

Game Changer: The Impact of Social Media on Gender Bias in Sports Media

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Abstract

Historically, traditional sports media has framed female athletes through stereotypical lenses that prioritize appearance and personal life over athletic achievements. Social media, however, has emerged as a powerful tool for female athletes to bypass the stereotypical lenses and portray their own narratives. This study explores how female athletes navigate these digital spaces to reshape public perceptions while addressing the challenges posed by the pressure to maintain an online persona.

The representation of female athletes in the media has long been characterized by gender bias, underrepresentation, and misrepresentation. Traditional sports media have often relegated women's sports to secondary status, framing female athletes through gendered lenses that emphasizes appearance and personal lives over athletic achievements (Jakubowska, 2022). This marginalization reinforces the stereotype that women's sports are less important than those of their male counterparts (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015). However, the advent of social media has provided female athletes with an unprecedented platform to take control of their public image and challenge conventional portrayals. Social media platforms like Instagram, X, and TikTok allow athletes to present their identities and narratives without the interference of traditional sports media, enabling them to engage directly with fans and showcase a more authentic representation of themselves (Pegoraro, 2010). This self representation is empowering as it allows athletes to craft personal brands and highlight achievements that might otherwise be overlooked by mainstream outlets (Harris & Brison, 2014).

While social media offers opportunities for empowerment and agency, it also presents challenges, especially concerning athlete welfare. The constant pressure to maintain an idealized online persona can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and negative mental health outcomes (Kavanagh, Litchfield, & Osborne, 2020). Female athletes who are often subject to online abuse in the form of body shaming, unrealistic beauty standards, etc. may experience heightened emotional strain as they navigate the demands of social media (Daniels, 2009). Furthermore, despite the empowering potential of these platforms, negative public perceptions rooted in traditional media stereotypes persist. This complicates the ability of female athletes to fully escape the limitations imposed by historical biases (Sahin et al., 2021).

Rationale

The purpose of this research is to examine how female athletes are represented in traditional sports media and how social media impacts their identity and public perception. Studies show how female athletes are often sidelined in traditional sports media. They are often marginalized or framed through a gendered lens, reinforcing their secondary status in mainstream sports coverage (Jakubowska, 2022). However, social media platforms like Instagram and X have provided athletes with new possibilities to control their self presentation and challenge traditional media portrayals and narratives (Pegoraro, 2010). While many female athletes feel empowered by social media, it also brings challenges, particularly the mental health impacts of maintaining an online identity, as highlighted by Kavanagh, Litchfield, and Osborne (2020). Despite growing research on athlete self representation, Sahin et al. (2021) note the lack of research on how these digital platforms influence public perception and an athlete's identity over time. This study aims to address the gap by exploring the dual role of social media in shaping both the empowerment and the challenges faced by female athletes. In this study, the following questions will be answered:

RQ1: How are female athletes depicted in the media?

RQ2: How does the use of social media impact female athlete identity and public perception?

Context

The media landscape for female athletes has changed significantly with the rise of social media. In the past, traditional media outlets often limited female athletes to stereotypical portrayals, focusing more on their personal lives and appearance than their athletic performance.

As Hall (2024) explains, media representations actively create meaning and shape how we understand the world, including how female athletes are portrayed. With the growing influence of social media platforms, athletes now have the ability to directly engage with their audiences, present their own stories, and challenge outdated narratives. While this shift has provided more visibility and empowerment for female athletes, it has also introduced new pressures, as athletes are expected to maintain a curated online presence. These challenges along with the potential impact on mental health are important factors to consider when exploring how female athletes navigate both traditional and social media spaces.

Theoretical Framework

This study applies Representation Theory to explore how female athletes are portrayed in traditional sports media and how they portray themselves on social media platforms.

Representation Theory examines how groups, identities, and cultures are portrayed in media and what societal effects these portrayals have. Central to this theory is the idea that media representations are not neutral; they are constructed and often times reflect and reinforce existing power dynamics, stereotypes, and cultural norms (Hall, 1997). By studying these portrayals, researchers can explore how media influences public perception and contributes to the formation of cultural identities.

Representation Theory is rooted in the work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall. Hall is widely credited with formalizing the concept in his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. He argued that media does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs it through selection, framing, and omission of information. Hall (1997) emphasized that representations carry meaning and often reinforce societal hierarchies,

stereotypes, and norms. These media constructions play a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions and influencing how individuals and groups are understood and represented.

In the context of this research, Representation Theory provides a lens through which to analyze the portrayal of female athletes in media. Traditional sports media has historically reinforced gendered stereotypes, often framing female athletes as secondary to their male counterparts and emphasizing traits such as appearance or personal lives over athletic achievements. By contrast, social media offers female athletes a platform to challenge these portrayals and assert control over their own narratives. Representation Theory will guide this study's exploration of the extent to which these portrayals reinforce or subvert societal norms and perceptions. Representation Theory provides a critical foundation for understanding the societal implications of these portrayals and the role of media in shaping narratives.

Literature Review

In recent years, the intersection of gender, sports, and media has sparked debate and extensive research, especially with a focus on how female athletes are represented in the media and the evolving role of social media in the shaping of their identities. This literature review examines four themes that express key issues surrounding female athletes in the media: underrepresentation and gender bias in sports media, social media as a platform for athlete self representation, social media and athlete welfare, and the impact of self representation on athlete identity and public perception. Additionally, this review identifies the gap in understanding how social media both empowers and affects the wellbeing of female athletes.

Under representation and gender bias in sports media

The under representation and gender bias faced by female athletes in traditional sports media has been a persistent issue in the industry. Studies have shown that female athletes are often marginalized in coverage, receiving significantly less airtime than male counterparts. Cooky, Messner, and Musto (2015) found that televised news and highlight shows regularly exclude or minimize the achievements of women in sports. This reinforces the secondary status of female athletes in the media landscape. This trend is not limited to the United States and Western sports media as Jakubowska (2022) highlights similar patterns in Polish newspapers, where male athletes are disproportionately covered especially during high profile events such as the Winter Olympics. Gendered framing further exacerbates the issue as female athletes are often portrayed through lenses that emphasize their appearance or personal life over their achievements. This biased representation of female athletes reinforces traditional gender roles and limits the public's perception of women's sports.

Additionally, Billings and Eastman (2000) demonstrate how the selective representation of gender, ethnicity, and nationality in American television coverage in the 2000 Summer Olympics shaped the way female athletes were portrayed. The study reveals that female athletes of color were often sidelined, while white female athletes received more coverage further enforcing racial and gendered biases. The continued underrepresentation of women in sports media not only affects their visibility but their ability to inspire future generations of female athletes. The disparities in coverage contribute to the notion that women's sports are less important or exciting than their male counterparts.

The underrepresentation of female athletes in traditional media is a key issue that has spurred much of the discussions around gender bias in sports media. As Cooky et al. (2015) and

Jakubowska (2022) note, such media practices reflect and perpetuate gendered power structures which limits opportunities for women to gain the recognition they deserve for their athletic talents and achievements.

Social media as a platform for athlete self representation

The rise of social media has transformed how athletes, particularly female athletes, engage with the public and manage their identities. Social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter (now called X), and TikTok offer athletes an unprecedented opportunity to bypass traditional media filters and present themselves on their own terms. Pegoraro (2010) explores how female athletes use Twitter to engage directly with their audience which allows them to control their self presentation and challenge the media's portrayal of them. By interacting with fans and sharing personal insights (on their own accord) along with athletic achievements, female athletes can construct a narrative that reflects their true selves, not what is portrayed in the media through stereotyped and gendered lenses. This shift is significant for female athletes who have historically been sidelined or misrepresented in traditional sports coverage (Jakubowska, 2022).

Similarly, Grubic (2020) examines the case of Ibtihaj Mohammed, a Muslim American fencer, who uses social media as a tool to assert her identity as both an athlete and a woman of color. Through her social media presence, Muhammad has redefined the narrative surrounding her. Challenging dominant culture norms Muhammad highlights how athletes from marginalized backgrounds are increasingly using social media platforms to express multifaceted identities. Grubic's study underscores the power of social media in allowing athletes to assert agency over how they are seen by the public and in the media along with challenging long-standing stereotypes in sports media.

The ability to self represent on social media also extends to the creation of personal brands, a phenomenon explored by Harris and Brison (2024). They note how elite female athletes like Serena Williams and Simone Biles, have harnessed social media to not only promote their athletic achievements but also build personal brands that align with their values and beliefs. This ability to craft a narrative around their identities allows athletes to cultivate a more holistic public image, one that exceeds their sports performance and highlights their activism, business ventures, or personal beliefs.

However, while social media offers new opportunities for self representation, it also brings challenges. Sahin et al. (2021) notes that the pressure to maintain a polished and consistent digital identity can lead to stress and anxiety for athletes. In particular, for female athletes who are expected to present themselves in ways that align with conventional beauty standards and gender norms. Despite these challenges, social media has undeniably become a crucial tool for athletes to shape their own narratives and create a space for female athletes to be seen and heard in ways that traditional media outlets have failed to provide.

Social media and athlete welfare

While social media provides female athletes with an unprecedented platform for self expression and empowerment, it also introduces significant challenges related to mental health and well being. The constant scrutiny and the pressure to maintain an online persona can take a toll on athletes' emotional and and psychological health. Kavanagh, Litchfield, and Osborne (2020) examine how the demands of creating an online persona combined with the scrutiny of fans and the public can lead to increased stress and anxiety. Athletes are frequently subjected to online abuse, body shaming, and other forms of harassment, which can exacerbate feelings of vulnerability and isolation. As these pressures continue to mount, many athletes struggle to find a

balance between a private and public life with their digital presence often becoming a source of emotional strain.

Sahin et al. (2021) also addresses the mental health challenges faced by athletes who engage in social media, particularly regarding the emotional toll of negative feedback and online criticism. These external pressures coupled with the need for athletes to uphold a positive and aspirational image can significantly affect their well being. The study emphasized that while social media can be a tool for empowerment it also amplifies the the burden of maintaining a public image. Moreover, Daniels (2009) highlights how female athletes are subjected to objectification and sexualization in both traditional and social media, which can further contribute to negative body image and self esteem issues. The focus on their physical appearance, often at the expense of their athletic achievements, places additional emotional and mental strain on athletes. This emphasis on appearances over performance can hinder female athletes' ability to focus on their sport and further complicates the relationship between their public and private identities.

While social media can be a platform for empowerment, the mental health impacts are undeniable. The pressure to constantly perform and present a polished image can detract from athletes overall well being. As Kavanagh et al. (2020) suggest, the impact of social media on athlete welfare requires further attention, particularly when considering the long-term effects on mental health and career longevity.

Impact of athlete self representation on athlete identity and public perception

Self representation on social media has profound impact on both the identity of female athletes and how they are perceived by the public. By controlling their own narratives, athletes

can challenge traditional media portrayals and reshape their public image. Grubic (2020) explores how Ibtihaj Muhammad's strategic use of social media allows her to control how she is perceived as a Black Muslim woman and an elite athlete. Muhammad's decision to showcase both her athletic accomplishments and personal values, such as her advocacy for diversity and inclusion, has shifted public perceptions which transcends the stereotypical representations of women in sports media. This case underscores the potential for athletes to shape multifaceted identities and redefine the terms of their public recognition.

Similarly, Sahin et al. (2021) emphasizes that the self representation strategies of female athletes on social media contribute to shaping their public identities. The control over their digital presence allows athletes to present themselves not only as sports figures but also as activists, entrepreneurs, and influencers, expanding their role in society beyond the traditional confines of sport. This form of identity construction on social media allows female athletes to present a more holistic version of themselves. One that aligns with their personal beliefs, social causes, and broader aspirations. As athletes increasingly engage in self presentation, the public perception of women's sports evolves, challenging the long-standing biases that have marginalized female athletes. Pegoraro (2010) also highlights how self presentation on Twitter allows athletes to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, which often frame their stories in ways that do not reflect their true selves. Through direct engagement with their followers, athletes can present a more authentic image and reshape their public persona contributing to a shift in how female athletes are viewed by the public. The ability to share unfiltered content and engage in two-way communication with fans and followers help demystify the athlete's persona providing a sense of transparency and authenticity that is often lacking in traditional media portrayals.

However, while self representation can empower athletes it also creates challenges in managing how they are perceived. As Cooky, Messner, and Musto (2015) argue, traditional sports media's framing of female athletes still influences public perception, and the gendered biases within these representations can persist despite athletes' efforts to reshape their image. The contrast between traditional media portrayals and the more personalized narratives constructed on social media reflect the ongoing tension in how female athletes are understood by the public.

This literature review reveals that female athletes face persistent underrepresentation and gender bias in traditional sports media, where their accomplishments are often minimized (Jakubowska, 2022). Social media offers an alternative platform, allowing athletes to control their narratives and counter biased portrayals (Pegoraro, 2010). However, the pressure to maintain a consistent online presence can have negative effects on athletes' mental health and well being (Kavanagh, Litchfield, & Osborne, 2020). While social media has the potential to shape athlete identity and positively impact public perception, stereotypes from traditional media persist in these digital spaces (Sahin et al., 2021). Yet, there remains a gap in understanding the long-term impact of social media on female athletes' empowerment and well being. Future research should explore how digital platforms influence athlete identity and public perception over time.

Methodology

To test these questions and theory, a series of deliverables will be produced and published. Two of the deliverables include a podcast titled *Game Changers* and a series of features articles. The podcast and articles will feature interviews with women in the sports industry that highlight their experiences in the industry. Each week, topics of the episode will vary based on the guest featured and their experiences in the industry.

The third method used is a promotional package announcing the podcast. The promotional package will include a press release, audio ad, video ad, and print ad. Each component of the promotional package will detail when and where the podcast is released. Along with the promotional package, there will be an Instagram account used to share project and podcast information. Through the completion of the project there will be twelve podcast episodes, seven articles, and forty Instagram posts.

The final method is a professional website housing all material for the project, a portfolio, and professional contact site. The site will be updated as the project progresses and more work is published.

Capstone Project Management

Timeline

The deliverables of this project are due throughout the spring semester. The first deliverable, a research paper, is due February 11th, 2025. The research paper was completed at the beginning of the semester. It was then self-edited and peer reviewed in the following weeks. The second deliverable, a promotional package was worked on through January and February. The first component of the promotional package completed was the audio ad, followed by the print ad and then the press release. The final component of the promotional package completed was the video ad.

The next two deliverables due are the podcast and articles. These deliverables are due February 25th and March 18th respectively, but these are to be accepted conditionally if the podcast episodes and articles are completed as needed. The final two deliverables are forty Instagram posts and a professional website. These deliverables have due dates but will be worked

on throughout the completion of the project. As work is completed it will be uploaded to the website. There will be multiple posts to the Instagram per week to meet the goal of forty posts.

Challenges

The most challenging part of this project for me is time management. This project is all about due dates and punctuality so I need to be diligent in my work and how I spend my time. While not hard to complete there is a large amount of work to complete in a short time frame. To overcome this challenge, I am taking it a day at a time. Breaking down my project and working on something each day will help make the project more manageable.

Successes

The biggest success of the project so far has been the podcast. *Game Changers* has received good reviews and feedback from peers, professors, and others. Another success has been the Instagram account. Since its creation it is gaining followers weekly.

Conclusion

This research examined how female athletes are depicted in the media and how social media impacts their identity and public perception. Traditional sports media has historically reinforced gender bias, underrepresenting female athletes and framing them through stereotypical lenses that focus on appearance or personal lives rather than athletic achievements. In comparison, social media has provided female athletes with a platform to challenge these narratives and take control of their public image. Female athletes, through self representation platforms like Instagram and TikTok, can highlight their athletic achievements and skill, engage with fans, and build personal brands that reflect their character and identity. However, while social media offers opportunities for empowerment, it also creates challenges. The pressure to

maintain a consistent and polished online persona can negatively affect athletes' mental health, leading to heightened stress, anxiety, and vulnerability to online abuse. These findings suggest that social media is a double-edged sword, offering female athletes greater visibility and agency while simultaneously demanding careful navigation of its pressures.

Future research should focus on how long-term social media engagement affects female athletes' careers, mental health, and evolving identities. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how self representation influences public perception and how athletes balance social media's demands at different stages in their careers, such as retirement and life post retirement. Understanding these experiences could help create support systems and resources for athletes as they transition to life beyond competing. Another important direction for future research is to investigate how factors like race, sexuality, and socioeconomic background shape female athletes' experiences with both traditional and social media. Athletes from underrepresented groups may face distinct challenges and biases while also finding unique opportunities to shape their narratives. Investigating audience engagement and how public perceptions evolve across media platforms could reveal whether social media disrupts stereotypes or perpetuates them. These insights are essential for promoting gender equity and better supporting female athletes in a rapidly changing media landscape.

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