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Session Title: Post-feminism and Social Media

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Title: Exploring social media engagement by female athletes in a postfeminist age

Time: 15 minutes

Intro (3 mins)

SLIDE 1

In this presentation I'd like to talk about research I've been conducting with Holly Thorpe (U. Waikato, NZ) that examines the use of social media by sportswomen.

The research aims to explore how social media is being used by sportswomen in the representation and promotion of their sport and themselves as sporting subjects.

Part of the reason why we are interested in investigating how women's sporting identities are being constructed online by athletes themselves is because it has been suggested that social media may offer a potential antidote to the lack of coverage or gender-stereotypical coverage of female athletes that we see emerging from traditional media outlets, and which have been roundly criticised for ignoring, trivialising and sexualising female athletes.

We wanted to explore whether social media offers female athletes an avenue outside of mainstream sports media to challenge the dominant representational regimes of women in sport and to allow female athletes to enhance their visibility on their own terms.

So we were less concerned with trying to determine whether representations of female athletes have ‘improved’, that is, whether sportswomen are being depicted ‘fairly’, ‘accurately’ and in ‘positive’ ways by others and/or themselves in online platforms.

Rather, we were interested in investigating how female athletes respond to particular trends toward what have been identified as postfeminist and neoliberal modes of subjecthood where women are increasingly being expected to demonstrate characteristics of ‘agency’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘capacity’ in marketing and promoting themselves in material and also online spaces.

So the significance of this study lies in what digital media platforms can reveal about wider social conditions informing how female athletes make themselves ‘visible’ online or market themselves in order to redress some of those structural gender inequalities in the sports media.

A guiding question for us, then, is ‘What might female athletes’ social media engagements tell us about how they go about finding a market solution to the problem of mis- or under-representation of women in sport in light of a neoliberalising of feminist agendas?’

Method (2 mins)

SLIDE 2

In order to do this we analysed the Facebook and Instagram profiles of five of the most popular female athletes online: Ronda Rousey (ultimate fighting), Maria Sharapova (tennis), Serena Williams (tennis), Danica Patrick (Formula One), and Alana Blanchard (surfing).

In terms of sample selection, these athletes were chosen because they are active social media users with huge international followings, which limited the sample to athletes from the global north.

Because we were interested in how athletes visually represent their identities as part of forging their brand, we focused on the visually-driven digital platforms - Facebook and Instagram – and examined their posts over a year to capture images across sporting and training seasons.

While analysing images we took into consideration accompanying text. But there was less focus on ‘likes’ and responses from followers (something we are looking at in future research).

Theoretical framework (1 minute)

Theoretically and in terms of the literature, we take our analytical cues from feminist media studies critics like Sarah Banet-Weiser and Amy Dobson, who note that social networking sites (SNS) are spaces where young women are marking themselves out as successful, self-actualising subjects by adopting many of the discourse and practices of promotional culture.

SLIDE 3

Banet-Weiser suggests that 'branding oneself is today understood not only as legitimate but as a goal to strive for. Indeed, self-branding is positioned by marketers and brand managers as the proper way – perhaps even the necessary way – to “take care of oneself” in contemporary advanced capitalist economies' (2012, p.54).

These conditions provide the backdrop to understanding the forms of femininity that many high profile athletes are compelled toward performing online, which commonly celebrate self-display as the freely chosen actions of 'liberated' female subjects.

Results and discussion (7 minutes)

SLIDE 4

Our results suggest that for the female sporting body to become visible, that is have currency, in social media spaces it is required to provide more than depictions of athletic ability or, indeed, heterosexual feminine appeal.

We found that female athletes are articulating sporting and social identities that appear to respond to a growing market for self-esteem and confidence and the demonstration of one's individual capacity.

They do this through their social media posts by crafting their self-brand using 3 inter-related strategies that we identified: expressions of bodily self-love, offering intimate moments of

self-disclosure and demonstrating self-empowerment. Overlapping and intersecting strategies.

In the remaining time I have, I'll be focusing on how 2 of the athletes – Ronda Rousey, Serena Williams - demonstrate self-empowerment and the different types of currency this affords them as feminine sporting subjects.

We suggest that these athletes, in different ways, are responding to the market for empowerment; a market that sells particular imaginings of femininity.

The analysis here is focusing in particular on the ways that self-empowerment is characterised in terms of celebrating one's body and how this dovetails with a neoliberal ethos compelling the female athletic subject to respond to systemic gender injustices as part of the presentation of the self.

In one example, we see Ronda Rousey post her *Sports Illustrated* cover on Facebook. She legitimates her decision to pose for the controversial magazine with the explanation 'Such an honor to share the cover with @theashleygraham and @haileyclauson for @si_swimsuit's issue celebrating women of all body types'.

Here, paradoxically, a practice that was once critiqued as objectifying female athletes, in the current contexts of postfeminist neoliberal tendencies, is used to seemingly advance feminist

agendas of diversity and counter what have been identified as narrow beauty ideals (via the depiction of plus-sized model Ashley Graham and Rousey's athletic body).

The kind of empowerment Rousey is therefore marketing is not just based on the expression of autonomous sexuality, but can be interpreted as appropriating the language of social justice, whereby individual actions are framed as catalysts for social change, in this case using one's 'empowered' athletic body to champion diversity.

While we are focusing primarily on visual representations, it is the text accompanying portrayals of a hetero-sexy style of athletic femininity that often frames these images as celebrations of empowered femininity. The text enables sportswomen to 'speak to' the image, and in so doing, 'perform' an empowered self and thus deflect charges of objectification and passivity.

SLIDE 5

In the next example from Serena Williams' feed, we can see ideas of bodily self-love, esteem and acceptance at play: body-positive affirmations known as love your body (LYB) discourses.

Williams' Instagram post of her hot-dog legs accompanied by the caption 'war wounds, scarred hotdogs or legs?' takes on new meaning beyond bodily objectification and sexualisation when understood relative to LYB discourses. She appears to stand in defiance

of a white convention/ideal of the flawless, smooth pink hot dog leg selfie – hers are brown, scarred and with no inner thigh gap.

By offering her body up for visual consumption via the language of LYB, she brands herself as an athlete who is ‘authentic’ and ‘accepting’ of her body by appearing to reject the airbrushed, retouched look that is characteristic of the hot-dog leg phenomenon.

While Williams to some extent challenges racial standards of beauty by proudly celebrating her black body – a body that has come under much scrutiny in the media for appearing too muscular and aggressive in the overwhelmingly white world of women’s tennis, the simplistic solutions offered by self-love mantras belie the entrenched systemic structural and cultural embeddedness of racial injustice.

It would appear that LYB discourses offer an avenue for athletes like Williams to manage conflicts that arise when racist beauty standards intersect with notions of successful female athleticism that rely on appearing pretty and powerful.

In the instance of celebrating her muscular thighs through a language of LYB, Williams addresses gender and racial discrimination directed at female athletes accused of not being feminine enough (commonly those outside of a white, heterosexual ideal), yet this is achieved without taking a political (hence potentially adversarial or disruptive) activist position that interrogates the hierarchies sustaining race and gender privilege in sportmedia.

That is, the negative stereotyping experienced by African American Athletes are best overcome by working on one's own self-esteem.

But there is a reason for this - unlike Rousey, who can capitalise on diversity rhetoric from a privileged position of whiteness, Williams as a African American female athlete is compelled to manage her difference in highly individualised way, lest more activist interventions against racism are interpreted 'negatively' and damaging to her 'brand'.

For the followers of these athletes on social media, what they are being encouraged to relate to is not necessarily the highly trained, elite female athletic body, but a brand of athlete advocating for women's self-esteem and body confidence.

Conclusion (2 minute)

SLIDE 6

For us, an exploration of how sportswomen use social media platforms within a neoliberal and postfeminist context has broader relevance to understanding the transformative shifts in media representations of female athletes, whereby self-expression becomes the mechanism by which the feminine body and self as a commodified brand is simultaneously produced and regulated.

Our findings indicate that, in a social media environment, female athletes are adopting new strategies for identity construction that capitalise on tropes of agentic postfeminist subjecthood to market themselves.

We argue that the power social media seemingly affords female athletes to control how they are represented in the media by forging their own profile and brand is not necessarily a form of gender emancipation for individual athletes, nor is the market an antidote to gender inequalities in sport coverage.

The overly-simplistic assertion that sportswomen's capacity to produce self-imagery on social media equates with empowerment is to bypass more complex interrogations of what modes of feminine athletic identity are 'made legible within the commercial parameters of online spaces' (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.63) and which remain invisible.

Rather, as demonstrated in this paper, we suggest that user-generated content facilitates the forging of new, yet no less problematic, feminine sporting identities.