feminist theories, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of sexualization and objectification. Media and Cultural Studies highlight how media representations shape social realities, with women athletes selectively portraying aspects influenced by cultural narratives and societal norms. An added component of social identity perspective explains how these athletes align their self-representation with both the sports community and broader societal expectations. Objectification theory reveals how women internalise an observer's perspective, leading to self-objectification that emphasises physical appearance over athletic ability. Cyberfeminism explores how digital spaces perpetuate gender injustices, while intersectional feminism emphasises the diverse experiences of women athletes based on race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Postfeminism and Third-Wave Feminism investigate the negotiation of gender identities and challenge traditional norms on platforms like Instagram. Finally, performative gender theory suggests that women athletes' Instagram posts are performative acts that construct their gender identity, capable of both reinforcing and challenging established norms. Together, these theories elucidate the complex interplay between individual agency, societal norms, and media representation, ultimately highlighting the potential of social media to both perpetuate and disrupt traditional gender stereotypes and promote more diverse and empowering representations of women athletes.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

To investigate self-objectification and self-sexualization versus empowerment and tackling stereotypical feminine self-representation among women Olympic athletes on Instagram, a qualitative research design was implemented. A qualitative content analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was chosen for its capacity to subjectively interpret data through systematic coding and theme identification. Qualitative methods are regularly utilised for interpreting both written text and visual input in depth, seeking to uncover themes and meanings (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 121). This approach aligns with the qualitative research rationale, emphasising depth, context, subjective interpretation, and flexibility - especially in regard to the research question, sampling size, data collection method, as well as approaches to meaning generation (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 2). Qualitative research is rooted in data and considers the context of the visuals analysed, making it more suitable than quantitative methods for understanding the complex meanings and multifaceted phenomena present in social media posts (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 122). By delving deeply into athletes' Instagram posts, we aimed to uncover nuanced insights often overlooked by quantitative methods. This approach allows to answer the research question and sub-questions, focusing on how women athletes choose to self-represent via Instagram posts and examining the intricate ways in which they navigate self-objectification and self-sexualization on this platform, as well as portray empowering messages. This comprehensive qualitative analysis provided a more holistic understanding of the athletes' self-representation, contributing valuable perspectives to the ongoing discourse on gender and media in sports.

Thematic analysis (TA) is a technique used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns or themes within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 1), which in this case focuses on women Olympic athlete Instagram posts. Unlike other qualitative methods, TA is flexible and not tied to any specific theoretical framework: this versatility means it can be used within various theoretical perspectives and research paradigms. TA systematically generates codes and themes from qualitative data, where codes represent the smallest units of interesting data relevant to the research question. These codes build up to form themes, which are larger patterns of meaning with a central organising concept. Themes help in structuring and presenting the researcher's analytical insights. The purpose of TA is not just to summarise the data but to interpret key features, influenced by the evolving research question. The process emphasises thorough and high-quality analysis, often involving a two-stage review for quality assurance. TA is useful for identifying patterns in data related to participants'

experiences, perspectives, behaviours, and practices, aiming to understand what participants think, feel, and do.

In this study, Walters' (2016) coding process for visual features was incorporated since Braun and Clarke's approach focuses primarily on textual data. TA is particularly effective for analysing media data, including social media posts (Walters, 2016, p. 111). Previous feminist research has also successfully employed this method (Schlenker et al., 1998, p. 138). The six-phase thematic coding analysis outlined by Clarke and Braun (2013) was utilised, encompassing a detailed description of the sample and data collection process, the sensitising concepts, and the specifics of the data analysis. Additionally, important aspects regarding the credibility of the research will be discussed in the following sections. This comprehensive approach ensures a thorough and nuanced understanding of the data, particularly in the context of women athletes' self-representation on Instagram.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

A sample of 125 meticulously curated posts (see Appendix B) from five women Olympic athletes' Instagram accounts were chosen to ensure a comprehensive representation of their social media activity. The athletes selected were Simone Biles, Allyson Felix, Janja Garnbret, Sha'Carri Richardson, and Yusra Mardini. These athletes were chosen because they had a high volume and diverse range of posts, in terms of differing settings, activities and environments. A list of women Olympic athletes was compiled using Google. Subsequently, their Instagram profiles were reviewed to determine whether the quantity and diversity of content were adequate for data collection and analysis. From each profile, 25 posts were selected to capture a diverse range of content, both professional and personal, facilitating the identification of instances of self-objectification and sexualization. Given Instagram's visual nature, qualitative content analysis was particularly suited for analysing the data, enabling the recognition of patterns and themes within the athletes' posts.

In qualitative research, a small, intentionally chosen sample is often used to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 653). Purposive sampling is employed to select participants who are most likely to provide relevant and valuable information, thus maximising the efficiency of limited research resources, and unlike random sampling, purposive sampling is a deliberate strategy to ensure that specific types of cases are included in the final sample (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 654) . This method is based on the premise that, given the study's aims and objectives, certain individuals may have unique and significant perspectives on the topics being explored, making their inclusion essential (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 654).

To examine how women athletes identify and self-represent in terms of objectification versus empowerment on Instagram, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established for data collection. The data inclusion criteria focused on several key aspects: the type of content, which had to be Instagram posts made by women Olympic athletes; the visuals, which required clear images of the athlete with a focus on their self-representation; the context, ensuring the athlete was prominently featured, excluding images of others or generic photos; the relevance, targeting posts suitable for analysis of self-sexualization, self-objectification or empowerment, encompassing both sports-related and personal content; and the activity level of the athletes, prioritising accounts with a high volume and variety of posts. Conversely, the data exclusion criteria eliminated posts that did not meet the visual and contextual requirements. Non-visual posts, such as those containing only text or lacking clear images, were excluded. Irrelevant content, which included posts not featuring the athlete or unrelated to their self-presentation, such as promotional content for products without the athlete's image, was also excluded. Ambiguous images, where the athlete was not clearly identifiable, such as in large group photos, were not considered. Additionally, repeated content, including duplicate or re-shared posts, was excluded to avoid redundancy. By applying these criteria, the research aimed to gather a comprehensive set of Instagram posts that accurately reflect how women athletes choose to represent themselves, allowing for an in-depth analysis of themes related to objectification and empowerment.

3.3 Sensitising Concepts

The research was conducted using an inductive approach instead of a deductive one, which facilitated the emergence of themes directly from the material rather than being shaped by theoretical preconceptions (Walters, 2016, p. 109). It is important to note, however, that no research can be entirely inductive, as it is impossible for researchers to work in a complete epistemological vacuum (Walters, 2016, p. 109). This approach is fundamentally data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 108).Thus, literature was consulted to identify sensitising concepts, which provide guidance for our data collection, though, one keeps an open mind for patterns that do not necessarily fit into those concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 77). The five identified sensitising concepts are described in the following paragraphs.

To begin with, the research was guided by the use of the definition of Feminism: an aim for gender equality by tackling the systemic biases and obstacles women face due to their gender (Delmar, 2018, p. 18). Social media, particularly Instagram, has become a powerful tool in this regard (Willem & Tortajada, 2021, p. 68). As social media continues to grow in popularity (Alley et al., 2017, p. 92), platforms like Instagram have transformed traditional offline communities, enabling users to

maintain broader and more diverse connections with friends, family, and acquaintances (Vriens & van Ingen, 2018, p. 2435). Instagram allows users to create and share content globally, offering women athletes the opportunity to represent themselves without external pressures, thereby enabling them to challenge traditional media narratives (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018, p. 364). Which leads to another sensitising concept - Self-representation, through which women can use social media to project their identities and advocate for social change, showcasing its potential as a powerful empowerment tool (Caldeira et al., 2020, p. 4). Self-representation involves deliberate choices in creating media content, highlighting specific aspects of oneself (Caldeira et al., 2020, p. 4). Furthermore, (Self)empowerment, part of the five identified sensitising concepts, is the outcome of women athletes leveraging social media to express self-love, disclose personal experiences, and promote empowerment, asserting control over their narratives and redefining their roles in sports (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018, p. 365). This empowerment is evident in athletes' celebration of their bodies and unique attributes, challenging societal norms and inspiring others to do the same (Banet-Weiser, 2017, p. 266).

Self-sexualisation, an additional sensitising term, refers to attempts to create sexual appeal using words, images, or actions aimed at evoking sexual thoughts or arousal in an audience (Lawrence et al., 2021, p. 693). Self-objectification, last sensitising concept of this research, involves seeing oneself as an object for others' pleasure, leading women to focus more on appearance than abilities, a trend prevalent in media portrayals of women athletes (Stock, 2015, p. 194). These sensitising concepts form the foundation of our research, exploring how women athletes navigate their self-representation on Instagram, balancing empowerment and societal expectations.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed as the qualitative method of choice due to its capacity to identify, analyse, and report patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). This method facilitated the exploration of complex issues like self-sexualization and self-objectification, as well as empowerment. This was done with the help of systematic coding which was performed to organise and identify significant themes, focusing on recurring patterns essential for understanding broader trends in the athletes' posts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). An exploratory research approach allowed for open-ended inquiry, generating insights and hypotheses rather than testing them. Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 86) Six Step Data Analysis Process was utilised for its structured approach to thematic analysis, guiding the systematic categorization of visual and textual elements present in the Instagram posts. To discuss more in depth, in the following paragraphs, the analysis stages will be described, according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 86).

The analysis commenced with phase one: familiarising oneself with the dataset, which comprised 125 Instagram posts from the accounts of five well-established Olympic women athletes. Each post was meticulously examined multiple times to fully grasp the content of the images and the intricate details within them. The visual data was then translated into written text using descriptive wording to facilitate the subsequent coding phase.

In phase two, once all descriptive terms were documented, a table of code words was constructed. These codes encapsulated all noteworthy attributes of the images, including objects, subjects, observed descriptive features, and other significant elements that could be textually described and were pertinent to the research. This coding process was carried out manually. Each image was re-examined multiple times to ensure thoroughness and accuracy. Any new details observed during these reviews, if relevant, were added to the code table. This rigorous process culminated in a comprehensive list of 137 codes.

Phase three involved organising these 137 codes by identifying relationships among them. Codes that were related to each other were grouped under a collective theme, for instance, such as "Sexualised Poses." This theme, which unified several related codes, later became a sub-theme under a broader theme called "Body Language and Expressions: Expressive Posing vs. Sexualized Posing." A hierarchical tree- type table (see Table 1 and Appendix A) was created to document the occurrence of these codes and the various groups and themes they formed. Sub-themes and overarching themes were subsequently identified and refined through this process.

In phase four, the sub-themes and main themes were reviewed and refined into clearer and more specific concepts and terms. Efforts were made to ensure that these themes accurately reflected the dataset and aligned with the objectives of the research.

During phase five, the main themes were cross-checked against the theoretical framework, sensitising concepts, and existing research literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). This phase involved naming the final main themes and their corresponding sub-themes.

The sixth and final phase focused on detailing the analysis and results. A coding tree emerged, outlining 14 sub-themes and ultimately 4 main themes. Exemplary codes were provided to illustrate the research analysis (see Table 1). The data proved to be a representative demonstration of the prevailing themes relevant to the study. It is important to note that analysis does not follow a straightforward, step-by-step progression from one phase to the next; rather, it is a recursive process, involving continual back-and-forth movement through the various phases as necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86).

3.5 Credibility

The implications of this study are expected to provide preliminary insights into the phenomenon of self-sexualization and self-objectification, as well as patterns of empowerment, among women Olympic athletes on Instagram. The findings may help generate other hypotheses for future research, laying the groundwork for more detailed, hypothesis-driven studies. The focus of this research is gaining a broad understanding of the patterns and themes, rather than providing conclusive evidence or generalizable results.

In addition, to maintain validity and reliability of the research, the sampling and six-phased coding processes as the method of the study are elaborately detailed in the preceding sections. This thorough, step-by-step explanation aims to make the data analysis transparent, comprehensive, and dependable, thereby enabling replication of the research process: by following these six phases, others should be able to achieve similar results, ensuring consistency and robustness in the findings (Silverman, 2011).

The main benefits of content analysis are unobtrusive data collection, where one can analyse content without the direct involvement of participants. Most importantly, this means that the presence of the researcher does not influence the results. This method is also transparent and replicable: when done properly, content analysis follows a systematic procedure that can be easily performed and replicated by other researchers, yielding results with high reliability. In addition, content analysis is a very flexible method - the analysis can be performed at any time, at any location and at low cost - everything you need is access to the right resources (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). However, there are disadvantages to content analysis. It's reductive – focusing on certain details on their own can sometimes be overly restrictive, disregarding context, nuance, and ambiguous meanings. It is both subjective and almost always involves some degree of subjective interpretation, which can affect reliability and the validity of the results and conclusions, leading to researcher bias and cognitive bias: for example, the inclination to perceive patterns in random data, known as apophenia, or the predisposition to emphasise evidence that aligns with existing beliefs, called confirmation bias, which both can influence specific analytical decisions and result in the selective presentation of results deemed suitable for publication (Baldwin et al., 2022, p. 1). Finally, it may be time-intensive - manually coding large amounts of text is extremely time-consuming and can be difficult to automate effectively.

Validity and Reliability Considerations

To ensure validity, we consider credibility which can be achieved through detailed documentation of the coding process, triangulation, and seeking feedback from peers or experts in the field. As well, we try to assure transferability: providing rich, thick descriptions of the context and findings to allow

others to assess the applicability to different settings. Reliability, on the other hands, depends on consistency and dependability: we ensure consistency in coding by using a well-defined coding scheme (see Appendix A) and dependability comes when we document the research process in detail, including any changes made during the study, to allow for replication or review by other researchers.

By following these steps and considerations, the qualitative visual content analysis can achieve a high level of validity and reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93; Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297 (1)), providing meaningful and insightful findings regarding self-sexualization and self-objectification in Instagram posts of women Olympic athletes.

4. Results

   This chapter presents and discusses the results of the current visual thematic analysis, identifying four themes that address the secondary research questions: "How do Instagram posts by women athletes reinforce prevailing gender roles?", "How do Instagram posts by women athletes contribute to the over-sexualisation of women in sport?" and "How do the Instagram posts of women athletes challenge traditional gender stereotypes within sports?"

   The first theme, "Body Language and Expressions: Expressive Posing vs. Sexualized Posing", examines the poses and facial expressions of women athletes. This theme explores whether the athletes' poses are self-sexualizing or challenge feminine stereotypes. The second theme, "Contextual Backdrops: Neutral Settings versus Sensual Environments", investigates the settings of the posts, highlighting whether they promote objectifying self-representations or foster healthy, neutral associations. The third theme, "Fashion Choices: Empowering Style versus Self-Sexualizing Attire", focuses on the athletes' clothing choices, analysing whether their attire is provocative and sexual or modest and normally stereotyped as "masculine". The fourth and final theme, "Showcasing Relationships: Nurturing Connections versus Objectifying Social Dynamics", looks at the portrayal of relationships in the posts. This theme distinguishes between images that depict nurturing, traditional feminine roles and those that sexualize or objectify women, presenting them as "attributes" to men. The table below outlines the themes, sub-themes, and examples of codes, which will be further elaborated upon in this chapter.

Table 1

Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Subtheme	Code example
Theme 1. Body Language and Expressions: Expressive Posing vs. Sexualized Posing	Sexualised and objectifying poses	Showing cleavage
	Sexualised and objectifying expressions	Puckered lips
	Expressive and empowering	Serious facial expression

Theme 2. Contextual Backdrops: Neutral Settings vs. Sensual Environments	Active lifestyle	Car present
	Using props for sensual appeal	Silk gloves
	Sensual or objectifying environments	In the bathtub
	Neutral or empowering settings	Nature in the background
Theme 3. Fashion choices: empowering style vs. self-sexualising attire	Enhancing feminine appearance	Loose hair
	Accentuating sexual appeal	Wearing heels
	Highlighting physical attributes	Tight shirt
	Self-sexualising attire	Tight dress
	Empowering style	Covering clothes
Theme 4. Showcasing Relationships: Nurturing vs. Objectifying Social Dynamics	Potentially objectifying interactions	Man touching woman's buttocks
	Nurturing roles	Playing with a child

4.1 Body Language and Expressions: Expressive Posing versus Sexualized Posing

"Expressive Posing vs. Sexualized Posing" (3 sub-themes and 25 codes in total) focuses on how body language, facial expressions, and poses contribute to Olympic women athletes' self-representation. Expressions and poses that are playful, serious, or relaxed highlight personality and character, presenting the athletes in a non-sexualized, empowering light. These representations emphasise their individuality and personal qualities, contributing to a more rounded and authentic

portrayal. However, sexualized expressions and poses are also prevalent. Poses that highlight physical attributes or suggest seduction, such as showing the tongue, puckering the lips, and making playful poses, can contribute to self-objectification. This pattern indicates that while women athletes often use their platform to showcase their personality and strengths, there is a simultaneous pressure to conform to sexualized standards of beauty and desirability.

The first sub-theme, "sexualised and objectifying poses" (7 codes), addresses how women athletes present themselves on Instagram in ways that emphasise sexuality and objectification. Codes such as "showing cleavage" and "leaning on a man" (see Figure 1 and 2) are indicative of how these posts can reinforce prevailing gender roles by portraying women as sexual objects or as accessories to men. Fasoli et al. (2018) argue that sensual poses significantly heighten sexualization, leading to increased perceptions of objectification and sexualization by viewers (p. 343). This aligns with the secondary research question: "How do Instagram posts by women athletes reinforce prevailing gender roles?". By adopting such poses, women athletes may inadvertently perpetuate traditional gender norms that view women primarily through a lens of sexual attractiveness and subservience, thereby reinforcing stereotypes that undermine their athletic achievements and professional capabilities.
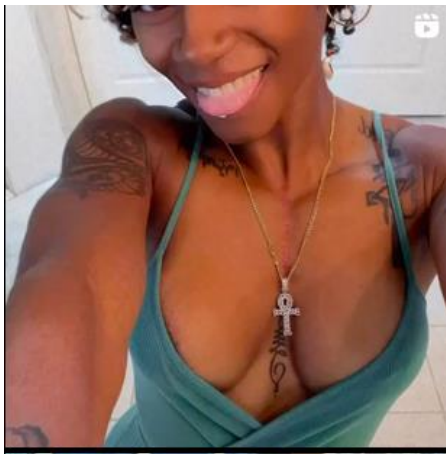
The second sub-theme, "sexualised and objectifying expressions" (5 codes), examines the facial expressions of women athletes in their Instagram posts and how these contribute to perceptions of objectification and sexualization. Examples like "puckered lips" denote sexualization, while "smiling" (see Figure 3 and 4) can be seen as fulfilling the expectation of women to appear pleasant and agreeable, thus objectifying them (Vendemia, 2024, p. 4). Fasoli et al. (2018) confirm that increased sexualized expressions lead to heightened sexualized perceptions (p. 343), which ties into the research question: "How do Instagram posts by women athletes contribute to the over-sexualization of women in sport?". When women athletes use sexualized facial expressions, they might unintentionally emphasise their sexuality over their athletic prowess, thereby contributing to a culture that over-sexualizes women in sports. This not only distracts from their professional achievements but also aligns with societal expectations that prioritise women's appearances over their competencies.

The final sub-theme, "expressive and empowering" (13 codes), highlights the efforts of women athletes to challenge traditional gender stereotypes through their body language and facial expressions. Codes such as "serious facial expression" and "playful facial expression" (see Figure 5 and 6) suggest a conscious attempt to defy stereotypical feminine expectations and present themselves in a more empowering light. Vendemia (2024) explains the social dynamics at play, revealing that sexualized women are judged more harshly by others (p. 1). This highlights the societal double standard where women are encouraged to present themselves sexually yet are criticised for

doing so. This context is essential for addressing one of the secondary research questions: "How do the Instagram posts of women athletes challenge traditional gender stereotypes within sports?". By showcasing serious or playful expressions, women athletes can shift the narrative away from sexualization and towards their individuality and strength. Through expressive and empowering poses, women athletes can redefine what it means to be a woman in sports, emphasising their agency, confidence, and athletic identity over societal expectations of femininity and attractiveness. This shift not only empowers the athletes themselves but also serves as a powerful message to their audience, promoting a broader acceptance of diverse representations of women in sports.

Figure 1

Sub-theme: "Sexualised and objectifying poses", code: "showing cleavage"

Note. Post retrieved from Sha'Carri Richardson's Instagram account (2024).

Figure 2

Sub-theme: "Sexualised and objectifying poses", code "leaning on a man"

Note. Post retrieved from Simone Biles' Instagram account (2024).

Figure 3

Sub-theme "Sexualised and objectifying expressions", code "puckered lips"
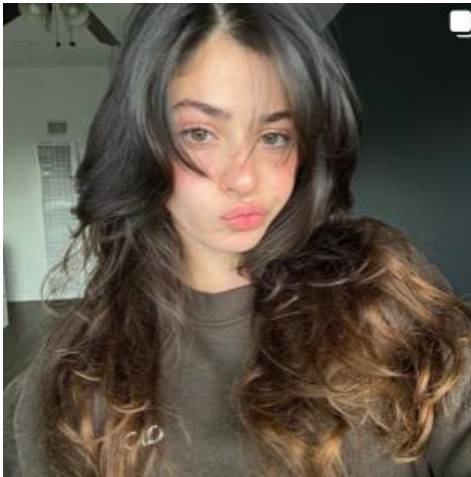
Note. Post retrieved from Yusra Mardini's Instagram account (2024).

Figure 4

Sub-theme "Sexualised and objectifying expressions", code "smiling"

Note. Post retrieved from Janja Garnbret's Instagram account (2024).

Figure 5

Sub-theme "Expressive and empowering", code "serious facial expression"

Note. Post retrieved from Janja Garnbret's Instagram account (2024).

Figure 6

Sub-theme "Expressive and empowering", code: "playful facial expression"

Note. Post retrieved from Sha'Carri Richardson's Instagram account (2024)

4.2 Contextual Backdrops: Neutral Settings versus Sensual Environments

In the theme of "Neutral Settings vs. Sensual Environments" (4 sub-themes and 37 codes), the settings and backgrounds of women athletes' Instagram posts play a critical role in shaping their image. Many images are set in wholesome, neutral, or empowering environments such as nature, during reading, or in active settings. These backdrops promote a healthy and balanced lifestyle, highlighting the athletes' dedication to physical and mental well-being. On the other hand, a considerable number of posts utilise sensual or objectifying environments. Settings like lounge chairs, hotel rooms, and bathing scenes can enhance the sexualization of the imagery, adding a layer of sensuality to the athletes' representation. These environments suggest a lifestyle that is not only active and healthy but also glamorous and desirable. The juxtaposition of these settings illustrates how women athletes navigate the fine line between promoting a wholesome image and engaging in self-sexualization.

The first sub-theme within "Contextual Backdrops: Neutral Settings versus Sensual Environments" is "Active lifestyle" (3 codes), a code example being "car present" (Figure 7). This sub-theme relates to the secondary research question: "How do Instagram posts by women athletes challenge traditional gender stereotypes within sports?". By showcasing an active lifestyle, these posts highlight women athletes' independence and strength, challenging traditional stereotypes that confine women to passive or domestic roles. This theme aligns with the "expressive and

empowering" sub-theme discussed previously, where serious or playful facial expressions were used to defy stereotypical feminine expectations. Posts depicting women athletes in active settings reinforce their autonomy and athletic identity, offering a counter-narrative to the traditional depiction of women. Fasoli et al.(2018, p. 339) asserts that individuals who are not perceived or treated as mere instruments for others' use (instrumentality), whose autonomy and personal experiences are acknowledged (rather than denied), and who are not viewed as possessions owned by someone (ownership), are not subject to self-objectification or objectification by others. This aligns with the "active lifestyle" sub-theme, where women athletes' Instagram posts emphasise their autonomy and strength. By presenting themselves in dynamic, active contexts, these athletes resist objectification and self-objectification, promoting a perception of women that values their agency and individuality over traditional, objectifying roles.

The second sub-theme, "using props for sensual appeal" (6 codes), includes codes like "silk gloves" (Figure 8). This sub-theme addresses the secondary research question: "How do Instagram posts by women athletes contribute to the over-sexualisation of women in sport?". The use of props like silk gloves, especially when combined with other sensual cues, sexualizes the overall meaning of the post. This parallels findings from the earlier discussion on "sexualised and objectifying poses" and "expressions", where sensual elements led to increased perceptions of sexualization and objectification (Fasoli et al., 2018, p. 343). By employing sensual props, these posts detract from the athletes' professional image, emphasising their sexuality over their athletic accomplishments and reinforcing the over-sexualization of women in sports.

The third sub-theme, "sensual or objectifying environments" (11 codes), includes codes such as "in the bathtub" (sensual - sexualization) and "cooking" (objectifying activity) (Figures 9 and 10). This sub-theme relates to secondary research questions: "How do Instagram posts by women athletes reinforce prevailing gender roles?" and "How do Instagram posts by women athletes contribute to the over-sexualisation of women in sport?". Settings like bathtubs or kitchens can reinforce traditional gender roles: women are self- depicting in sexualized or domestic contexts. Similar to the "sensual and objectifying poses" discussed earlier, these environments enhance the perception of women as objects or caretakers, overshadowing their athletic identity and reinforcing stereotypes that confine women to specific roles. By positioning themselves in sensual or domestic backdrops, women athletes not only align with societal expectations but also perpetuate a cycle of objectification. This mirrors the findings of Galdi et al. (2014), where suggestive dressing or submissive posturing contributes to self-sexualization. Such portrayals detract from the athletes' professional achievements and athletic prowess, shifting the focus to their physical appearance and traditional feminine roles. Consequently, these Instagram posts reinforce prevailing gender roles by

depicting women as sexual objects or domestic figures, rather than as autonomous and empowered individuals.

The final sub-theme, "neutral or empowering settings" (17 codes), includes codes like "nature in the background" (Figure 11). This sub-theme addresses the research question: "How do the Instagram posts of women athletes challenge traditional gender stereotypes within sports?". Neutral or empowering settings, such as natural landscapes, shift the focus from the athlete's sexuality to their individuality and strength. This aligns with the "expressive and empowering" sub-theme from the previous theme, where serious or playful expressions were used to present a more empowering image of women athletes. Women athletes are not reinforcing self-objectification and self-sexualisation by suggestively dressing, or posing in exploitative and submissive postures (Galdi et al., 2014, p. 399).While these settings can still be sexualized if combined with elements like bikinis, they also have the potential to be playful and non-sexualizing, emphasising the athletes' connection to nature and their authentic selves.

In conclusion, the contextual backdrops and their respective sub-themes illustrate the multifaceted ways in which women athletes' Instagram posts can reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles and contribute to or mitigate the over-sexualization of women in sports. These findings reinforce the complexities observed in the previous discussion on body language and expressions, highlighting how women athletes navigate societal expectations through their online presence. By carefully curating their posts, women athletes can either succumb to or resist the pressures of sexualization, ultimately influencing how women in sports are perceived and valued.

Figure 7

Sub-theme "Active lifestyle", code "car present"

Note. Post retrieved from Janja Garnbret's Instagram account (2024).

Figure 8

Sub-theme "Using props for sensual appeal", code "silk gloves"

Note. Post retrieved from Yusra Mardini's Instagram account (2024).

Figure 9

Sub-theme "Sensual or objectifying environments", code "in the bathtub"

Note. Post retrieved from Yusra Mardini's Instagram account (2024).

Figure 10

Sub-theme "Sensual or objectifying environments", code "cooking"

Note. Post retrieved from Allyson Felix Instagram account (2024).

Figure 11

Sub-theme "Neutral or empowering settings", code "nature in the background"

Note. Post retrieved from Sha'Carri Richardson's Instagram account (2024).

4.3 Fashion choices: Empowering Style versus Self-Sexualizing Attire

The theme of "Empowering Style vs. Self-Sexualizing Attire" (5 sub-themes and 57 codes) reveals the diverse ways women athletes use fashion to construct their public personas. Empowering fashion choices, such as sportswear, fashionable yet modest outfits, and casual clothing, underscore the athletes' strength, confidence, and style. These choices reflect a commitment to showcasing their athletic abilities and personal empowerment without necessarily sexualizing their image. However, there is a significant presence of self-sexualizing attire within their posts. Bikinis, tight dresses, and revealing clothing often feature prominently, paired with accessories and makeup that enhance sexual appeal. Such fashion choices can accentuate physical attributes and contribute to a more sexualized image. This suggests a dual representation where women athletes balance the projection of their athleticism and empowerment with elements of self-sexualization, influenced by societal standards of beauty and desirability.

The first sub-theme within the overarching theme of fashion choices is "Enhancing feminine appearance" (9 codes), with an example code being "loose hair" (Figure 12). This sub-theme addresses the research question: "How do Instagram posts by women athletes reinforce prevailing gender roles?". By showcasing traditionally feminine styles such as loose hair, women athletes may reinforce conventional gender norms that emphasise beauty and femininity over athleticism and competence. These fashion choices can subtly affirm traditional roles, suggesting that women should prioritise their appearance. According to Fasoli et al. (2018, p. 343), even merely emphasising

feminine traits can lead observers to perceive women as lacking competence, thus reinforcing stereotypes that undermine their professional identity as athletes.

The second sub-theme, "Accentuating sexual appeal" (8 codes), is exemplified by the code "wearing heels" (Figure 13). This sub-theme directly relates to the research question: "How do Instagram posts by women athletes contribute to the over-sexualisation of women in sport?". Wearing high heels can be seen as a fashion choice that accentuates sexual appeal, which, as Galdi et al. (2014) found, contributes to self-sexualization. Such attire emphasises sexuality over athleticism, perpetuating the notion that women athletes are to be viewed through a sexualized lens rather than recognized for their athletic prowess. This fashion choice can detract from their sports achievements, focusing attention instead on their physical attractiveness.

The third sub-theme, "Highlighting physical attributes" (12 codes), includes codes like "tight shirt" (Figure 14). This sub-theme addresses the secondary research questions: "How do Instagram posts by women athletes reinforce prevailing gender roles?" and "How do Instagram posts by women athletes contribute to the over-sexualisation of women in sport?". Tight clothing that highlights physical attributes can serve to sexualize women athletes, aligning with Tiggemann and Andrew's (2012, p. 646) findings that more revealing clothing increases self-sexualization. Such portrayals can reinforce traditional gender roles by emphasising the female body as an object of visual pleasure, overshadowing the athletes' skills and reinforcing stereotypes that women should be valued primarily for their looks.

The fourth sub-theme, "Self-sexualising attire" (15 codes), with the code example "tight dress" (Figure 15), further explores how fashion choices contribute to the over-sexualization of women athletes. This theme directly relates to the research question: "How do Instagram posts by women athletes contribute to the over-sexualisation of women in sport?". Wearing tight dresses can enhance the perception of women as sexual objects, rather than professional athletes: Galdi et al. (2014) suggest that such suggestive dressing contributes to self-sexualization, thereby reinforcing the societal tendency to view women athletes through a sexualized lens. This not only impacts how they are perceived but also how they may perceive themselves, potentially internalising these objectifying views.

The final sub-theme, "Empowering style" (13 codes), includes codes such as "covering clothes" (Figure 16). This sub-theme addresses the research question: "How do the Instagram posts of women athletes challenge traditional gender stereotypes within sports?". By opting for covering clothes, such as attire that is less revealing, women athletes can challenge traditional stereotypes that equate femininity with sexualization. Tiggemann and Andrew (2012, p. 646), indicate that wearing less revealing clothing leads to less self-sexualization. This choice allows athletes to present themselves in a manner that emphasises their athletic or professional competence rather than their

physical appearance. In contrast to attire that accentuates sexual appeal or highlights physical attributes, covering clothes can empower women athletes by redirecting focus towards their skills and achievements. This fashion choice promotes a more inclusive and diverse representation of women in sports, challenging societal norms that often prioritise sexual attractiveness over athletic prowess.

In conclusion, the fashion choices depicted in Instagram posts by women athletes can either reinforce traditional gender roles and contribute to over-sexualization or challenge these norms by promoting empowerment and individuality. The impact of these choices is significant in shaping public perception and the athletes' own self-concept, highlighting the complex interplay between fashion, gender, and identity in the realm of sports.

Figure 12

Sub-theme "Enhancing feminine appearance", code "loose hair"
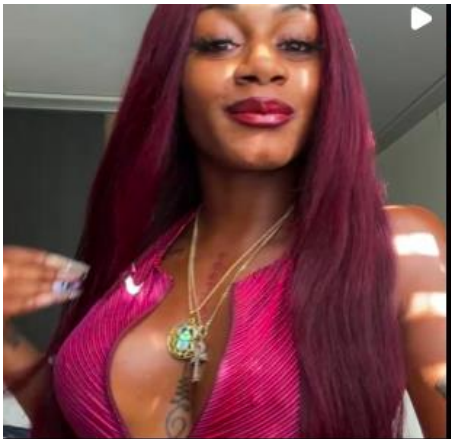
Note. Post retrieved from Sha'Carri Richardson's Instagram account (2024).

Figure 13

Sub-theme "Accentuating sexual appeal", code "wearing heels"

Note. Post retrieved from Simone Biles' Instagram account (2024).

Figure 14

Sub-theme "Highlighting Physical attributes", code "tight shirt"
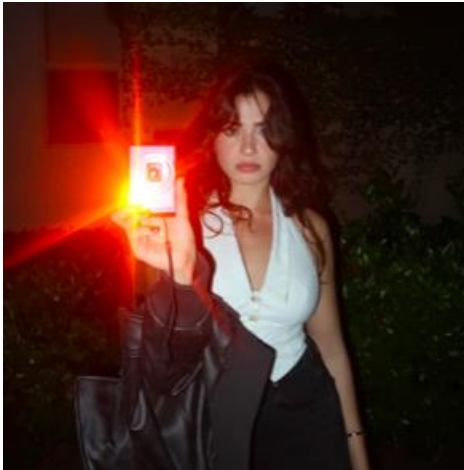
Note. Post retrieved from Yusra Mardini's Instagram account (2024).

Figure 15

Sub-theme "Accentuating sexual appeal", code "wearing heels"

Note. Post retrieved from Allyson Felix Instagram account (2024).

Figure 16

Sub-theme "Empowering style", code "covering clothes"

Note. Post retrieved from Janja Garnbret's Instagram account (2024).

4.4 Showcasing Relationships: Nurturing Connections versus Objectifying Social Dynamics

In examining the theme of "Nurturing Connections versus Objectifying Social Dynamics" (2 sub-themes and 18 codes), a nuanced portrayal of women athletes emerges. On one hand, these athletes frequently depict themselves in nurturing roles, particularly when interacting with children.

Images of holding, hugging, and playing with children convey a sense of care and empathy, aligning with traditional notions of femininity and maternal instincts. These representations are generally non-sexualizing, focusing instead on the athletes' nurturing capabilities and their roles as mentors and caregivers. However, the traditional and stereotypical depiction of women may contribute to an objectified meaning. Conversely, interactions with adults, especially men, often present a different narrative. In some instances, these interactions can lean towards objectified and sexualized meanings. For example, images where physical contact with men is emphasised, such as leaning on a man or being touched by a man, may suggest dependence or submission. Such portrayals can inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes and contribute to the objectification of the athletes. This duality indicates a complex interplay between presenting a nurturing image and the subtle pressures to conform to objectifying portrayals in certain social contexts.

The first sub-theme within this theme is "Potentially objectifying interactions" (9 codes), with an example code being "man touching woman's buttocks". This sub-theme directly addresses the research question: "How do Instagram posts by women athletes contribute to the over-sexualization of women in sport?". Images portraying objectifying interactions, particularly with men, can perpetuate the sexualization of women athletes. According to Rose et al. (2012, p. 589), women often communicate traditional gender roles through their social media interactions and posts, reinforcing societal expectations regarding women's behaviour and relationships. By depicting themselves in potentially objectifying scenarios, athletes may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes that reduce their identities to objects of male desire, rather than respected athletes.

The second and final sub-theme is "Nurturing roles" (9 codes), exemplified by actions such as "playing with a child". This sub-theme relates to the research questions: "How do Instagram posts by women athletes reinforce prevailing gender roles?" and "How do the Instagram posts of women athletes challenge traditional gender stereotypes within sports?". Images depicting nurturing interactions, particularly with children, do not challenge traditional gender stereotypes and showcase women athletes as "caretakers". These posts emphasise qualities beyond physical prowess, however, presents athletes as the "nurturers". This portrayal goes hand in hand with Rose et al. (2012, p. 589) findings that women tend to align their social media presence with the stereotypical, deeply rooted ideas of how a woman should act and what values she ought to represent (nurturing and caretaking).

In conclusion, the portrayal of relationships in Instagram posts by women athletes reflects a balance between nurturing connections and potentially objectifying social dynamics. These representations contribute to ongoing discussions about gender roles and stereotypes within sports, illustrating the complex interplay between personal expression and societal expectations. By critically examining these themes, we gain insights into how women athletes navigate their public personas, shaping perceptions and challenging norms in the digital age.

Figure 17

Sub-theme "Potentially objectifying interactions", code "man touching woman's buttocks"

Note. Post retrieved from Simone Biles' Instagram account (2024).

Figure 18

Sub-theme "Nurturing roles", code "playing with a child"

Note. Post retrieved from Taken from Allyson Felix Instagram account (2024).

4.5 Summary

In summary, the self-representation of women athletes on Instagram reflects a complex interplay of nurturing connections, empowering fashion, wholesome settings, and expressive posing with elements of objectification and self-sexualization. While many posts emphasize strength, empowerment, and healthy lifestyles, there is a significant undercurrent of self-sexualization influenced by societal expectations and personal choices. This duality in representation highlights the multifaceted nature of women athletes' public personas and the ongoing negotiation between empowerment and objectification in their social media presence.

The first theme, "Body Language and Expressions: Expressive Posing versus Sexualized Posing", revealed how poses and facial expressions could both challenge and reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. Expressive and empowering poses, such as serious or playful expressions, often challenge stereotypes by showcasing athletes' autonomy and strength. However, sexualized and objectifying poses, like showing cleavage or sensual facial expressions, contribute to the over-sexualization of women in sports. This dichotomy answers the secondary research questions by illustrating how Instagram posts can either challenge traditional gender roles or reinforce prevailing stereotypes and sexual objectification.

The second theme, "Contextual Backdrops: Neutral Settings versus Sensual Environments", further explored how the environment and context of the images impact perceptions. Sub-themes like "active lifestyle" highlight non-sexual, empowering settings that challenge traditional stereotypes. In contrast, "sensual or objectifying environments", such as bathtubs or kitchens, reinforce gender roles by depicting women in sexualized or domestic contexts. These findings align with the research questions by showing how different settings can either contribute to or challenge the over-sexualization of women athletes and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles.

The third theme, "Fashion Choices: Empowering Style versus Self-Sexualizing Attire", examined how clothing choices impact self-representation. Empowering styles, like wearing bright colours or covering clothes, help challenge stereotypes and promote a positive image. Conversely, self-sexualizing attire, such as tight dresses or heels, reinforces objectification and sexualization. Scientific findings suggest that sexual objectification is not merely a matter of nudity but involves a combination of sexualizing elements that lead to negative perceptions of capability and intelligence (Fasoli et al., 2018, p. 343-344). This theme addresses the research questions by showing how fashion choices can either empower women athletes or contribute to their sexualization and objectification.

Finally, the theme "Showcasing Relationships: Nurturing Connections versus Objectifying Social Dynamics" highlighted how interactions with others, especially children or men, can either reinforce traditional gender roles or challenge them. Nurturing roles, such as playing with children, emphasize care and mentorship, challenging stereotypes by presenting athletes in a positive light.

However, potentially objectifying interactions, like a man touching a woman's buttocks, reinforce sexualization and dependency. This duality illustrates the complex nature of women athletes' social media portrayals, answering the research questions by demonstrating how these posts can both challenge and reinforce prevailing gender norms and the sexualization of women in sports.

Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating that the portrayal of women athletes on Instagram significantly affects public perception. The interplay of nurturing, empowering, and sexualizing elements highlights the ongoing struggle between self-expression and societal expectations, ultimately influencing how women athletes are viewed and judged.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to analyse the portrayal of Olympic women athletes on Instagram, exploring how their self-representations reflect or challenge prevailing gender norms and stereotypes. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 77-101) of posts from selected Olympic athletes, we examined themes of objectification, sexualization, empowerment, and gender representation to uncover the complexities of self-representation in the context of social media. Our findings indicate that while many women athletes use Instagram to challenge traditional gender stereotypes and assert their athletic competence, sexualized imagery persists, aligning with societal expectations of female beauty and desirability. This duality suggests that women athletes navigate a complex landscape where commercial benefits and societal pressures intersect.

The primary research question—how Olympic women athletes portray themselves on Instagram—revealed a nuanced picture. Athletes often blend empowerment narratives with elements of traditional femininity, thereby both reinforcing and challenging gender norms. This aligns with objectification theory, which, according to Stock (2015, p. 192), states that people at times are treated as commodities for others' gratification and might eventually start internalizing an observer's perspective on their bodies, which is what Darvin and Sagas (2017) confirm to be happening in the sports industry. In addition, performative gender theory relates to our findings, as it emphasizes the fluid and constructed nature of gender identities (Butler, 1988, p. 525). Cyberfeminism theory also plays a role here, examining how digital spaces can both perpetuate gender injustices and serve as platforms for challenging these inequalities (Toto & Scarinci, 2021, p. 137). Our analysis supports the potential of social media platforms as tools for feminist activism, as evidenced by posts that explicitly counteract sexist narratives and promote gender equality. However, the persistence of sexualized self-representation underscores the ongoing influence of societal and commercial pressures, highlighting the need for continued advocacy and education.

In addressing the secondary research questions, "How do Instagram posts by women athletes reinforce prevailing gender roles?" and "How do the Instagram posts of women athletes challenge traditional gender stereotypes within sports?", this study uncovered a nuanced landscape of self-representation. Instagram posts by women athletes often reinforce prevailing gender roles through sexualized and objectifying imagery. For example, poses and facial expressions that highlight physical attractiveness, as well as settings and attire that align with societal expectations of female beauty and desirability, contribute to the over-sexualization of women in sports. Posts set in domestic or sensual environments further perpetuate traditional gender roles by depicting women athletes in contexts that emphasize their sexuality or domesticity, thereby reinforcing stereotypical

notions of femininity. Conversely, many Instagram posts challenge traditional gender stereotypes within sports by showcasing women athletes' strength, competence, and autonomy. Empowering poses and expressions, active lifestyle settings, and clothing choices that emphasize athleticism and professionalism all serve to counteract stereotypes that undermine women's capabilities in sports. These posts often highlight achievements, training routines, and the physical prowess of women athletes, thereby promoting a narrative of empowerment and equality. Additionally, interactions that depict nurturing roles and mentorship emphasize qualities of leadership and support, challenging the notion that women must conform to passive or secondary roles in sports. By examining these contrasting portrayals, this study reveals how women athletes use Instagram as a platform to navigate and negotiate the complex terrain of gender representation, both reinforcing and challenging societal norms in their public personas.

Despite some progress, a significant gap in access and representation between men and women in sports persists, highlighting entrenched societal biases and structural barriers that have historically favoured male participation in athletics (Spaaij et al., 2015, p. 405). Nevertheless, women continuously strive to overcome existing gender-bound barriers within professional sport to gain respect, equality, and control over their bodies and opportunities compared to their male counterparts (Sherry et al., 2016, p. 305). This study is rooted in and closely aligned with feminist theories, particularly objectification theory, cyberfeminism, and intersectional feminism, which help us gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between individual agency, societal norms, and media representation in the self-representation of women athletes on social media platforms.

Regarding the present study, overall, the self-representation of women athletes on Instagram reflects a complex interplay between nurturing and empowering roles, personal expression, or elements of objectification and self-sexualization. While many posts emphasize strength, empowerment, and healthy lifestyles, there is a significant undercurrent of self-sexualization influenced by societal expectations and personal choices. This duality in representation highlights the multifaceted nature of women athletes' public personas and the ongoing negotiation between empowerment and objectification in their social media presence.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of media and cultural studies by providing contemporary insights into how digital platforms influence gender dynamics in sports, reinforcing the importance of intersectional approaches to media representation and feminist theory in addressing these issues. By acknowledging and critically analysing the various dimensions of women athletes' self-presentation, researchers, practitioners, and stakeholders can work towards promoting more inclusive, empowering, and equitable representations of women in sports and

beyond. Ultimately, these insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding gender representation in sports media and social media platforms like Instagram.

5.1 Social and Academic Implications

The study addresses the issue of gender representation in media, specifically focusing on the objectification and sexualization of women athletes on the popular social media platform Instagram. The findings highlight the role of societal norms when prioritizing physical attractiveness over athletic abilities and how women athletes reinforce gender stereotypes through their posts. Academically, the study applies theories such as Objectification Theory, Performative Gender Theory, and Third-Wave Feminism to the context of social media, contributing to our understanding of how digital self-representation can challenge or reinforce traditional gender roles.

The academic contribution of this study lies in its application of established feminist theories to the realm of social media. By using Objectification Theory, Performative Gender Theory, and Third-Wave Feminism, the research delves deeply into how women athletes' self-representation on Instagram reflects a complex interplay of societal norms, personal agency, and cultural perceptions of gender (Mikkola, 2024; Lennon & Fischer, 2024). This application provides a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms both challenge and reinforce traditional gender roles.

The study's findings contribute to the broader discourse on gender and media by showing how social media platforms like Instagram can serve as sites of both empowerment and constraint. It underscores the importance of considering the broader social and cultural context in which digital self-representation occurs, and how these representations can influence public perceptions and individual identities.

Socially, the exploration of gender representation among women athletes on Instagram enhances our understanding of the intersection of feminism, technology, and sports media. The study illustrates how female objectification can manifest in social media by integrating cyberfeminism and intersectional feminism, while also demonstrating how women athletes navigate gendered expectations on social media platforms. It is important to stress the need for further research into the role of media in shaping gender identities and diverse and authentic representations of women in sports.

The social implications of this research are significant in understanding how media representation shapes and reflects societal attitudes toward gender. Social media serves as a pivotal platform for women athletes to converge and forge a collective identity rooted in their athleticism. By establishing a digital presence, they confront and deconstruct the deep-rooted notion that sports

are predominantly a male domain (Heinecken, 2015, p. 10). This disruption of traditional gender norms in sports media is crucial for advancing gender equality in broader societal contexts.

However, the present also highlights the persistent issue of female (self)objectification in digital spaces. Conventional media has frequently fallen short in offering fair and respectful coverage of women athletes, instead often focusing on their appearance, sexualizing them, and downplaying their accomplishments (Darvin & Sagas, 2017, p. 180). Instagram, while offering new opportunities for self-representation, can also perpetuate these biases. The aesthetic presentation of women athletes can reinforce gender stereotypes, where physical attractiveness is prioritized over athletic competence.

Empirical studies highlight the significance of taking into account intersecting factors like race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status to fully grasp the experiences of women athletes (Newell, 2022, p. 64). The study shows that while some women athletes use their platforms to convey empowering messages and serve as role models, their representation is still influenced by societal norms and expectations. This highlights the need for more diverse and authentic representations of women in sports, which can only be achieved through continuous and critical engagement with the media.

Moreover, social media literacy is essential for women athletes to navigate and challenge gendered expectations effectively. Modern young women view themselves as more skilled and informed in media literacy than earlier generations of feminists, emphasizing the changing role of social media in shaping feminist discussions and challenging conventional norms of representation (Snyder, 2008, p. 190). This awareness is crucial for fostering social change and promoting more inclusive and equitable representations of women in sports.

Overall, the study calls for further research into the role of media in shaping gender identities and the need for policies and practices that promote diverse and authentic representations of women athletes. By understanding the dynamics of gender representation on platforms like Instagram, we can better support women athletes in their efforts to challenge stereotypes and achieve greater equality in sports and society.

5.2. Limitations and Future Lines of Research

A few limitations of the research should be acknowledged. First, the sample size, focused on 25 posts from each account, which does not represent all Olympic women athletes on Instagram, nor does it reflect the full range of their posts. This limits the generalizability of the findings and cautions for drawing far-reaching conclusions. Additionally, the study concentrated on high-profile Olympic

women athletes, which does not reflect the experiences of lesser-followed or less-active athletes who might have different social media presence and methods of posting.

There are limitations to content analysis as well. It can be overly reductive, often concentrating on specific details while neglecting context, nuance, and ambiguous meanings. This method is inherently subjective and typically involves some degree of personal interpretation, which can compromise the reliability and validity of the findings, potentially introducing research and cognitive biases: apophenia, the tendency to see patterns in random data, and confirmation bias, the tendency to favour evidence that supports existing beliefs - these both can affect analytical decisions and lead to selective presentation of publishable results (Baldwin et al., 2022, p. 1). Additionally, it is time-intensive, as manually coding large volumes of text is laborious and difficult to automate efficiently, limiting the scope of the research due to time constraints.

Future research should expand the sample size and include a broader range of Olympic women athletes to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Another limitation is the reliance on visual content analysis, which might not fully capture the athletes' intentions or the audience's interpretations. Future studies could, for example, use interviews or surveys with the athletes and their followers to gain deeper insights into the motivations behind and reactions to their posts. It would be as well interesting to analyse the comments under the posts to see how the self-representation is interpreted by the public. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could examine how self-representation through Instagram posts evolves through time and could include audience perceptions of the posts, especially in response to changing social norms and media practices.

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Table 2*: Coding Scheme*

Codes	Subthemes	Themes
playful pose	sexualised poses	Body Language and Expressions: Expressive Posing vs. Sexualized Posing
leaning on a man		
showing cleavage		
showing off buttocks		
showing tongue	sexualised expressions	
puckered lips		
tired/uninterested facial expression		
"posy"		
playful facial expression	expressive & empowering	
soft facial expression		
serious facial expression		
smiling		
quirky facial expression		
relaxed pose		
shy/conservative pose		

laying down		
posing showing flexibility		
selfie angle		
standing from behind		
not being the main focus of the picture		
solo in the picture		
leisure environment		
water in the background		
not showing face/ turned away		
making direct eye contact with camera		
not making eye contact		
being the centre of attention		
driving	suggestive lifestyle	Contextual Backdrops: Neutral Settings vs. Sensual Environments
car present		
surfing board	using props for sensual appeal	
holding flowers		
mirror		
silk gloves		
blushed cheeks		

tattoos		
red lips		
lounge chair	sensual or objectifying environments	
hammock/ swing		
lounge furniture		
hotel environment		
street/city background		
silky furniture		
in the bathtub		
promoting skincare		
showing designer brands		
showering		
nature in the background	neutral or empowering settings	
flowers in the background		
reading		
sunset background		
gardening		
travelling		
being active		
cooking		
eating		

food present		
drinking		
domestic background		
neutral coloured clothes		
neutral/empty background		
outside environment		
inside environment		
loose hair	enhancing feminine appearance	fashion choices: empowering style vs self-sexualisation
tied up hair		
hair covering the face		
braided hair		
curled hair		
coloured hair		
long hair		
wet hair		
flower pattern clothes		
wearing heels	accentuating sexual appeal	
wearing glasses		
wearing sunglasses		
wearing a hat		
shiny accessories		

shiny jacket		
wearing princess tiara		
make up		
tight shirt	highlighting physical attributes	
long boots		
short shorts		
open shoes		
sporty shoes		
tights		
fishnet tights		
long nails		
coloured nails		
short nails		
uncoloured nails		
showing muscles		
wearing bikini	self-sexualising attire	
short dress		
silky dress		
long dress		
off shoulder dress		
waist cut-out dress		
tight dress		

dress with a slit		
shiny dress		
conservative bathing suit		
short skirt		
open back dress		
sleeveless dress		
sleeveless shirt		
long skirt		
animal prints on attire		
turtleneck dress		
fairy costume		
wearing bright colours	empowering style	
covering clothes		
loose shirt		
wearing pants		
sports clothes		
fashionable clothes		
wearing a hoodie/ covering hair		
modest jewellery		
no make-up / natural make up		
modest jewellery		

no jewellery		
interacting with other people in a friendly manner	potentially objectifying interactions	Showcasing Relationships: Nurturing vs. Objectifying Social Dynamics
man is focus of picture		
man touching woman's buttocks		
smiling to a man		
couple picture		
helping a man		
being with family		
with a friend		
multiple people in the picture		
playing with a child	nurturing roles	
holding a child		
interacting with children in a nurturing manner		
hugging a child		
making eye contact with a child		
standing next to a child		
kissing a child		
pregnancy		
animals present		

Appendix B

Overview of the sample of Instagram posts

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2019, November 19). "*mama gotta have a life too*👩🏽" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/B5CYQb4lEqX/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2019, November 18). *"33 was a monumental year for me. i gave birth to the most amazing little girl. God restored my health.* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/B5A_vZhl1Xw/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2020, December 26). *"Merry Christmas!*🎄*Sending lots of love from my little fam to yours!*❤️*xx"* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/B6g55p5Hub_/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2021, January 2). *"2021 I'm ready for ya!*🚀*"* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CJhvCFAlGIS/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2021, January 4). *"*🖤🖤🖤*"* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CJmyBIkFoGV/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2021, June 7). *"J O Y*✨*"* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CPzKZ9pHPRj/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2021, June 22). *"MY WHY. • Never stop fighting, you are here for a reason and your purpose is bigger than you can imagine.* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CQZrccyHd5H/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2021, October 25). *"and finally some rest*🛋️☕️🌼*"* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CVdcHZ7PIXT/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2021, October 28). *"joy: a series"* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CVlHq75PmCk/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2022, February 14). *"*💝💝💝*"* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CoqC71GyQ55/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2022, December 14). *"I decided not to gate-keep this holiday time saver. The @honeybaked_ham Company is stepping in to help me meal.* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CmKHKfILpLN/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2022, September 5). *"Can't imagine a better way to spend the last few days of summer* 🌼*!"* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CiGw1O_M_R4/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2022, September 12). *"Summer you were great 🥹🥹"* [Photograph].

    Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CibB02QOWUC/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2023, April 10). *"I Serve a Risen Savior ✝️🌸💐🌷"* [Photograph].

    Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cq1dlTTvo6R/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2023, April 28). *"Mentally here rn 🌴🌺🌊"* [Photograph]. Instagram.

    https://www.instagram.com/p/Crj4PYqvpFg/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2023, January 27). *"New day, new way to serve @honeybaked_ham!*

    My secret recipe for weeknight meal prep, especially on those winter nights - HoneyBaked!

    [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cn7XXbmNks6/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2023, March 12). *"Because who doesn't love to dress up. Revisiting*

    some of my favorite looks ✨" [Photograph]. Instagram.

    https://www.instagram.com/p/Cpsq0yGscA3/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2023, March 25). *"Filling my cup with what really matters🖤 Drop your*

    keys to making work + family exist in harmony below⬇️ [Photograph]. Instagram.

    https://www.instagram.com/p/C48gn_axTR_/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2023, June 20). *"36 hours in Cannes🙃FR"* [Photograph]. Instagram.

    https://www.instagram.com/p/Cttt-Mlu_3w/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2023, October 28). *"pool days are the best days✨"* [Photograph].

    Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CFvX5pTnj3x/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2023, August 13). *"OOO🏞️ "* [Photograph]. Instagram.

    https://www.instagram.com/p/Cv3TYV5MpAO/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2024, March 1). *"Thrilled to share I'm part of the @spanx Spring '24*

    campaign. Their products are made for women, by women - so [Photograph]. Instagram.

    https://www.instagram.com/p/C3-47OMu5xd/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2024, March 12). *"Thank you God for your faithfulness and this*

    blessing🙏🤍 " [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C4ZKemfPW5Y/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2024, March 25). *"Filling my cup with what really matters🖤 Drop your*

    keys to making work + family exist in harmony below⬇️ [Photograph]. Instagram.

    https://www.instagram.com/p/C48gn_axTR_/

Allyson Felix [@allysonfelix]. (2024, March 12). *"Thrilled to share I'm part of the @spanx Spring '24*

    campaign. Their products are made for women, by women - so [Photograph]. Instagram.

    https://www.instagram.com/p/C3-47OMu5xd/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2016, July 25). "*Well deserved rest with @domen_skofic 😄 ❤️*

We haven't had sea side vacations for years so we are still adjusting [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/BITCWXwhyF2/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2017, November 27). "*Our last day in paradise! 🌋🦢 Hopefully we*

are flying back home tomorrow 🤞 Volcano please cooperate 🌋 🙏" [Photograph].

Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/BcAJWu6HDjD/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2018, December 10). "📍*Kandima, Maldives Beach days in*

December couldn't be better with my boy @domen_skofic 🍍 🍉 This place is heaven

[Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/BrNr48rHTS_/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2018, December 12). "*Underneath the palm trees you can swing*

your worries away 🐚" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/BrSavgpnfPR/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2019, October 10). "*Balance is the key 🌞*

#fordkaplus@avtohisaklemencic 📷: @domen_skofic" [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/B3coiReHP54/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2021, May 21). "*I'm happy to announce that I'm partnering with*

@rhinoskinsolutions! Having good skin on your fingers is such an important part

[Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CPJOUQAjiTB/?img_index=1

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2024, February 16). "*1000 trees planted in Karst region! 🤩 🌿*

I'm excited that this passion project with @lumarhise has come to life [Photograph].

Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C3a04asMz8J/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2022, May 31). "*Monaco Grand Prix 2022 🏁 ❤️ A-M-A-Z-I-N-G!!*

🤩 🏎️💨 Epic day in Monaco with Tokyo and Beijing Olympic champions [Photograph].

Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CeOq8kXD6kh/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2022, September 8). "*Wait what!? Exciting things to be found at*

the venue here in Koper 🤩 🤩 keep your eyes open, I'm [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/Cw8C1nOMmBr/?img_index=1

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2022, December 15). "*Sometimes, being the best in the world*

doesn't mean you will be voted the best in your country 🤷 Well [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CmM5vdYDZul/?img_index=1

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2024, March 4). "*Can you love dusty climbing gyms and red-*

carpet events? Definitely! 🤩 Dress by @benedetti_life 🌱 (skirt and blouse were

[Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C4GhbVCsYbg/?img_index=1

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2023, March 30). "*Different, new, challenging. Also good, satisfying and extremely excited! I went through the range of emotions and the result is* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CqbCPNnDYYP/?img_index=1

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2023, August 30). "*Heads up for anyone in Arco!* 🎨📷 *I'm excited to be signing autographs tomorrow before the @rockmasterfestival program kicks* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cwk7TlrsHpw/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2023, October 5). "*Remember to rest as hard as you work.* 😌" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CyB1jKlsdL6/?img_index=1

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2023, October 17). "*More of this starting as of tomorrow at Hong Kong, Singapore and Shanghai! See you soon! @justclimbhk @boulder_plus@theclinic.international* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cygc7zEsUqa/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2023, September 28). "*Summer >>>>*" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CxvujM3MV_K/?img_index=1

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2023, September 28). "*Summer >>>>*" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CxvujM3MV_K/?img_index=2

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2024, April 22). "*The story about Janja and the magic flower* 🌺 *Never heard of it?* 😱 *Don't worry, you will soon have* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C6EsdtAMqlz/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2024, April 24). "*It's heeere!!* 🤩🥰 *I literally can't believe I get to have my own children's book! Based on real life* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C6J2CEiMvJU/?img_index=1

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2024, March 12). "*It's a quarter life calling!* 🥳🥳 *Thank you for so many birthday wishes everyone, you made my day!* ▯ [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C4bSJDLM-GT/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2024, March 12). "*La vie est belle* ♡" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CkC86WwyFmS/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2021, May 21). "*I'm happy to announce that I'm partnering with @rhinoskinsolutions! Having good skin on your fingers is such an important part* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CPJOUQAjiTB/?img_index=1

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2024, March 12). "🥂 to 23 ✨ Thank you everyone for lovely birthday wishes! ❤️" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CbDhUHitSLK/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2018, December 12). "*Underneath the palm trees you can swing your worries away* ✌" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/BrSavgpnfPR/

Janja Garnbret [@janja_garnbret]. (2022, May 17). "*The plan to offset my carbon footprint of last year's travels has been in place for quite some time. When* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CdqhTEsD6PL/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2022, April 21). "*Wow! My new exclusive Simone x @gkeliteleotards just launched online @target.* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CcnYSwYu4g1/

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2022, April 26). "*ICYMI, my Athleta Girl x Simone Biles collab is here! It's full of bright, uplifting styles and empowering affirmations designed to* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CcyqzSrOZQ1/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2022, November 25). "*grateful. thankful. blessed.* 😋😍🥰" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/ClXMbeJO573/

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2022, November 29). "*my precious little niece made her debut friday. I'm so proud to be your TT & I'm excited to spoil* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/ClhhAocNvM5/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2022, December 1). "*HAPPY HOLIDAYS* ❤" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Clorw6nuTy5/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2022, December 13). "*The best part of me is you   ENGAGEMENT SHOOT* 💍🤍🦋 *shot by: @cakewalkfilms*" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CmFqUV-j-yo/

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2022, December 25). "*Let's hear some commotion for the dress*" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cmkyd_1NLMT/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2022, December 25). "*Merry Christmas* 🤎🎄📩" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cmm4Gxmu42u/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2023, February 15). "*Happy valentines day* ❤🔥 *to many more sweet days with you baby. @jowens*" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CoqcZCqt_v_/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2023, March 2). "*Peace, love, @alaiabelize* 🫶🏽" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CpS7QoyObLt/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2023, March 4). "*Previously on island time*" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CpWONdGNomP/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2023, May 22). "*Livin*" [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CshoM1MtMtS/

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2023, May 23). "*It's a wifestyle*" [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CskKwbLNvDA/

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2023, June 1). "*Warmer days* ☀️🔲🍉" [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/Cs7Zkh8tk8O/

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2023, August 16). "*Long distance isn't easy, but seeing you play your*

heart out is so worth it 💛 *I'm so proud of* [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/Cv-4NY5Oaj2/

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2023, November 7). "*Victory monday!!!!!!*" [Photograph].

Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CzUvGTrtPw8/

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2023, November 20). "*Green bae* 💚" [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/Cz4U1KqOIq7/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2023, December 10). "*it's been a helluva season & there's so*

much to be proud of. I'm so proud of the work you've put [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/C2bEqVItBL4/

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2023, December 25). "*ringing in the new year* 🤍 🥂"

[Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C1k5yPsunv3/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2024, January 10). [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/C17g2vSOLCD/

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2024, January 10). [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/C17g109uztS/

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2024, January 25). "*Love supporting you & your dreams*"

[Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C2gLJr1N6M_/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2024, February 26). "*This ain't Texas* 🎛️🌸 💛" [Photograph].

Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C3y8o4WLtSH/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2024, February 27). "*Canceling my return flight*" [Photograph].

Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C33kDZIupIV/?img_index=1

Simone Biles [@simonebiles]. (2024, February 29). "*Day & night* 🔲🤍 💙" [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/C36U5ZauopE/?img_index=1

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2021, April 2). "*Do you , they gone watch anyways* 👹"

[Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CNKq6B6nYAx/?img_index=1

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2021, October 9). [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CUygAU6Nbr4/

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2021, October 24). "*Ouu I really like her*😍 *Hair from @1beautyobt Installed by @tamedbybri*" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CVZA4dPj2R6/

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2022, April 20). [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CclbFdhPfAa/?img_index=2

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2022, June 15). "*Shine Richardson* 🌻" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Ce132cVP76G/

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2022, September 8). [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CiQDOGJDUib/

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2022, December 23). "*Grandma told me everyday is Christmas when you living right because you receive the gift of life* 💌" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CmhtipKvx39/?img_index=1

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2022, December 31). "*Hey y'all* 🎉🎉🎉🎉🎉*it's going to be an amazing journey. Dropping another YT video tonight* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cm2FH6_j4zF/

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2023, February 4). "*Betty Boop was a black woman* 💋" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CoQReAyjC4P/

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2023, February 7). "*If I post a post with my chest out my page does numbers yet when I want to show truth* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CoX82FgjeOp/

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2023, February 14). "*If you're always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be* 🪐" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/ConxT69v1o9/

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2023, March 29). "*Soul, Body, Mind 2E4 now ,enjoyed shedding the chapter of 22.*" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CqYyyTivCuK/?img_index=1

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2023, May 3). [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CrwoKOeqscr/?img_index=1

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2023, May 31). "📱" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cs6v09ePpfo/?img_index=1

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2023, June 11). "*Oregon, Master Round Soon* 🏃 *P.S.A Nobody gone out scream my momma*😊" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CtXWmgvv-1h/?img_index=1

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2023, September 6). "*Let go of expectations, let go of the*

 norms, just be you that you really want to show-before speaking [Photograph]. Instagram.

 https://www.instagram.com/p/Cw3VgjvPOyE/?img_index=1

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2023, November 10). "*JUST ANNOUNCED: November 10, 2023 is*

 officially Sha'Carri Richardson Day in Dallas!" [Photograph]. Instagram.

 https://www.instagram.com/p/CzeQaJQOv1m/?img_index=1

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2023, December 11). "*Real recognize real* 💚" [Photograph].

 Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C0sZ99SN2Zr/?img_index=1

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2024, February 19). "*The countdown has begun* ⌛"

 [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C3guHRVtw0t/?img_index=1

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2024, February 26). "*A new @jacquemus x @nike collection is*

 here featuring @itsshacarri. Now available on Jacquemus.com and March 5 on the SNKRS

 app." [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C30YjTCO3K7/?img_index=1

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2024, February 26). [Photograph]. Instagram.

 https://www.instagram.com/p/C30fy8xPg_J/

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2024, April 5). "👀 *Are you ready for more? Take a closer look*

 at Sha'Carri's fit by swiping through. #AirMaxDn Tap to shop [Photograph]. Instagram.

 https://www.instagram.com/p/C5Yrzk8rLf-/?img_index=1

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2024, April 12). "*Nike On Air Event 2024 - Paris, France @nike*

 @jacquemus #NikeOnAir" [Photograph]. Instagram.

 https://www.instagram.com/p/C5o9EOpqEYM/?img_index=3

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2024, March 26). "*More life* 🌸*, More Love* 🖤*, More Growth*

 ⚖️*. 24 thank you* ▢" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C49fm89NqS-

 /?img_index=5

Sha'Carri Richardson [@itsshacarri]. (2024, June 4). "*@itsshacarri x NEW Olay Cleansing Melts, the*

 Official Facial Cleanser of Team USA us *Cleanse with speed like U.S. Olympic Hopeful*

 Sha'Carri [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C7ziSiwgACd/

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2021, June 20). "*Today is WORLD REFUGEE DAY. More than 82*

 million people have now lost their homes. That's 82 million reasons to [Photograph].

 Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CQWanR5sSfK/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2021, July 29). "*You can't match with us* 🖤🙂" [Photograph].

 Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CR6UWHbMoTU/

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2021, September 6). "*Not sure who's the model here* 👀

 @louisvuitton by @voguegermany Photo: @d.avit Interview/Editor: @dennisbraatz Styling:

@nicolaknels Frisur und Make [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CTfSSR3oo0m/

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2021, September 12). "*Blue skies, sunshine, everything's fine.*"

[Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CTuvlz1Ava-/

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2021, October 3). "*Not me being distracted the whole day so I won't*

study🫠🌊" [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CUkmvjXoyCb/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2021, October 31). "*A witch with a crown?* ▢" [Photograph].

Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CVshaP4smye/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2022, June 20). "*It could be you. It could be me. Every*

refugee story is different. But one thing always stays the same [Photograph].

Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CfCRcMENEcS/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2022, October 9). "*Tea anyone?*" [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CjgHByXteMC/

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2022, October 31). "*Have a fairy good Halloween*🧚" [Photograph].

Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CkYz3VgPL_F/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2023, January 14). "*A new attempt to post more often*

@chanelofficial" [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CnZ9TEpvLhA/

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2023, March 7)."*Better late than never! Thank you Bottega*

Veneta for having me at the Winter 2023 show." [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CpfxImWPqTC/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2023, March 20). "*Last one explains it all*" [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CqBU7FbtGT1/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2023, May 27). "*grazie per una notte speciale @mytheresa.com x*

@dolcegabbana ❤️" [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CswVVQLMCdh/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2023, June 27). "*More pasta please*🍝" [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CuAH-q1MMLH/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2023, June 29). "*Eid Adha Mubarak Habibis*▢▢ مُبارك أَضحى عيد"

[Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CuFSX_dsAog/

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2023, July 29). "*What a beautiful day*▢▢" [Photograph]. Instagram.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CvSWZ8mM9Fs/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2023, September 25). "*Back to school I guess*" [Photograph].

      Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cxn4LjpRUat/

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2023, September 26). *"@dior* 🖤 *By @fynnstoldt*" [Photograph].

      Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CxqfHNMpkTY/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2023, December 11). "*Thank you @globalcitizenforum for giving me*

      the platform to share my story the past few days, I met so many [Photograph]. Instagram.

      https://www.instagram.com/p/C0uQnW5MvIS/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2024, February 9). "*Staring contest?*" [Photograph]. Instagram.

      https://www.instagram.com/p/C3IyX0JPIIN/

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2024, March 15). "🧸 🌧️ 🧿 🍀" [Photograph]. Instagram.

      https://www.instagram.com/p/C4ixioSuTkC/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2024, March 17). "*11:11*" [Photograph]. Instagram.

      https://www.instagram.com/p/C4n2CTkJimw/

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2024, March 20). *"Ran out of captions, yet again."*

      [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C4vps8lxiRI/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2024, March 23). "*Today's episode*" [Photograph]. Instagram.

      https://www.instagram.com/p/C43WdcPJ1AG/?img_index=1

Yusra Mardini [@yusramardini]. (2024, April 15). "*Ad| Coachella takeover @bmw* 🤍 *By*

      @tobi_holzweiler" [Photograph]. Instagram.

      https://www.instagram.com/p/C5ynKmBS1ES/?img_index=1