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Kathleen Amore  
*Portland State University*

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Social Media and Society: An Investigation of How Female Athletes Use Instagram

Kathleen Amore

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in University Honors and Communication

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Lee Shaker

Portland State University

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Abstract

Athletes increasingly leverage social media so they can share experiences first-hand, sell products, and promote their personal ideas and skills. Female athletes can become empowered through Instagram’s ability to give a ‘voice’ to the object through captions, as well as its’ ability to generate revenue through endorsements. Female athletes who find the most success on Instagram often post content that highlights their sexuality and personal life over their sport. Their success is found through a form of ‘self-objectification’, which can be seen as empowering and/or regressive to women’s sport. To explore this tension, my research project focused on the intentions and experiences of female athletes in their use of Instagram for professional purposes. I interviewed six professional female skiers between the ages of 21 and 34 years old who are active on Instagram. My semi-structured interviews took place in person and over Zoom between February and April in 2023. The findings suggest that while Instagram can increase media exposure, generate income, and build communities for female athletes, it also reinforces objectification. This project suggests that an athlete’s choice to objectify herself is a form of empowerment.

Keywords: female athletes, Instagram, social media, objectification, women’s sports, female empowerment
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Introduction

The intersection between sports and media is an important discourse in the field of communication. Gender differences in male and female athletes are developed through agenda setting in commercialized sports. In the past, sports media consisted of television broadcasts and written articles. Word choice, camera angles, and exposure hold powerful meanings to the audience (Messner et al., 1993). In traditional media, female athletes are infantilized when they are described as “graceful” or “beautiful”. They are gender-marked when referred to as “the women’s team”, or referred to by their first name. They are sexualized through camera angles and word choice. In addition, they receive less media exposure than their male counterparts (Bruce, 2016; Messner et al., 1993). Moving away from traditional media coverage, social media brings a new method for athletes to gain agency and exposure to their audiences. Sports media are rapidly evolving as new communication technologies emerge. From newspapers, to radio, to television, to the internet, and finally to social media, it is hard to imagine a world without mediated sports entertainment.

Instagram, Youtube, Twitter, and Facebook are now an integral part of sports media and communication. Social media are spaces in which athletes can share experiences first-hand, sell products, and promote their personal ideas and skills. Instagram, in particular, is an increasingly important part of the sports industry, allowing new methods for brands and athletes to create income. Instagram is also a way for athletes to present themselves in an intimate way, therefore creating an emotional connection with their fans. Studies that focus on the relationship between brand equity
and athlete presentation are scarce because social media is such a new and ever-changing entity (Bruce, 2013; Billings, 2014). Research in this discourse reveals trends that are valuable due to the amount of people who engage with social media. The study of how individuals interact with social media reflects evidence of issues in the real world.

This project tracks the trend of how female athletes engage with Instagram. It considers whether they are empowered and objectified in an online media space. While Instagram can be a breeding ground for online hate and potential “regression” for female athletes, the goal of this project is to break down these negatives and reveal the overarching benefits of the app. Women can become empowered through Instagram’s ability to give a ‘voice’ to the object through captions, as well as its ability to generate revenue through endorsements. This thesis includes scholarly research as well as qualitative evidence to examine how female athletes use Instagram, and how it can provide benefits and conflicts to the advancement of their sport. Six professional female skiers who are active on Instagram were interviewed in order to understand how and why this form of communication has impacted women’s sport. In their experiences, while Instagram can make women vulnerable to online hate, it can also increase their media exposure, generate income, and build communities.

**Literature Review**

*Agenda Setting in Traditional Media*

Though some people might argue that sports media are inconsequential distractions, there are reasons to believe that they are an influential part of our information landscape. According to Bruce (2013), “media sport does matter, precisely because its stories and images convey information about who and what matters, and in
what ways they matter.” In other words, the ways in which sport is framed in the media are vital to how the audience will perceive it. Sports journalists operate at the intersection of sports and objectivity, and their stories construct reality. Communication through media plays a central role in the perception and reproduction of sports. Traditional media coverage reinforces a gender bias through infantilization, sexualization, and gender-marking female athletes. This practice upholds masculine privilege in sport by positioning women athletes as inferior to a male standard (Bruce, 2013, 2015).

**Sexism in Traditional Media**

Messner et al. (1993), conducted a content analysis of a 1984 collegiate basketball tournament which showed that regardless of the gender of the commentator, infantilization and gender marking was extremely prevalent. This is a linguistic practice rooted in misogyny, in which the dominant man would be referred to as Mr., and the subordinate woman referred to by her first name. Infantilization reinforces male athletes' superiority to females. Women are also often marked as ‘other’ by being referred to as “the women’s team,” while men are “the team.” Sherry et al. (2016) conducted a content analysis of images of female athletes in traditional media. They found that images of female athletes in the media fail to represent their athletic performance. Sports women are often photographed in a posed and sexual manner, rather than actively competing in their sport. Furthermore, words used to describe female athletes in the media such as emotional, small, weak, beautiful, and graceful, conform them to their femininity rather than their sport (Litchfield & Osborne, 2015). The sexualization and objectification of women “reinforce gender differences and uphold masculine privilege in sport by positioning women athletes as inferior to a male
standard” (Bruce, 2013, 2015). This method of agenda setting in traditional media both subordinates and delegitimizes female athletes.

**Self-presentation of Female Athletes on Instagram**

Social media, Instagram in particular, are different from traditional media because individuals have agency over their content. Within a sports context, athletes no longer have to rely on photographers, journalists, and television producers for exposure to their audience. They are now able to directly communicate through sharing posts that have the potential to reach millions of people. With this in mind, some athletes have more success on social media platforms than others. Scholars concerned with these trends have found attributes that reflect gender differences in how athletes gain popularity online. Goffman’s theory (1959) claims that self-presentation is goal driven and maintains a balance between the goals of the individual and the goals of the audience (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Recent research grounded in Goffman’s theory of self-presentation suggests that women are more likely to post photos of themselves, as well as photos that are sexual in nature (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). According to a content analysis of eight celebrity-athletes, females post more personal photos (family and friends) while males post more action shots (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). This reflects misogynistic ideals that women are ‘liked’ more when they are in a passive-posed setting, while men are ‘liked’ when they are in an active setting. It goes back to the idea of women being perceived as objects and men as subjects. Men also have more success in user engagement (comments and likes) (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). This could be due to men’s sports being overall more popular than women’s sports, therefore giving them a larger online audience.
Content analyses in this discourse also reveal the methods female athletes use to present themselves on social media. Professional female athletes tend to use self-love, self-disclosure, and self-empowerment to gain agency and autonomy on social media (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). This study was limited in that they made assumptions on the athletes’ intentions based on comments and captions in their content. Since female athletes must balance their own goals with the goals of the audience, their methods of portraying self-love, self-disclosure, and self-empowerment often includes some type of self-objectification (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). This ‘self-objectification’ is empowering as “women are encouraged to ‘own’ and celebrate their bodies and sexuality as a marker of freedom and choice, and social media provides a platform through which the individual athlete can proactively cultivate brand visibility” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 60).

**Does Agency Online Create Female Empowerment?**

*Empowerment* is defined as “the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one’s life and claiming one’s rights” (Oxford, 2022). An important part of having success on social media is athletes’ ability to stay true to themselves but also perform for their audience. Since the highest user engagement for female athletes comes from images that are sexual, posed, and personal-life oriented (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018), does it make sense for respected athletes to post in ways that conform to these expectations? Are these women promoting empowerment by gaining popularity online through self-objectification and feminization? Or are they allowing a desire for popularity and endorsements to lead them into exploiting their own bodies?
This conundrum was highlighted in a New York Times article about the NCAA’s new NIL (Name, Image, and Likeness) policy. This policy allows college athletes to profit off their popularity online. Olivia Dunne, a gymnast at LSU gained millions of followers through this platform, as well as through posting photos very sexual in nature. She is currently one of the highest paid female athletes and makes seven figures through her TikTok and Instagram accounts. The NYT article warned that “social media posts that spotlight attractiveness can be seen as regressive for female athletes as it impacts how society perceives the legitimacy of female sports” (Villanova University, 2022, para. 3). Dunn argues that the ability for female athletes to objectify themselves online is empowering because it allows her to generate wealth through brand endorsements that she never would have been able to achieve through a career in women’s college gymnastics (Streeter, 2022). In other words, Instagram allows Dunne to support herself as a college athlete in a domain with few other career opportunities. Beyond gymnastics, there is still a large wage gap between female and male athletes. For example, the 2015 FIFA World Cup prize money for the men’s tournament was $35 million, and the women’s was $2 million. The U.S. men’s participant bonus was $1.5 million, and the women’s was $200,000 (Garris, 2017). So, to Dunne and others empowerment comes from elite female athletes being able to create an authentic brand in the sports market place through emphasizing their femininity and celebrating heterosexiness. Self-branding is a vital part of generating income through social media, and this comes with the aesthetic labor of ‘having the right look’ in order to promote brand consumption (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

Marketing feminine self-expression through bodily display “simultaneously invokes tropes of female objectification while promoting the self as an agentic,
independent and confident female subject” (Banet-Weiser, 2015). Instagram is a unique outlet as it allows women to post images that are sexual in nature, but also gives them the space to have a voice in how they are perceived. Bruce (2016) writes, “…athletes already know the criticisms and reject them. They know exactly what they are doing. They know, and they do it all the same, both because they do not experience themselves as manipulated and powerless, and because like many others in the MTV generation…they rightly see visibility in the media as the only ‘real’ outlet for the achievement of selfhood this culture offers (p. 85).” In other words, Instagram allows women to take back control over their public image. They can curate photos, captions, videos, and stories that have the same potential exposure as a third-party media outlet that they do not have control over. As Olivia Dunne demonstrates, there are women who have embraced and profited off of the fact that audience members value traditional heterosexiness and femininity.

Some may take on the perspective of Streeter (2022), in which any type of objectification of women is regressive and delegitimizes women’s sport. Haley Jones, an All-American point guard at Stanford who is popular on Instagram offers a perspective that is counter to Dunne’s (Streeter, 2022). She claimed to find success with social media and sponsorships through being authentically herself, and that does not involve objectifying herself. She explained that bikini pictures are not the type of content that she wants to post, and it is not what her audience wants to see. Jones stated:

You can go outside wearing sweatpants and a puffer jacket, and you’ll be sexualized. I could be on a podcast, and it could just be my voice, and I’ll face the same thing. So, I think it will be there, no matter what you do or how you present yourself. This is the society we live in. (Streeter, 2022)
In other words, no matter how female athletes choose to portray themselves, they will be objectified due to the nature of society. Jones noted that she focuses on the positive support she receives through her Instagram, and blocks out those who ridicule her for not sexualizing and feminizing herself.

Though some female athletes may avoid sexualizing their own image, objectification of female athletes is impossible to avoid, especially when brands profit off of social media, and “sex sells.” Athletes make money through sponsorships and endorsements, and those companies prefer to work with those who have a high user engagement. Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) interviewed female athletes trying to make the Rio Olympics and found that a common theme among them was pressure to post sexy photos on social media in order to gain popularity. Some athletes decided that posting suggestive content was not worth it, and others credited their increased online popularity and earning power to self-objectification. With this in mind, how can female athletes be blamed for posting photos that are sexual in nature? These women are aware that their actions do not necessarily advance the sport, but they face pressures from their sponsors, their followers, and their own desire to create a lasting career. It can be difficult to balance posting photos that are sexual in nature while maintaining respect as an athlete because this does little to advance the sport (LaVoi & Calhoun, 2014). Instagram can be used as a tool for women because it provides a space for women’s voices to be heard through captions and communities online. Social media and third wave feminism allow female athletes to bring their sexuality and capabilities together in order to be perceived as pretty AND powerful (Bruce, 2016).
Much of the relevant research reviewed here is based on content analysis and this method provides valuable information regarding the attributes of athletes’ posts on Instagram. But, content analysis cannot speak to athletes’ motivations or broader experiences as Instagram users. To better understand the context of these posts, another method is necessary. So, by conducting six interviews with professional female freeride skiers who are active on Instagram, I seek to discover how the app has influenced their careers as athletes.

RQ1: How does the audience’s reception of Instagram posts affect female athletes in terms of their agency, safety, and empowerment?

RQ2: Why do female athletes use Instagram?

Method

I chose to interview skiers because the athletes within the sport would not be nearly as successful as they are today without the use of Instagram¹. Freeride skiing is a niche within skiing that thrives on cinematography more than it does broadcast competition. It operates differently than popular sports like basketball, tennis, and soccer. In this sense, Instagram is a perfect outlet for skiers to become successful because they can promote their photos and video projects through posting. Before social media, athletes relied on ski movies, ski magazines, and in some disciplines, the World Cup, Olympics, and Freeride World Tour² to receive income. Freeskiers make most of their money through film projects and brand endorsements; very little income comes from competitions. Freeskiing is an extreme sport that is still heavily dominated by

¹ This statement is based on information collected from the interviews.
² The Freeride World Tour is a professional big mountain ski competition that is not included in World Cup events or the Olympics.
men. The pool of women who have found success at a professional level is small, and it is often controlled by men (male photographers, filmers, commentators, judges, journalists, etc...). Social media are the first spaces in which women have full control over their image. Instagram, in particular, provides female freeskiers with important opportunities for exposure, income, and networking. Studying the interaction of objectification of freeskiers is also valuable because the uniform for the sport is androgynous. Skiers dress in baggy snow gear, helmets, and goggles, which affects the ways in which skier-women are objectified.

My semi-structured interviews took place in person and over Zoom. They were recorded and transcribed through Google Docs via voice typing. They were conducted between February and April, 2023. The interview questions (see Appendix A) are based on background research on female athletes and their self-presentation on Instagram and the resulting interviews provide insight into the experience of female free-skiers on Instagram. The age of the athletes ranges from 21 years old to 34 years old allowing for a wide scope of how Instagram has affected the sport. The table below identifies the age, number of Instagram followers, and notable accomplishments of the interviewees:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athlete</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Followers on Instagram</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A (Freeride World Tour competitor in 2022-23)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3,177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Freeride World Tour competitor in 2022)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>38.1K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5,422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D (Olympic half-pipe competitor in 2022)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9,608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15.4K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7,183</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

After conducting six interviews with female skiers, common themes regarding how and why they use Instagram emerged. Together, these themes illustrate the balance between empowerment & exploitation that female free skiers seek to strike as they post on Instagram. Shared feelings about the negative aspects of Instagram are also included to provide a well-rounded perspective.

Free Skiers’ Motivations for Using Instagram

Instagram Creates a Career in Freeskiing

A career in freeskiing cannot exist without Instagram and the app is completely intertwined with the sport of freeskiing. It is “baked into contracts [with sponsors], and you really have to sell yourself to companies” (Athlete A). In other words, when one signs a contract to receive skis, goggles, gear etc..., they have to endorse that company through tagging the company’s products in posts. Instagram is a tool athletes use to promote themselves and their sponsors to the outside world. Freeskiing is not nearly as televised as sports like basketball, tennis, and gymnastics. There are many disciplines of skiing in the Olympics, but freeride skiing is still not a part of that competition. In part because of these obstacles to exposure, athletes like the women I interview in this section rely on Instagram as a method of sharing their skills and experiences.

Before social media, athletes had to work and “get lucky” in order to be recruited for photoshoots and film segments, and then hope that maybe they would land in a ski magazine or movie. Athlete B explained:

Social media is where we all are creators at any given moment and everyone you see on the planet has a really high quality camera in their pocket and video
capabilities. We're able to capture everything and then we're blasting it out to the world for reviews, likes, and comments.

In the past, athletes got a paycheck from companies facilitating their feature in a magazine or movie, but now pay checks come from brand endorsements and sponsored advertisements. Athlete E said one of the main pros of using Instagram is how easy it is to make connections with companies and create paid content through brand endorsements. She said, “once you have a profile, you can make a business out of it.” Athlete B describes Instagram as a love-hate relationship because her income sometimes depends on the amount of interaction a post gets, but at the same time it is such an easy process that it is hard to complain about. She states:

I think it's such a beautiful tool that we have in our pocket that all of us can create and capture the moment and it also allows me to like slow down in the mountains and capture those moments of my friends I put my personal touch on what I'm doing instead of that always relying on the film or photographer at the same time it's like it's a bit superficial in the sense that I don't really know all these people that are liking and commenting on my Instagram.

Furthermore, Athlete A provides insight to how Freeride World Tour (FWT)\(^3\) competitors use Instagram:

I'm concerned about how reliant sponsorships are about posting. When I'm on the tour, every night I'm editing clips. It’s silly because it’s my job, but it’s absurd because it feels like it’s more about your ability to make content than it is your skiing ability. But it’s also a positive because how much work you put in is what you get out.

\(^3\) The Freeride World Tour is a professional big mountain ski competition that is not included in World Cup events or the Olympics.
Similarly, Athlete D, an Olympic halfpipe skier, said that Instagram plays a very important role in her career because women’s park skiing does not have a huge television audience. Her Instagram started to grow rapidly after she was named to the Olympic team and she gained quite a few sponsorships and brand deals through it. She also likes that Instagram allows her to show more behind the scenes aspects of competitions and add more subjectivity and personality to her competition experiences. Instagram eliminates the ‘agenda setting’ factor of traditional mass media. Despite underlying societal pressures to uphold a feminine ideal, all of the athletes felt little to no pressure from their sponsors or audience to perform in a certain way. On one hand, athletes who present themselves in a way that pleases the audience (self objectification), may have an easier time developing a following and getting a sponsor, but the sponsors themselves do not require the athletes to post specific content. In addition to this, athletes can still get sponsorships the ‘old-fashioned’ way through competitions. Athlete D posited that women athletes tend to do better with social media engagement, which allows them to produce more income, but she argued that it shouldn’t be like that. Income should come from the sport more than it does social media.

**Instagram Builds Communities**

Another reason why the athletes use Instagram is to build supportive communities within the sport. The relationship between skiing, gender, and social media is important because the amount of women within it is so small. Instagram is a useful place for athletes to network themselves in order to find inspiration and connections. Competitive slopestyle skier Athlete E remarks:

Men’s skiing has been around since the 70s, and it wasn't a thing for women to be park skiing until like the 2010s. The guys kinda got a head start in terms of
coaching who their teammates were. This plays a big role in our skiing. Men just had longer to develop their sport. Women’s skiing has gone so far in the last 5 years, like we’re doing triples now. [Women’s] skiing is progressing at an insane rate.

Athlete E partially attributes the progression to social media and the increased exposure to women’s freeskiing. With men’s skiing being broadcast at a much higher rate than womens, Instagram provides an important space for women to gain visibility of each other, which in turn creates female communities within the sport. Athlete B said she’s seen a huge increase in female skiers and snowboarders in the backcountry over the last three years. She credits this to athletes being able to put out content that inspires others and shows how accessible the sport can be for women. Athlete A stated that the best part of Instagram is “100% the community aspect. It’s connected me to so many women and queer people in the ski-a-verse that I never would have known without it.” She also said it serves as a source of inspiration for her career, as she has access to all the achievements and success of her biggest role models. When asked how gender plays a role in skiing, all of the athletes said it was very prominent growing up because they were often the only girl skier in a group of boys. Athletes B, F, E, and A all credited Instagram to connecting them with life-long female ski partnerships. Since there is such a rarity in female freeskiers, Instagram plays an important role in creating communities for women.

**Embracing the Opportunity for Self-presentation on Instagram**

Instagram is a unique space for athletes because they do not have to rely on a third-party to present them in a certain way through images and captions. Athlete C emphasized the benefits and protections Instagram has created for female athletes in
the modern world. She used the case of Kelly Sildaru as an example. Athlete C remembers being excited that 16 year old Sildaru, a X games medalist, got featured in POWDER Magazine, but was disappointed to see that they only included one photo of her skiing, and the rest were modeled photos of her. Due to the fact that ‘hot’ photos of women tend to get more attention, magazines often only include non-action shots of featured women (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Instagram allows women to take control of how they are presented to the world. It is no longer a process in which photographers (most likely men) take pictures, and then editors (most likely men) choose which photos to include in the magazine feature. Athlete F made use of this through promoting her own film project through Instagram. Her posts attracted attention from larger ski companies who supported her even further. She described Instagram as a ‘shortcut’ to gaining notoriety, especially in the ski world because the community is so tightly knit. It allows for far less middle-men⁴ to bypass in order to get their voices and actions across to the world. Instagram is a unique tool because athletes can use it to promote their skills, their projects, and themselves.

Athlete E brought up an important point relating to the negative aspects of Instagram. It can be hard to fit a video into the algorithm when there is such a high volume of difficult tricks people are achieving and they go viral so quickly and the entire world’s attention span is shortened, and now people only stick around to watch reels under 15 seconds. There seems to be no more space for creative and longer videos of skiing. Athlete A explained that Instagram can be “super toxic” and “draining,” and the validation from likes and comments can be addicting. She also struggles with the

⁴ ‘Middle-men’ as in editors, writers, producers, filmers, photographers, publishers etc…
comparison aspect of social media, admitting it can feel like what she accomplishes as an athlete is never enough to keep up with the constant influx of media. These negative aspects come from the pressures of self-presentation on Instagram.

In line with Goffman’s theory of self presentation, the athletes reported curating their content to satisfy both their personal goals and those of the audience. When asked what type of posts get the most user interaction, all of the athletes interviewed said selfies or video clips that show their face. Athlete B recalls being disappointed that a selfie she posted received more likes than a photo of her skiing a massive line down a mountain in Alaska. Athlete E is a former competitive park skier who now uses Instagram as a platform to post creative free-skiing content. She remarks that there are dramatic differences in user interaction in videos where she posts a clip of her face and her skiing versus a clip of just her skiing. She said it even comes down to whether her hair is visible or not. It’s not that Athlete E wants to show her face in her videos, she just knows how to work with the inherently gendered and sexualized algorithm on ski-Instagram. The women all accepted this reality as the way the world is, and none of them felt that things were going to change.

Despite women having more control over their image, gendered differences in social media presence are still felt and acknowledged by all the athletes. When asked what differences the interviewees noticed between what they post and what their male counterparts post, they all said women tend to present a more well-rounded personality on Instagram. It seems that women of the freeride world post an assortment of pictures of all facets of their lives, while men tend to contain themselves to only sports images. Athlete A admitted she feels a pressure to ‘feminize’ herself in videos because if a girl is doing something that “looks like something a man could do, it’s gonna get a lot of likes.”
Athlete D felt that women in their ski gear are not sexualized, but “there are examples of top female athletes being asked to do *Sports Illustrated* shoots in their bikinis, and they wouldn’t be asked to do that unless they were a gorgeous woman who the world would like to see as an object. It all comes down to the media being used.” These examples show the underlying pressures on social media for female athletes to feminize themselves in order to get more user interaction.

In terms of an imagined audience, the athletes liked to think that they were catering to members of the ski world. Athlete B stated that she tries to gear her schedule towards getting young women outside, and she thought that was her main audience. However, after running analytics on her account, she found that the majority of her followers were men under 24 from Denver, Colorado. Athletes D and B also said that the majority of their followers were men, even though the content they put out is catered towards inspiring other women. Athlete C likes to check out the profiles of her followers and claims that her audience is filled with thoughtful people. The athletes all felt that their main audience was young female skiers, and the few that ran analytics on their accounts were surprised at the amount of male followers they had.

**Discussion**

This project explores the experience of female athletes on Instagram. It investigates content analyses, social science studies, as well as semi-structured interviews in order to track how Instagram plays a role in the career of athletes. The mission of this thesis is to contribute to a growing body of studies that acknowledge gendered differences in an online-media presence. This work shows the implications of online misogyny in how it serves as both a benefit and a disadvantage. From this work, a young girl looking to start an Instagram account based on her athletic skill, would know
that ‘sexy’ photos might get the most interaction, but it is her choice to present herself however she wants, and success can be found in others ways too (as in the case of Haley Jones). Nevertheless, the choice to not-sexualize oneself comes with the burden of having to curate a safe and supportive environment online. Instagram has valuable characteristics that increase visibility, income, and community. Spreading awareness of online misogyny is vital to changing the perception of women online from objects into empowered individuals.

**Objectification Accepted as Reality**

The interviews aligned with evidence from the literature review section in multiple ways. Both quantitative and qualitative data show that the most user engagement on a female athletes’ Instagram comes from posed content that show off femininity and cater to a male gaze (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). The interviewed women all accepted this reality as the way the world is, and none of them felt that things were going to change. When asked what differences the interviewees noticed between what they post and what their male counterparts post, they all said women tend to present a more well-rounded personality on Instagram. It seems that women of the freeride world post an assortment of pictures of all facets of their lives (see Figure 1), while men tend to contain themselves to only sports images.
Figure 1

Top left to bottom right: (1) Chloe Kim, 2x Olympic snowboard gold medalist with 927K followers, (2) Eileen Gu, 2x Olympic gold medalist with 1.8M followers, (3) Henrik Harlaut, 11x Olympic medalist with 308K followers, (4) Zebb Powell, Xgames gold medalist with 406K followers. These screenshots taken on April 10, 2023, show the direct gender differences in the Instagram feeds of male versus female athletes. The screenshots show their 12 most recent posts.
A more detailed analysis shows that 3/12 posts in Kim’s (1) feed are snowboard related and 3/12 posts in Gu’s (2) feed are ski related. On the other hand, 11/12 posts in Harault’s (3) feed are related to skiing, and 12/12 posts on Powell’s (4) feed are related to snowboarding. Both female athletes have significantly more followers than the male athletes. Is this because they are better at marketing themselves through sharing personal life photos? I provide this just to show simple evidence of the differences in skier/snowboarder athlete Instagram pages. These images support both evidence from research, as well as claims made by interviewed athletes. Perhaps the difference in the type of content on male and female profiles is due to more men being involved in action sports overall. The fact that most of the athletes had more male followers than female\(^5\) may explain the subconscious pressure to appeal to a male gaze, as well as why they receive more interaction on sexually suggestive photos. The abundance of men on ski-Instagram could also contribute to the algorithm favoring content that caters to the male-gaze\(^6\).

Furthermore, the interviewed freeskiers said that they still felt objectified online despite their uniform being unisex. Skiers wear baggy jackets and snow pants with a helmet and goggles which hides both the face and body, but there is still a sexualization of the athlete. This trend aligns with what Haley Jones said about women being sexualized even if they go out in “sweatpants and a puffer jacket”. The interviewed athletes all have different relationships to how they portray their sexuality online. Some of them like to post more scandalous pictures just because they want to. None of them credited their success on social media self-objectification, but they said it does help in terms of attracting a larger audience and promoting brand endorsements. Eileen Gu

\(^5\) This claim is based on information received from interviewees who ran analytics on their accounts.

\(^6\) This is speculation; further scholarship on a misogynistic algorithm is an area for future research.
used her popularity on Instagram as an Olympic skier to start a career as a model for Louis Vuitton and Tiffany and Co.

**Instagram is a Positive Influence on Female Freeskiers**

Overall, Instagram has had a positive impact on female skiers. It provides a space in which women can market both their skills as an athlete and their feminine ideals. The debate over whether self-objectification on Instagram is good or bad for women’s sport comes down to individual perceptions. The important part about Instagram is that it gives female athletes the choice to present themselves in whatever way they want. While it is unfortunate that the male gaze is deeply ingrained in online audiences which makes it so feminine ideals receive more interaction, there are ways to use Instagram successfully that avoid being outwardly sexual. Since there is still such a large wage gap between male and female athletes, Instagram acts as a method to generate additional (and well deserved) income. It also serves as a platform for inspiration to other female athletes. As women’s sport is rarely televised, Instagram is a place for athletes to witness and interact with others similar to them.

This project extends prior literature by providing insight into the motivation of female athletes posting on Instagram. Clarity on how women want to be perceived on Instagram can be achieved through their actual words and voices. Content analysis on social media can be difficult to pull accurate information from because of delayed conversations. Those who post can only react to the impression they appear to make on others through comments and likes (Brake, 2012). Interviews serve as an important method in examining themes and patterns on social media.
**Limitations**

This research is limited in that it only includes 6 interviews that were sampled out of convenience. The investigation also only focuses on participants of free-skiing, a very niche sport. With this in mind, the findings cannot necessarily be applied to the general population of female athletes. Additionally, this research project focused mainly on white, heteronormative, able-bodied female athletes. While some of the women I interviewed are BIPOC and LGBTQASI+, most of the background research is limited on the basis of intersectionality. The primary focus of this paper is to investigate the relationship between female athletes and Instagram, and does not take into account other factors that may have some effect. The intersectionality of athletes on social media is an area for future research.

**Conclusion**

Social media are a vital part of the contemporary western world and offer a huge space for online marketing. The investigation of how individuals use social media is valuable because it provides insight into motivations of the audience and the user posting. Furthermore, it provides evidence on the formation of social groups, and misogynistic tendencies on the internet. This project illustrates how Instagram facilitates and reinforces misogynistic ideals, but it also shows that female athletes can seize agency and be empowered as they present themselves to the world. Scholarship on how racism and classism is reinforced on social media is grounds for future research.

This work is important as it shows how women can gain income, visibility, and community while maintaining a career as an athlete. Modern communication platforms like Instagram influence women’s sport in multiple ways, and work in other disciplines is just as important. Society should recognize the influential power of social media, and
study it in order to both take advantage and track inequalities. Understanding how social pressures manifest through self-presentation on social media reflects issues marginalized people face in the ‘real’ world. Awareness of these trends can lead to a safer and more equal world both on and off the Internet.
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Appendix A: Interview Questions

- Can you describe your niche in the free-skiing community? (Background, discipline, title)

- How does Instagram play a role in your skiing career?

- In the past, skiing has been a sport dominated by men. How has Instagram changed the game for female skiers?

- Based off the top of your head, what type of posts typically get the most likes and user engagement? Are you concerned with any of these trends?

- Who do you conceptualize your online audience to be? How do you perform to please this imagined audience?

- How has gender played a role in your career?

- How has Instagram allowed you to break through the barriers of traditional media coverage in women’s sports?

- Are you aware of the new NIL policy? How do you feel about this?

- Have you ever felt victim to online violence on social media? How do you deal with this?

- Free-skiing is a unique sport because the uniform is unisex. How does this affect your experience as a woman in the sport? Are freeskiers less sexualized compared to other sports?

- What kind of differences do you see between how male and female freeskiers present themselves on Instagram? Why do you think this occurs?

- What are the pros and cons of using Instagram as a female athlete?

- What are your other comments or questions on the relationship between female athletes and Instagram?
Lastly, do you know any other women in the field who would be interested in sharing their experience?