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**Eke Panuku, Eke Tangaroa! How Black Ferns 7s
Athletes Navigate Instagram and Inspire the Next
Generation in Aotearoa**

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of
Master of Health, Sport, and Human Performance
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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

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Abstract

This thesis considers the role of Instagram in the lives of players on the New Zealand Black Ferns 7s rugby team, and audience engagement with players' social media accounts. Using a mana wāhine methodology, this study explores how Black Ferns 7s players utilize and navigate Instagram, through mixed-methods enquiry, including a social media analysis of 8 players' accounts, interviews with 3 Black Ferns 7s players, and talanoa sessions with members of the women's rugby community in the Bay of Plenty, supplemented by input from Black Ferns players and fans via direct messages on Instagram. The quantitative social media analysis identified 4 key themes in players' Instagram posts: achievement, team & rugby, life outside rugby, and culture & vulnerability. The analysis reveals that players post the most regarding their "team & rugby", generating an "athlete first" self-representation. It finds a statistically significant difference in the thematic content of Instagram posts based on squad seniority and the number of followers a player has. Followers were found to engage most with posts regarding "achievement", and the least with posts regarding "culture and vulnerability".

The interviews elaborate upon these quantitative differences by highlighting why athletes specifically use Instagram, insights into Black Ferns aspirational team dynamics, and the importance of a player's life outside of rugby. The thematic analysis also reveals the digital economic and collective labour involved in producing social media content as a member of this team, and what it means to be culturally "authentic" online in Aotearoa. It reveals the unique elements generated by the team-sport context of this study, including intra-team differences in social media usage. Furthermore, hauora, Indigenous role modeling, and Tall Poppy Syndrome emerge as factors particularly unique to the cultural context within which this study takes place. The discussions culminate in the establishment of a layered understanding of the external, internal, and individual factors which shape Instagram posting habits, and the features which most significantly impact why audiences follow the curated displays Black Ferns 7s athletes provide online.

This project contributes to international literature on sportswomen's use of social media, demonstrating the powerful ways that players support one another in what, when, and how they post, and the importance of cultural identity in Māori and Pasifika players' social media engagement. It further reveals the importance of team culture in shaping individual players' social media and audience engagement. This thesis also highlights the significance of sporting and cultural histories and intersectional identities in digital self-representation and fan engagement with sportswomen's social media usage.

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Ko Mākeo te maunga

Ko Waiawa te awa

Ko Mātaatua te waka

Ko Whakatōhea te iwi

Ko Omarumutu te marae

I te taha tōkū māmā, no Ōpōtiki ahau

Me i te taha o tōkū pāpā, no Awherika ki te Tonga ahau

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Chapter 1: He Kōrero Whakataki

It was 2012 and 35 degrees outside in the Tanzanian heat when I played rugby for the first time, with upwards of 60 children on the field at my school, and only about 7 pairs of shoes in sight. I couldn't wait to put on the boots I'd bought at the secondhand market, but when most of the kids showed up barefoot, I quickly hid them in my bag. We played for hours, despite the language barriers that existed; boys and girls played alongside one another, despite the strict gender separation that permeated most of the majority-Muslim society we lived in; and we refused to let the game end, despite the lack of shade under the African sun. It was on this day that I decided I was going to play rugby, and I didn't need shoes to do it.

It was orientation week when I stepped into the university's administration office, in a small town in Spain, where speaking Spanish was not merely an expectation, but a necessity. After failing to locate the women's rugby tryouts on the list, I asked the administrator when and where they were taking place. The look of confusion from behind her glasses made me think it was time to pull out my amateur Spanish skills, so I asked again, "rugby training, for girls? I can only see boys on the list". Her realization was followed by a giggle. "For girls? Girls don't play rugby", she laughed. Now, this was a particularly traditional part of Spain: siesta time meant everything shut from 2pm to 5pm, without fail, daily; a regular bedtime sat around the 10:00pm mark, and God forbid anything opened before 9:30am; and rugby was a men's sport.

By no fault of her own, it was unlikely the lady had ever seen women playing rugby in that town, with architecture that looked as if it had been taken straight out of a Disney film. But in the age of digital media, I was surprised images and videos of women taking to the field had yet to reach her screen. I felt defeated, and so, I took a different approach. Instead, I asked, "ok, then who is your men's coach?". She responded that they had yet to secure one. In that moment, I made a split-second decision that I am inclined to believe changed my life. With my best attempt at confidence, I told her

not to worry, that I would be the coach, and swiftly walked out of the office before she could tell me otherwise. It was from that day that I decided I wanted to be involved in sport as more than just an athlete, and I didn't need a women's team to do it.

It was in the weeks that followed that I took up the role of coaching the university's only rugby team, and those 25 boys are the reason I am now a strength and conditioning coach. However, my experience in that administration office is burned into my mind, etched into my memory as the single most powerful motivator for why I continue to pursue a career in a male-dominated industry: because rugby is not a boys' club, and it was the Black Ferns wāhine that reinforced this for me. Seeing them not only dominate on the field and in the World Series, but also express their pride, culture, and strength online on social media, has encouraged me to play and work in sport.

I was late to the social media game, but I quickly found it to be quite a personal space, where I could follow those who I want to see more of and create a feed that fuelled my passions. In a lifestyle that saw me moving countries every few years, it was also my lifeline: to old friends, to things I had to leave behind, and to my other home of Aotearoa. Following the Black Ferns, All Blacks, and other New Zealand rugby players online was how I kept that connection alive, even when I was on the complete opposite end of the world. Particularly when I was living in countries where women's rights were limited and women's sport ignored, following these influential and unquestionably skilful women gave me a sense of pride in where I came from, and a sense of hope for where I was going. This is because although I didn't necessarily see sportswomen succeeding in person around me, I saw enough of it online to prompt a myriad of emotions about women in sport, motivating me to continue training and coaching. These athletes served as reminders that just because I didn't see something happening in front of me doesn't mean it will not happen at all: someone has to blaze the trail. So you see, it was never just about wanting to play rugby like the Black Ferns, it was about being steadfast in my desire to be part of a sporting space filled with people who did not look like me or think like me, so as to ensure that those who sought to do the

same would eventually be welcome in that space too. This is what these women represented for me, halfway across the world, being laughed at for wanting to play rugby. But I would be naïve to think I am alone in all of this: plenty of other young ladies would have gone through similar discouraging experiences, and likely use their social media platforms in similar personal fashions.

And so was born the research that follows, by a young girl inspired by the women in black, to continue to make space for herself and other wāhine in a decades-old boys' club, so that the next time a girl asks where rugby tryouts are, she is met with an answer, and never again with laughter.

The above explores just one of my many experiences working and playing in a male-dominated sport that have motivated my desire to engage in research and study sport as a sociological and political phenomenon. Growing up in South Africa, the discussion around rugby was often more political than social: it was once the white man's sport (Nauright, 1996); then it was the thing that brought the Rainbow Nation together (Vincent & Stevenson, 2010); it was Madiba's tool to heal our division (Dunn, 2009); and then it became a trigger for discussions around racial quotas (Chiweshe, 2016; Höglund & Sundberg, 2008; Merrett et al., 2011). Race and rugby were, and still are, intertwined in South Africa, largely because gender was not a factor of significance, at least, not in comparison to the seriousness of race or ethnicity in terms of inequality (Hargreaves, 1997). Women's rugby in South Africa has been comparatively minimal up until recent years. Whilst the men's Blitzboks 7s team was near-championing the World Rugby 7s World Series in 2010, the South African Women's 7s team was only just coming off of their first ever appearance. And so, during my school years in South Africa, as far as I could see, there was no women's rugby to pursue. I never saw a women's rugby match on SuperSport, there were no women posted to the national team accounts online, and there were no women's provincial teams published alongside the men's team photos or advertisements, online or in their respective stadiums. The women's team was, in many ways, invisible. However, it was always different when it came to New Zealand teams, who were constantly producing content online, which included content regarding their women's teams: it

was these women I came to follow online. Hence, due to significant imbalances in visibility, amongst other political factors, I spent the majority of my life watching and supporting the All Blacks and Black Ferns, as my mother is Māori.

What further motivated this research were my experiences of stereotyping and gender expectations in sport, which crossed international borders, from South Africa to Spain to New Zealand. The globality of these instances made it clear to me that it was unlikely I was alone in my experiences with – and exposure to – women’s rugby. How had others felt its presence online? What did portrayals of women’s rugby online do for other players? Furthermore, on the opposite side of the screen, what does being visible online mean for women who already play the game, and how does that visibility affect their conduct in person and online? These were the sorts of questions that inspired this research, which seeks to answer the primary research question: how do Black Ferns 7s players navigate Instagram, and what has been the perception of this digital labour by the wider women’s rugby community in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Sportswomen & Representation in Media

“When our men take the field, we expect them to win. When our women take the field, they’ve already won, at least in our minds: our only question is how much they will win by”

– James Porter on the All Blacks and Black Ferns

With the highest win percentage in international rugby history – at almost 90% (*Black Ferns*, n.d.) – the New Zealand (NZ) Black Ferns are one of the world’s most successful rugby teams. With six Rugby World Cup wins under their belt – more than any other team -, their success and strength are undeniable. This success unquestionably extends to the women’s Black Ferns 7s team, recent victors at the Tokyo Olympics and reigning champions of the HSBC World Series. Alongside these accolades, the Black Ferns 7s (BF7s) are also the reigning Rugby World Cup 7s champions and 2018 Commonwealth Games champions. They are *the* global standard in rugby 7s globally. Yet, New

Zealanders have ignored these accolades when it comes to factors such as media coverage, pay, and resourcing.

According to a recent study¹ conducted by Isentia and Sport New Zealand (2021), 15% of New Zealand's sport coverage is on women's sport. This number is well above the 4% global average. However, men's rugby coverage alone is still more than double the coverage of all women's sport in New Zealand combined (George, 2021). Yet, this overwhelming focus on men's coverage is hardly questioned (Bruce, 2008). This further demonstrates that young and non-professional women athletes are exposed to sporting media on the topic of men and male athletes considerably more often than they are to articles and media regarding sportswomen (Bruce, 2008). This stark inequality of coverage does not align with the aforementioned societal expectations for the women's national rugby teams and the standards to which the public holds the Black Ferns and Black Ferns 7s.

Multiple studies from around the world have explored the differential portrayal of men and women in sports media (Bruce, 2008; Daniels, 2012; Elueze & Jones, 1998; King, 2007; Lebel et al., 2019; Schedler & Wagstaff, 2018; Trolan, 2013). These studies have demonstrated quantifiable differences in sporting coverage, such as those discussed above, and qualitative differences across televised coverage present in narratives and even camera angles (Bissell & Duke, 2007; Greer et al., 2009). Thematically, it has been commonly found that both femininity and heterosexuality have been emphasized in media portrayals of sportswomen, as opposed to their athleticism (Kane et al., 2013a). Specifically in the context of Aotearoa, the same Sport New Zealand (2021) report revealed that sportswomen were significantly more likely to receive comments and questions about their appearance and personal lives than their male counterparts, in keeping with previous findings about media representation of sportswomen (Bruce, 2016; Wensing & Bruce, 2003). These quantitative and qualitative differences in media coverage of men and women in sport have had a negative impact

¹ This report took into account data from 2020

on perceptions of women's sport and women athletes (Fink, 2015). It is clear that sportswomen have historically lacked autonomy in establishing their public image, and this has been reflected by earlier studies on the topic.

There exists a notable historical trend across studies on women's sport and media of focusing on the portrayal and sexualization of sportswomen *by others* (i.e. journalists, reporters, editors) (Daniels, 2009; Kane et al., 2013a; Knight & Giuliano, 2001), as opposed to how women choose to represent *themselves*, in a manner that highlights *their* voices. This inability for sportswomen to control their portrayal and narratives in traditional media, and their subsequent perception by and within society, has become increasingly challenged by social media platforms (Bruce, 2008; Krane et al., 2004). These platforms have served to initiate a power shift, making space for sportswomen to have increased autonomy over their image and, consequently, their public perception (Bruce, 2008; Bruce & Hardin, 2014). For women who participate in stereotypically masculine sports, this has been particularly meaningful, for reasons including widening access to those sports (Olive, 2015; Thorpe et al., 2017) and challenging expectations of gender roles (Bruce, 2008; Fallon & Jome, 2007). Rugby is one such sport in which sportswomen are using social media to change the ways they are represented, and how the public comes to understand women's rugby and women rugby players.

The literature has demonstrated stark contrasts between the quantities of female versus male sport coverage in the media, as well as qualitative differences that shape that coverage. This highlights the timeliness of this research, in a country set to host three women's world cups across 2022 and 2023 (Cricket, Rugby, and Football), whereby the gendered imbalance of sport coverage in Aotearoa exposed by the Sport New Zealand (2021) report does not bode well. The findings of this report encourage further investigation into the intersection of women's sports, sportswomen, and the media coverage they receive. This thesis is one such investigation. Importantly, although the Sport New Zealand (2021) report provided insightful findings, it failed to take into account one very significant, widespread, and accessible media source: social media. The use of social media by rugby

athletes and its subsequent influence on the public is a phenomenon lacking attention in literature regarding sportswomen and media, particularly with regard to NZ sportswomen, and how online audiences are engaging with NZ sportswomen. This is a gap that this study seeks to help fill.

Turning to Social Media

Social media is a relatively new social tool that can be used to chip away at relatively old social issues and topics which require addressing and redressing. Because of the scale of its engagement – and the ever-expanding potential for more – social media has the power to create and initiate social and societal shifts through the increased exposure and visibility it enables, as demonstrated by Alrababa'h et al., (2021) and Scheadler and Wagstaff (2018) in their studies regarding exposure to Muslim athletes and to female athletes, respectively. This includes shifts in expectations surrounding notions like cultural stereotypes and sexism (Foster et al., 2021), which, in turn, influence the world of women's sport (AlKhalifa & Farello, 2021). However, this has not occurred in the absence of backlash; many sportswomen experience an array of online abuse and trolling (Litchfield et al., 2018a; McCarthy, 2022; Megarry, 2014; Sobieraj, 2018). Yet, social media continues to be a valuable tool for sportswomen, with the potential to redress the imbalance blatantly present in New Zealand's broadcasting of women's versus men's sport (Bruce & Hardin, 2014). It is a free, 24/7 service that is not inhibited by the limitations of print sources, thus presenting a greater number of opportunities for sportswomen to be highlighted.

News outlets and media platforms can also have their own social media accounts, such as *Stuff NZ* having a Twitter account, or the *New Zealand Herald* having an Instagram account. However, according to Adá-Lameiras and Rodríguez-Castro (2021) these accounts, which exist beyond “the time and space constraints [...] used to justify the low coverage of women's sport” in traditional media (Adá-Lameiras & Rodríguez-Castro., 2020, p. 1), have failed to de-marginalize women's sport in media coverage. For example, whether the *New Zealand Herald* is publishing to their website, in print, or on Instagram, they are still publishing the same content, and women's sport

is still being kept on the fringes – globally. This emphasizes the importance of *personal* social media accounts by individual athletes, over which the athletes *themselves* have autonomy and *mana motuhake* (self-determination) over their own images and information. It is through these personal accounts that an individuals’ digital labour is able to have greater potential impacts on other individuals and communities, including displaying role models (Midgley et al., 2021), increasing visibility, and transcending and combatting traditional media norms and deficits surrounding sportswomen and the coverage they receive (Vann, 2014), amongst other factors. Personal social media accounts enable sportswomen to have *mana motuhake* over their portrayal and the discourses or topics they seek to engage with, as opposed to having no redress for the ability of media bodies to dictate that on their behalf.

This is not to say, however, that the experiences of women and girls online have been entirely positive and constructive when using social media. Comments sections are often riddled with belligerence, confrontation, and even harassment, born of the confidence that comes with being hidden behind a screen, in actions we would otherwise refer to as trolling (“Back to the Kitchen,” 2019; Litchfield et al., 2018b; McCarthy, 2022; Toffoletti, Olive, et al., 2021). This online abuse and bullying, including overt sexualization and misogyny, has been found to be more common with social media than with traditional media (Kavanagh et al., 2019). Online misogyny and harassment are unfortunate realities of the social media world, moreover, it is disproportionately targeted at women (McCarthy, 2021; Mogjadi et al., 2020). Furthermore, this harassment is a frequent online response to women who carry out norm violations (MacPherson & Kerr, 2021). Women participating in a predominantly-male and stereotypically masculine sport such as rugby, including training in a manner that can often produce physiological adaptations and hypertrophic results that have been more stereotypical of men, are particularly open to being perceived as women who are violating – albeit outdated – societal norms regarding femininity (Fallon & Jome, 2007). Athletes operating in unique social and cultural landscapes are also vulnerable to backlash and harassment in the event

they conduct or portray themselves in a manner that contradicts or violates local cultural norms and expectations (Holmes et al., 2017; Mouly & Sankaran, 2000; Pierce et al., 2017). This bullying and harassment can have negative repercussions on the mental health of athletes (McCarthy, 2021), the participation of other women and girls in digital spaces (Megarry, 2014), and discourage discussion or the depth of discussion on certain social topics (Sobieraj, 2018). Therefore, whilst engaging in online platforms may benefit matters of redress toward gender equity in sporting media coverage and portrayal, it goes without question that, in doing so, sportswomen are made vulnerable, and opening themselves up to (quite literally) a world of potentially abusive comments.

Thus, although potentially mentally and emotionally challenging, the mana motuhake that comes with having a direct line of communication with a fanbase influences the women's sporting landscape. Social media has made this communication possible, alongside the opportunity for athletes to redress inequalities in gender-based media coverage. Operating and taking control of their own personal social media accounts means sportswomen can exercise greater autonomy over their public image, share their personal experiences, and engage in conversations they feel are valuable, at whatever depth they feel comfortable with, should they choose to. All of these factors undoubtedly play a role in shaping women's sport today, from grassroots to professional levels. As such, the role of social media in sportswomen's careers, and future professional sportswomen, is multifaceted, dynamic, and interesting, deserving of further exploration.

Here's What's in Store

The main differences in this particular thesis compared to the content discussed above is twofold. Firstly, it transcends traditional definitions of heteronormative "femininity" as it has been historically defined by white, heterosexual, middle-income (Ussher, 1997), Western women in sport, by incorporating a mana wāhine feminist perspective appropriate to the context in which this research is taking place: Aotearoa. To date, no research yet has focused specifically on New Zealand sportswomen's use of Instagram. The Indigenous feminisms and mana wāhine approach which guide

this research and its respective methods exist to best answer questions that do not sit within a traditional Western framework: of media, of feminisms, and of sport teams. In this sense, this study differs from other feminist studies of women athletes that investigate and take place in white, Western settings. There are obviously exceptions to this, and thus, this study adds to a small, but growing, body of literature that focuses on women beyond this demographic, including an increasing number of studies on black sportswomen's use of social media (Litchfield et al., 2018b), Indigenous Australian female sporting role models (Ferguson et al., 2019; Madden et al., 2013; Stronach et al., 2016, 2022), and research on Muslim sportswomen (Ahmad, 2019), amongst other examples.

Second, this study focuses on the portrayal of sportswomen as they have determined it *themselves*, not their portrayal by other outlets or publishers. This autonomy has been grasped by these sportswomen via the independence that exists in personal social media, and has enabled sportswomen to fight under-representation in traditional media (Bruce, 2013, 2015; Midgley et al., 2021; Thorpe et al., 2017). Sportswomen are agentic in this dynamic, utilizing social media for their own purposes, but not without its fair share of complexities. Social media was narrowed down to the platform Instagram for this study, based on its reach to the public, its malleability in terms of self-representation (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b), and its popularity amongst athletes. It was important to purposively select a group of wāhine who are known or recognizable nation-wide in investigating the impact of professional sportswomen on women's sport in Aotearoa. The Black Ferns 7s are one such group.

The vast majority of the Black Ferns 7s team is of Pasifika and/or Māori descent, and the team is very public in embracing Indigenous practices such as haka and *waiata* (song). It was for these reasons that Indigenous methodologies were employed for the data collection processes and the subsequent analyses, as this is most appropriate for the context. Furthermore, in order to highlight the voices of the women conducting this digital labour, feminist methodologies were also employed. The combination of these two methodologies exist in a mana wāhine approach, incorporating feminist

ideologies and methodologies into an Indigenous Māori and Pasifika context, creating a framework best suited to the participants in this research, and for myself as the researcher as well, navigating this space.

Through the framework briefly described above (see Chapter Three for a more in-depth discussion of the methodology), this study seeks to establish an understanding of how these professional sportswomen navigate Instagram in ways which incorporate social, cultural, and audience-generated feedback, through a mixed-methods inquiry. A quantitative social media analysis of the Instagram accounts of eight Black Ferns 7s players is utilized in conjunction with two qualitative elements: one-on-one interviews with Black Ferns 7s players, whose accounts were analysed; and group interviews structured around wānanga and talanoa frameworks with individuals within the women's rugby community in the Bay of Plenty. These three elements will provide a multidimensional perspective of sportswomen's social media usage and the broader perceptions of the rugby community.

Firstly, consultation with these players about their Instagram accounts, through one-on-one interviews, allows these sportswomen the space and ability to clarify their intentions, aims, and motivations for the content and themes they choose to post about. This aim and perspective is inherently feminist in that it creates space for these women's voices and values their knowledge. Secondly, the quantitative analysis thereafter numerically describes the thematic frequency of the content posted and the online engagement created by these Black Ferns 7s players. And thirdly, the impact of these actions, understood as both qualitative meaning and intention, and quantitative frequency and interaction, can be evaluated through consultation with members of these sportswomen's audience, that is, individuals in the women's rugby community, through a culturally respectful and responsive group interview. This three-part process facilitated an in-depth understanding of players' intentions, the actual numerical reflection of online interactions, and the

way the wider women's rugby community feels about this digital content, including how it otherwise impacts their perception and experiences of women's rugby in Aotearoa.

The remainder of this thesis consists of six chapters. Firstly, in the literature review, I locate this thesis at the intersection of three key bodies of literature: research on experiences in women's rugby, noting that there exists little research on women rugby players' use of social media; scholarship on the digital experiences of women athletes on social media globally, noting that most of this literature has focused on white, Western women, with some important exceptions, and that there is no research on sportswomen's use of social media in Aotearoa; and Indigenous social media usage, noting how small this current body of literature is as it pertains to sportswomen. In the methodology chapter, I outline how feminist and Indigenous knowledges are incorporated into this study, in a way that demonstrates this study's contribution to a growing body of decolonized research literature, alongside the ways in which this diversified my research design and methods in the following chapter. The quantitative analysis is then presented in chapter four, before explaining the results via the qualitative findings from the interviews and focus groups, weaving the qualitative and quantitative elements to establish a multidimensional understanding of the factors which impact these sportswomen's Instagram usage. I conclude by layering the factors which emerged from experiences detailed on either end of the study, from both the individual athletes and the wider group, and weave these together to detail how the two entities impact the decision-making and development of one another, in a symbiotic relationship of *mahi tahi* (working as one).

Chapter 2: Arotakenga Mātātuhi – Literature Review

In this chapter, I explore global literature related to sportswomen in digital spaces, as it pertains to the wider picture of women's sporting media. The intersection at which this study exists, namely, between lived experiences in women's rugby, sportswomen's use of social media, and Indigenous social media usage, is clarified here. First, I begin by situating modern-day women's rugby in Aotearoa through an exploration of the sport's socio-cultural, gendered, and political past. Then, I draw upon global literature on experiences in women's rugby to demonstrate how women rugby players carefully navigate femininity and gendered expectations in a male-dominated sport, and how this same marginalization applies to race and whiteness. I then redirect the discussion to social media, specifically how it is used by sportswomen and sporting role models. I follow this with a discussion on social media usage by Indigenous people and athletes, including the importance of Indigenous sporting role models. I then finish by acknowledging the importance of pragmatically studying this topic and the sportswomen who have given life to it by discussing previous Indigenous and feminist studies on the topic of sportswomen and social media. I emphasize how limited this particular body of literature is and the need for more research, particularly in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand and rugby.

Before We Go Any Further, a Note on Women's Rugby

Before exploring the role of sportswomen on social media in developing, impacting, or transforming the women's rugby landscape in Aotearoa, it is firstly imperative to understand what shape that landscape currently takes. As previously stated, women's rugby is one of the fastest growing team sports in the world; however, as Curtin (2016) notes, it is very difficult to provide a systematic history of women's rugby in Aotearoa, due to its historically contested existence. She further notes this fragmented history is not unique to women rugby players in Aotearoa; it has also been seen in women's football in England as noted by Jean Williams, and in Rob Hess's documentation of women playing Aussie Rules (Curtin, 2016). There has always existed "an

historical disdain for women's involvement in male sports, particularly contact ones" (Curtin, 2016, p. 2073), and women's participation in traditionally-male sports has always been met with resistance, globally, which has complicated research into its history. This inability to pinpoint a timeline or systematic history of women's rugby in Aotearoa (Curtin, 2016) is reminiscent of Dr Farah Palmer's (2016) statement that sociology and history are intimately connected, in line with a Māori worldview, specifically of time, which holds that "the past, present, and future are not distinct entities. [...] but [rather] a continuous flow of events and influences" (p. 2171). This flow has shaped and continues to shape women's sporting experiences in Aotearoa today. Taking on this methodological perspective, as Palmer (2016) notes, is important for ensuring this study is consistent with Indigenous worldviews, has legitimacy in Māori contexts, and is responsive to what is expected of Māori research (Palmer, 2016).

The first ever Black Ferns team was only established in 1989 ("All Blacks", N.D.); however, the team did not become sanctioned by New Zealand Rugby (NZR) until 1991, prior to which they received no funding and no official recognition as a New Zealand team. There existed almost 100 years of women's rugby history in Aotearoa before NZR endorsed the Black Ferns, in which time, women rugby players had to define the sport for themselves (Curtin, 2016), becoming pioneers of the game "in ways that contested gender norms of femininity" (Curtin, 2016, p. 2072), and "challenged dominant discourse with regard to hegemonic masculinity, femininity, and compulsory heterosexuality" (Palmer, 2016, p. 2179). Curtin's (2016) historical investigation utilized digitized local and national newspapers to "connect some of the historical dots in the women's game" (p. 2073), identifying advertisements and articles that initiated and grew women's rugby in Aotearoa. This demonstrated the important role the media has long had in women's rugby, not only in publicizing it and attempting to grow it, but in investigating it, knowing its history, and understanding public perception and societal reactions to growth in its participation over time.

After newspapers, and prior to social media becoming a modern-day catalyst for change (Agyemang et al., 2020; Namarta & Singh, 2015), television media was the impetus in 1991 for the official acknowledgement of the Black Ferns, thanks in large part to a television special by Paul Holmes (G. Paul, personal interview, July 14 2022). Prior to the programme airing, in the absence of any funding from NZR, players were expected to pay out of pocket in order to attend the – albeit unsanctioned – Women’s Rugby World Cup (Pearson, 2021). However, the public support and outrage that followed Paul Holmes’s coverage of the Black Ferns has been regarded as what eventually forced NZR into endorsing the team (G. Paul, personal communication, July 14 2022). Thus, it is clear that media has always played an important role in developing women’s rugby in Aotearoa, from advertising opportunities to play in the late 1890s (Curtin, 2016), to the endorsement of the team in 1992, to triggering cultural and management shifts in 2022.

This response to popular demand demonstrates a function of professionalization (or in this case, endorsement as a first step toward professionalization), as noted by Garton et al. (2021), who analyzed the decision to professionalize Argentine women’s football as if it were a social policy which can maintain public order. In 2018, 26 years after this first Black Ferns team was endorsed, the first ever contracts were handed out to Black Ferns players, signing 30 players, and creating the first semi-professional women’s rugby 15s players in Aotearoa (RugbyWorld, 2018). This decision to (semi)professionalize the Black Ferns demonstrated the other two functions of professionalization according to Garton et al. (2021): it acknowledged underdevelopment and inequality in a team accomplishing unprecedented feats, whilst offering an institutional solution, with the legitimacy and power to address those inequalities where the market could not (Curtin, 2016).

However, the Black Ferns 15s were not the first contracted women’s rugby players in Aotearoa. Rugby 7s was established in New Zealand even more recently, with the first official New Zealand Women’s 7s team only coming together in 2008 (clubrugby, 2021). Their history followed a similar path to that of their 15s counterparts. From 1997, the New Zealand women dominated global

7s under the names the New Zealand Wild Ducks and the Aotearoa Māori 7s, with the coach of the latter, Peter Joseph, even going so far as to sell his home in order to send the unendorsed team to the Hong Kong 7s in 2002 (clubrugby, 2021).

From 2008 onwards, the Black Ferns 7s continuously demonstrated excellence on the field, winning both the first women's Sevens World Series and the inaugural Women's Rugby Sevens World Cup (Rugby Museum, N.D.). This dominance was sufficient in demonstrating that New Zealand women's 7s was *the* global standard, and in 2014, New Zealand Rugby signed the Black Ferns 7s players to contracts. This occurred following the announcement of the inclusion of 7s in the Olympics for Rio 2016, a decision which "made [7s] a professional option" according to women's 7s and 15s player Ruby Tui (Binner, 2020, para.32). This opportunity enabled these players to focus on their sport, establish traditions and cultures, create expectations, and generate dynamics of learning and leading within their squad. This study provides insight into the qualitative products of this within the Black Ferns 7s team environment, as indicated by new players, senior players, and players who have been with the team prior to the introduction of professional contracts.

Global Experiences in Women's Rugby

The brief history above contextualizes women's rugby in Aotearoa, but New Zealand is by no means the only country where women's rugby is a popular sport. Although cultural contexts inevitably shape women's experiences differently, the reality that rugby is a male-dominated sport is a common feature for all women who play around the world. This reality has brought women around the world into contentious situations surrounding gender roles. The necessity to fulfil masculine expectations in sport in order to be considered a skilled athlete, whilst simultaneously being expected to fulfil gendered expectations of femininity and being a woman, is a clear demonstration of this conflict at work (Fallon & Jome, 2007). This is particularly relevant to women's rugby players, by nature of occupying a space that contradicts what was traditionally viewed as feminine or appropriate for women around the world (Basham, 2018). Through a process of group interviews, Krane et al.

(2004) found that sportswomen perceived being feminine in contrast to being athletic. This dichotomy is indicative of an “apparently irreconcilable contradiction between femininity and athleticism” (Bruce, 2016, p. 364). This internal conflict with external perceptions is important to keep in mind when considering sociological studies of women rugby players and their experiences with and in the sport.

Early research using questionnaires found that male and female players both perceived rugby as a predominantly male sport (Chu et al., 2003; Csizma et al., 1988; Matteo, 1985). Questionnaires were also utilized by O’Hanley (1998) to research experiences of women rugby players in Canada, including reasons for taking up the sport and continuing participation in it. However, (potential) lack of depth is a limitation of questionnaires, which, unlike semi-structured interviews, can limit the nuances and complexities of themes discussed around a topic. In the context of this thesis, it could constrain the voice of sportswomen seeking to shed light upon their reality and experiences online, contrary to the aims of a feminist study.

The vast majority of studies which have explored experiences of sportswomen in traditionally male-dominated sports have provided sociological perspectives, and utilized methods which “were predominantly qualitative, using participant observation and in-depth interviews” (Chu et al., 2003, p. 110). This thesis is a departure from this tendency, and instead uses mixed-methods, taking into account quantitative data from the social media content generated by sportswomen.

As expressed by Martín (2011), who considered women’s rugby in London and Barcelona, the majority of sociological studies regarding women’s rugby around the world seek to do one of two things. Either they establish why women choose to play rugby despite significant societal opposition to it, or they investigate how these women mitigate or resist these narratives which create and reinforce male hegemony in rugby. Martín (2011) finds a number of different identities present between women rugby players, including unapologetic equalists who seek complete similarity to the men’s game and culture, and players of “phallogentric femininity” who actively counter masculine

hegemony with displays of femininity off the pitch. Martín (2011) also names a number of differences *within* women rugby players, which she refers to as “splits” or “fractures”, but importantly converge at the topic of intersectionality, acknowledging the multiple femininities among players which work to both disrupt and reinforce the dichotomous gender system which permeates rugby culture, and arguably sport in general. As a women’s rugby player herself, Martin acknowledges that her interpretations and representations of interview data do not embody an objective position as I similarly do in this study.

The male domination of rugby poses a social risk to women seeking to join or participate in the sport, as explored by Joncheray and Tlili (2013) in the French context. Howe (2001) also found that most barriers to participation in women’s rugby are social, in the context of South Wales, and unrelated to the physical and contact aspects of the sport. In Joncheray and Tlili’s (2013) study, social barriers to participation are partially constructed by a players’ surrounding social circle and wider society, including their national rugby union. These types of barriers exist when these external groups perceive women’s participation in rugby as a physical risk, as well as a social one. The socially risky components involve a “two-fold stigma” considered by Howe (2001), in which women rugby players are perceived as both unfeminine and homosexual. Embodying the former risks the loss of any feminine attributes, but rejecting it and embracing femininity leads to perceptions of incompetence and an inadequate ability to play rugby. Embodying both may be perceived as a reinforcement of stereotypes, heterosexism, and gender inequality, through the desire to distance oneself from sexist and homophobic stigmas, as found by Ezzell (2009) in the American context. Still, external groups viewing rugby as a “risky sport” becomes a socially controlling factor for women, creating deterring narratives (Joncheray & Tlili, 2013). Broad (2001) made the same claim, that concerns regarding a woman’s aesthetic appearance have been used to control sportswomen in their athletic and sporting pursuits.

Other barriers to participation have been documented in contexts which revealed the possibility that, in countries where rugby is newer or has less history, rugby may not be as overwhelmingly male as it is in places where its existence has predated modern feminist movements. In such contexts, rugby has not been historically associated with hegemonic masculinity. De Oliveira et al., (2019) found that public perception of rugby in Brazil, where the sport is still in its youth, differed from that of other countries where rugby is an historically male sport. Instead, it was seen as a sport of strength and hard physical contact, with no gendered specifications. Rugby was, however, perceived as more virile than other sports. De Oliveira et al. (2019) found prejudiced attitudes toward women's participation in sport in general, with barriers to participation in the Brazilian context pertaining largely to a cultural image of women which prioritizes delicacy, fragility, and aesthetic highlights over athletic ability. As such, women's participation in sport, and particularly rugby, became a violation of those cultural norms surrounding a woman's image in Brazil, as opposed to expectations surrounding rugby specifically.

According to Ezzell (2009), as a coping mechanism for women's subordination in the sport in the south-eastern United States, women rugby players were found to take on or support "the norms, values, and behaviours" of members of the "oppressor class" (Ezzell, 2009), with the oppressor class referring to men in the case of rugby. Fuchs and Le Hénaff (2014) echo this sentiment through exploring female athletes' alcohol use in French post-match settings, a traditional part of so-called "rugby culture", and how that alcohol consumption, a norm and value instilled by men who established rugby, is perceived as "necessary to demonstrate their inclusion" in France (Fuchs & Le Hénaff, 2014). Drinking, like rugby, holds masculine connotations, and as such, by participating in post-match drinking, these French women rugby players are transgressing norms of femininity. Women's rugby has been found to be very culturally similar to men's rugby in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand (Wright & Clarke, 1999), and drinking is one of these cross-cutting features. Although Howe (2001) argued that professionalization differentiated men's rugby significantly from the

women's game, increased women's professionalization over recent years has arguably diluted these differences.

There are other methods which sportswomen have used to respond to gendered subordination and norm violations in rugby. On the one hand, Ezzell (2009) mentions pleasing the dominant group by breaking some gendered norms in favour of those which they support, but she also explores rugby players' use of defensive othering in the American context. Defensive othering refers to women portraying themselves as exceptions to the stereotype, in an effort to convince outsiders that they are "not like those other girls". Although this distanced these sportswomen from sexist and homophobic stigmas, it also reinforced dominant heterosexism and gender inequality in rugby (Ezzell, 2009). These athletes took on a "heterosexy-fit" identity to counter these stigmas, which not only appeals to the uniqueness of rugby, but also of team sports, as it describes a collective identity players branded the team with that was simultaneously tough, feminine, and heterosexual (Ezzell, 2009).

This is reminiscent of the apologetic model of resistance women rugby players have been found to use. This is when women "apologize" for transgressing gender norms through an emphasis of other aspects of gender presentation (Ezzell, 2009). Through interviewing players in Canada, Hardy (2015) found that those players perceived heterosexual rugby players to be more likely to engage in apologetic behaviour, likely due to the homosexual and lesbian stereotypes associated with rugby (Howe, 2001). She noted the same for women who were uncomfortable with their sexuality, and the perception that players who were newer to rugby and its culture were also more likely to display apologetic behaviours (Hardy, 2015). These apologetic behaviours have not only been found in studies regarding women in rugby, but also in other traditionally male-dominated contexts, such as the military, law enforcement, and firefighting (Martin, 1994; Williams, 1989; Yoder & Berendsen, 2001).

In contrast to this, there also exist *unapologetic* behaviours in women rugby players. Hardy (2015) also identified "unapologetic feminism" among some Canadian rugby players, who

acknowledged that whilst some women were more likely to display apologetic behaviours (i.e. heterosexual, sexually uncomfortable, and newer players), most players resisted that stereotypical behaviour by embracing their non-conformity unapologetically. Being unapologetic became the way in which these women navigated negative reactions to rugby participation. Likewise, in the American context, Broad (2001) found that women rugby players do not apologize, but rather transgress gender expectations and even the social construction of gender itself, destabilizing the binary of woman and man, and establishing rugby as a form of queer resistance. Chase (2006) noted the same resistant nature of women's participation in rugby in Midwestern America. More specifically, at an American university, Basham (2018) found that the physicality of rugby in particular was a point from which significant unapologetic behaviour emerged, alongside significant empowerment for women's players, as it is often this high-contact aspect of rugby which generates negative reactions to women's participation in rugby, as was noted in cases in Canada, America, England, and Brazil. However, perceptions of women's rugby participation on that university campus seemingly depended upon the team's success. Women's participation in rugby on clearly successful teams was regarded positively (Basham, 2018). Contrastingly, if the team was not successful, then stereotypes surrounding women in rugby reinforced that women should not be in that space. Consequently, women playing for new, amateur, or poor performing teams and clubs have been found to receive more negative responses (Basham, 2018).

Whilst the above studies predominantly consider the impacts of gender in a male-dominated sport, there are many additional intersectional factors at play. A number of players on the Black Ferns and Black Ferns 7s squads are also mothers, another intersectional identity which was investigated by Palmer and Leberman (2009). They note that being a mother further contrasts with the masculine expectations associated with elite sport. Palmer and Leberman (2009) found that athlete mothers often feel a sense of guilt and lack of time, but that support systems, including organizational support and personal support networks, were integral to their ability to continue being

an elite athlete (Palmer & Leberman, 2009). These familial support systems are also an integral part of Māori and Pasifika cultures. Juggling the identities of parent and athlete is often perceived as a uniquely female “issue” in elite sport, one that is only just beginning to shift away from being mutually exclusive (Palmer & Leberman, 2009).

Understanding experiences through identities which intersect with race and ethnicity are also fundamental to understanding experiences of Māori and Pasifika wāhine playing rugby in Aotearoa, as is explored in this study. Dr Farah Palmer has considered this particular intersection at depth in multiple studies, from specifically Indigenous and Kaupapa Māori perspectives. In one article, Erueti and Palmer (2014) look at experiences of Māori elite athletes in New Zealand’s Olympic and Commonwealth teams, investigating the role of tikanga and mātauranga Māori in the ethno-cultural identities of Māori athletes. They note that the presence of tikanga in these team environments leads to constant negotiation between an individual’s identities as Māori, as an elite athlete, as a “New Zealander”, and as a member of that team, including internal identity crises depending on the amount of Māori knowledge that individual perceived they had. Still, Erueti and Palmer (2014) found that the tikanga and mātauranga Māori encountered by those athletes in preparation for the Olympics and the Commonwealth Games was vital to their ethno-cultural identity, regardless of how much knowledge they felt they had to begin with. Furthermore, the team-wide embrace and usage of Māoritanga encouraged a public self-expression of Māori ethno-cultural identities amongst those players (Erueti & Palmer, 2014). This helped generate understandings as to how Māoritanga in team environments can create both positive and conflicting intersecting identities amongst Māori elite athletes who may not feel completely confident in their own Māori cultural competency.

Also exploring the critical intersections of gender, culture, and ethnicity, Yoko Kanemasu carried out insightful studies into experiences of Fijian women rugby players, from a feminist perspective in a similarly post-colonial context. Kanemasu and Molnar (2017) conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 women to inform their study on negotiating male-dominance present in

both ethnic traditions and sport in post-colonial Fiji. They note that rugby, when it is played by Fijian women, symbolically represents marginalization that is present in both Indigenous tradition and colonial influences (Shiri et al., 2022). Similarly, Kanemasu and Johnson (2019) conducted an enquiry into the pressures of being a woman playing male-dominated sports like rugby. They focused on the community attitudes associated with such participation in a post-colonial, Pasifika setting, the results of which are likely reflective of some of the attitudes present in Aotearoa's vast Fijian and Pasifika communities. Similarly, the "transformative potential of [sportswomen's] everyday practices" highlighted by Kanemasu and Molnar (2017) may also be applicable to Aotearoa, as it is indicative of the transformative potential of the Black Ferns 7s social media mahi in the wider women's rugby scene.

Adjepong (2017), who considered the role of whiteness and sexuality in women's rugby, establishes that, just like how women are considered "other" in predominantly male sports, whiteness is the norm to which any differences are compared or constructed, diminishing people of colour to positions of "other" as well. Whiteness was documented as a trait used to conform more closely with normative expectations of women, as black women are often stereotyped as more "masculine" (Ezzell, 2019). Importantly, this racial othering has seeped into research as well. In researching black and Indian women in football in England, Scraton et al. (2005) made the important observation that white research participants are rarely identified as such in current literature, and that research consisting of solely white participants has often been utilized to theorize experiences of *all* women's experiences in sport. The tendency to identify participants by race when they are not white is another demonstration of non-whiteness being construed as "other". This demonstrates how Māori and Pasifika women rugby players are not only marginalized in rugby by nature of their gender, but can also be marginalized by media and in research by their race and ethnicity (Thorpe et al., 2020).

This section has explored the experiences of women in rugby around the world, and how it has forced careful navigation of femininity, gender roles, and stereotypes. It has also demonstrated how

intersectional identities further marginalize women in rugby if those women are not white.

Nevertheless, navigating these realities on the field is only part of the picture: how does this translate digitally? While little research has considered women rugby players' self-representation in digital spaces, there is an important and growing body of scholarship examining sportswomen's usage of social media.

Sportswomen on Social Media

The increased participation in women's sport has not been reflected in media coverage (Cooky et al., 2013). However, over the past two decades, accounts run by individual athletes across social media platforms have become vital tools in redressing the lack of coverage of women's sport and women athletes in traditional media and online media outlets (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b). It is through these platforms that sportswomen can increase and enhance their own visibility, on their own terms, disrupting male-dominated sport media power dynamics, and instead taking some of that digital cultural space for themselves (Bruce & Hardin, 2014). However, as previously mentioned, this has not been without resistance. Sportswomen experience significantly more online abuse, harassment, and trolling (Mogaji et al., 2020; Ahmad, 2019) than their male counterparts. McCarthy (2021) found that recently professionalized sports have increased opportunities for visibility of women athletes in professional and media spaces, but that this increased exposure has resulted in increased misogyny, abuse, and trolling. Although Scheadler and Wagstaff (2018) found that exposure to women's sport decreases prejudice toward it over time, increased exposure through participating in online spaces like social media has opened the door to further scrutiny as well.

Research has examined how sportswomen used social media to disrupt and challenge gender and cultural norms. For example, Ahmad (2019) demonstrated the disruptive force via digital spheres in social dynamics and gender stereotypes that Muslim sportswomen were shown to have by challenging stereotypical representations online. By moving this disruption from the field to a wider audience, through social media, the impact of *digital* space invaders is amplified (Ahmad, 2019),

increasing visibility of these challenges to dominant portrayals of Muslim sportswomen, and to dominant discourse around the subject (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020). This furthers opportunities to regain some autonomy over public representation, not without the same consequences that come with norm violations (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020) associated with women in sport, but still with a greater impact than solely doing so on the field of play. Importantly, Ahmad and Thorpe (2020) also revealed the ways in which these challenges, representations of sportswomen's lives, and self-branding strategies are all carried out in culturally specific manners, which not only respect but ultimately empower Muslim women through visibility of other Muslim (sports)women. Drawing upon Puwar's (2004) concept of space invasion, they explain how Muslim sportswomen used social media to redress longstanding Islamophobic stereotypes of Muslim women as in "need of saving", as well as the historic imbalance in women's media coverage and the traditional male ownership over sporting media.

Whilst a significant amount of digital media published about and by sportswomen transgresses norms of femininity, this is not always the case. Some content is sexualized in order to appear more feminine, by both media and by athletes themselves (Olive, 2015), or where highly feminine aesthetics are employed as a means of meeting gendered expectations in certain sports (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a). Consequently, the comparatively inadequate coverage of women's sport, both globally and in New Zealand (Bruce, 2008), often contains considerable amounts of sexualization, with many publications designed through, for, or by men (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012; Bissell & Duke, 2007; Bruce, 2016). Comparing different feminist perspectives of such self-representations, Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce (2017) explain how, from a second-wave feminist perspective, hypersexualized images of sportswomen have been considered objectifying, whereas through the lens of postfeminist or neoliberal feminist perspectives, some athletes and audiences read such images as socially and financially empowering (Thorpe et al., 2017). As various scholars have revealed, some sportswomen have engaged in sexualization strategies by choice (Daniels, 2012;

Barnett, 2017), deliberately portraying themselves in a (hetero)sexualized manner (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b; Olive, 2015). From a postfeminist perspective (Thorpe et al., 2017), this emphasizes freedom and choice, including the right to choose to use sexualization strategies in personal social media. In another example, Coche (2017) found, through an analysis of four elements of sportswomen's Twitter profiles, that sportswomen "simultaneously preserve and counter traditional roles" in sport, by presenting themselves primarily as athletes, however, aesthetically, they prioritize femininity. In these instances, images posted on social media by sportswomen have the ability to both challenge and reinforce existing sexualization and gender stereotypes (Olive, 2015).

This is an interesting dichotomy between stereotypes and empowerment to which Rebecca Olive has given insight: where sexualized depictions of women published by external media sources are typically frowned upon, they are often approached as a feminist celebration of beauty, strength, femininity, and accomplishment when published by sportswomen themselves, as can be seen in the comments on a sportswoman's images (Olive, 2015). This is because sportswomen on social media may not solely disrupt existing stereotypes or dynamics surrounding their sports: they may also reinforce what is already in place, as they do in surfing (Olive, 2015). Whilst media portrayals of women athletes which highlight (hetero)sexuality arguably trivialize women's sports, it does not necessarily do so when sportswomen choose to take ownership of that portrayal. This "reclamation of signs of femininity as empowering" rather than diminishing or trivializing (Cocca, 2014) is grounded in a third-wave feminist perspective (Thorpe et al., 2017). Where the aforementioned second-wave of feminism would have approached the publication of sexualized images, such as bikini pictures or images in sports bras, as a diversion away from athletic achievement, third-wave feminist perspectives take ownership of this content, further disrupting stereotypes and dynamics around "(hetero)sexual objectification" of sportswomen (Thorpe et al., 2017).

Having a social media presence has opened further financial opportunities for sportswomen, through making their accounts – and, by extension, their personal brands – commercially viable

(Mogaji et al., 2022). Through an analysis of the Instagram feeds of five renowned sportswomen over one year, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018b) found that “emphasizing empowered femininity, celebrating hetero-sexiness, and revealing personal intimacies” (p. 306) are strategies which draw digital engagement, as they respond best to consumer expectations about what constitutes an appealing brand. They label their conceptual framework “the athletic labour of femininity” (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b), and utilize it as a way through which visual digital labour carried out by sportswomen seeking to brand themselves in the sport media market – and all the intricacies and intersectionalities associated with this – can be better understood. This often unpaid and invisible digital labour (Thorpe et al., 2017; Toffoletti, Olive, et al., 2021; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b) is often carried out by sportswomen as a necessity, in order to develop a sporting brand and commercial deals with which sportswomen can supplement their income, which is still substantially lower than the salaries of their male counterparts (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b). Whilst branding may be important to some athletes who may even partially rely on it financially, through a series of discursive interviews, Mogaji et al. (2022) found that sportswomen prioritized building their career over building their brand. As such, it is clear branding and commercialization is only one component of social media usage for some sportswomen, amongst a myriad of other uses.

The above literature examining experiences of sportswomen on social media have revealed interesting balances maintained by women athletes online: being visible, but remaining protected from harassment; being an athlete, but also being “adequately” female; breaking gender stereotypes, but simultaneously reinforcing them with overt sexualization; building a brand, but also building a career. These deliberations were explored by Pocock and Skey (2022), who note that sportswomen, as role models, also demonstrate a need to carefully balance closeness with their fans and audience with an “appropriate distance”. This appropriate distance applies to all of the various stakeholders sportswomen encounter online, including the sponsors, fans, and trolls who contribute to the other dichotomies sportswomen need to balance. Appropriate distance protects sportswomen from fan

disengagement and, importantly, the mental and emotional consequences of online self-representations and digital labour (Pocock & Skey, 2022). In their study, Pocock and Skey (2022) found that sportswomen took their role model status very seriously, and emphasized their impact on younger generations, even going so far as to create educational and informative content on their social media profiles. There is a very limited body of literature that considers sportswomen's use of social media particularly for the purpose of being a role model for younger athletes. There also exists research on the dynamics occurring on the other end of the screen, exploring how young athletes choose role models, and the impact those role models have on them.

The above has explored the growing body of literature focused on sportswomen's experiences and uses of social media. Apart from a few exceptions, the majority of this literature focuses on white women on social media, as well as western women on social media. Furthermore, rarely do studies on this topic consider team sports, despite the contributions of these women being unique in emerging from such an environment (Stronach et al., 2022). Research regarding the experiences and uses of social media by Indigenous and non-white sportswomen is extremely limited.

Role Models & Indigenous Athletes Online

Role models have been found to vitally impact career development and identity exploration in adolescents, but the body of literature surrounding this phenomenon in the sporting context is limited (Ronkainen et al., 2019). Using interviews and narrative inquiry, Ronkainen et al. (2019) found that adolescent female athletes identify both elite athletes and family members as their main role models. However, unlike males, girls tended to select sporting role models based on relationships and similarities between themselves and their role model, as opposed to simply choosing the most well-known athletes (Ronkainen et al., 2019). This revealed that young women athletes spent more time finding a suitable sporting role model. The impact of sporting role models (SRMs) has been found to vary throughout the stages of playing sport, with minimal influence in the

initial stages of picking the sport up, but significantly more influence in retaining athletes who transition to higher levels through being inspired to train more or more seriously (De Croock et al., 2012; C. Green, 2005).

Literature on the impact of SRMs has revealed differences based on gender and race. Kofoed and McGovney (2019) found that same-gender role models for women were significantly more likely to influence career choice than opposite-gender male role models. Likewise, they also found that having a same-race role model made an individual significantly more likely to select the career path of that role model than if they had had a mentor of a different race. Whilst not analyzed in a sporting context, Kofoed and McGovney (2019) bring forth an important point: race and gender matter when it comes to seeing a future career possibility. It can thus be inferred that having female Māori and Pasifika SRMs is of significant importance for Māori and Pasifika youth in Aotearoa.

The need to see it to believe it or be it is frequently cited in literature, such as Midgley et al.'s (2021) “She Needs to See it to be it” or Stronach et al.'s (2022) “You Can’t be What You Can’t See”. Visibility of role models has been repeatedly demonstrated as important for youth, and there exists a very limited, but important, body of literature surrounding this topic in the Indigenous sporting space, particularly in the Australian context. Indigenous SRMs have been found to be particularly important in promoting healthy behaviours and physical activity in Indigenous Australian youth (O’Brien et al., 2009). Through interviews with 22 Indigenous Australian women, Stronach et al. (2016) found that young women desire to see more Indigenous sportswomen represented in media specifically as role models: social media offers this possibility. When operating on social media, Stronach et al. (2022) found 10 functions of Indigenous SRMs, through an extension of Meier's (2015) theory, which included nine functions of SRMs, who were not specifically Indigenous. This is an important example of glocalization, which will be discussed further in this thesis. Stronach et al. (2022) also identified that cultural maintenance was a unique function of Indigenous SRMs in digital

spaces, taking pride in sharing positive portrayals of their culture online, and subsequently encouraging others to do the same.

Role models have a greater impact when they are of the same gender. They also have a greater impact if they are of the same ethnicity or race. However, men dominate the sport media space, making it harder to see women succeeding in sport. Similarly, whiteness dominates the rugby space (Adjepong, 2017; Ezzell, 2009), making it harder for Indigenous players to see themselves in those they idolize (Stronach et al., 2022). Young girls select SRMs based on similarities between themselves and their role model, meaning they take longer to find a SRM in the first place (Midgley et al., 2021). Given that stereotypes push the narrative that women are less athletic and less skilled in sport (Adelson & Olding, 2013), it is arguably more important for women athletes to have women SRMs who demonstrate that it is possible to be a successful, professional sportswoman (Midgley et al., 2021). Whilst social media may increase the visibility of Indigenous sportswomen, it is no panacea, as there also exist barriers to Indigenous digital participation: low internet connectivity for those who live rurally, the cost of technology, and concerns over the misappropriation of Indigenous culture and practices (Dyson & Underwood, 2006) are all factors at play. Existing literature therefore seems to indicate that, despite arguably having a greater need for their visibility, young Indigenous women's rugby players will struggle more to find and connect with a sporting role model, due to: a lack of sportswomen in sport media; a lack of media attention paid to non-white SRMs in sport; and barriers to Indigenous digital participation, all of which may negatively impact the ability to find and connect with adequately similar SRMs online.

Similar to how sportswomen on social media are both redressing media coverage deficits whilst concurrently opening themselves up to greater amounts of abuse, Indigenous social media use has both garnered opportunities to resist colonial discourse and increase activism, as well as increased exposure to racist discourse and blatant threats (Carlson & Dreher, 2018). Carlson and Dreher (2018) further argue that Indigenous people on social media challenge dominant discourse,

similar to findings by Gray et al. (2015) which established that effective digital storytelling had the ability to reduce and challenge stigmas, specifically as it related to HIV in Aotearoa. Carlson et al.'s (2021) book clarified that Indigenous social media use is a global phenomenon that stretches from Northern Europe to Canada to South America and to the Pacific. Indigenous digital participation has often resulted in forms of digital storytelling, from Canada (Adelson & Olding, 2013; Shiri et al., 2022) to Australia (Kervin et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2016) to Aotearoa (Carlson & Dreher, 2018; Gray et al., 2015) and beyond (Carlson et al., 2021). According to Adelson and Olding (2013), digital storytelling is simultaneously historical, meaning it shares histories silenced by colonization, aspirational, in that it is an empowering tool for marginalized communities, and recuperative, as it engages in decolonization processes.

Carlson and Dreher (2018) maintain that social media has enabled connectivity between Indigenous peoples. In “Indigenous People Rise Up: The Global Ascendancy of Social Media Activism”, Carlson et al. (2021) lead a discussion on global instances of Indigenous digital storytelling across social media and reinforce this same finding, that “social media technologies bridge distance, time, and nation-states to mobilize Indigenous people” (p. 3) and encourage solidarity with one another. Similarly, Shiri et al. (2022) echo Manuelito's (2015) claims in their approach to digital storytelling, which, when interpreted in a Māori context, mean that Indigenous digital stories themselves are connections to *tūpuna* (ancestors), to *whenua* (land), to their *reo* (language), to their *tikanga* (customs/practices), and to future generations to come. Importantly, particularly as it pertains to sportswomen, Carlson et al. (2021) also note that social media “has served as a platform for [...] recognizing Indigenous strength and talent” (p. 4), emphasizing the ability for social media to promulgate the achievements of the Black Ferns 7s over other types of media, without ignoring or softening their indigeneness.

It is clear that social media is an empowering and unifying force in Indigenous communities, for Indigenous people around the globe who rally behind Indigenous issues (Carlson et al., 2021). It

is important to note that the Indigenous use of social media by athletes has not been researched in the context of Aotearoa. The above discussion has demonstrated that it is a topic worthy of greater research, considering the power social media has enabled Indigenous communities, women, athletes, and the intersectional identity of the three: Indigenous sportswomen.

Glocalizing Feminism

Many of the studies mentioned thus far regarding women rugby players, sportswomen on social media, and Indigenous social media usage have employed feminist tactics and approaches to research. This has included the critical perspective of second-wave feminism, particularly in contexts of sexualized imagery of sportswomen, and the ability of digital depictions of sportswomen to trivialize women's sport. In contrast to this, third-wave feminism sees this ownership of stereotypical femininity and sexualization as empowering, which some sportswomen may choose to engage with on their personal social media profiles. This emphasis on taking power and empowerment is reminiscent of a postfeminist perspective, for which numerous definitions exist. However, it is broadly understood as a perspective which argues that traditional feminism as it once was is no longer necessary for modern empowered women (Ahmad, 2019; Thorpe et al., 2017). A critical postfeminist perspective, as it pertains to sport, is particularly concerned with society paradoxically placing women in agentic positions, whilst simultaneously failing to demarginalize women athletes (Toffoletti, 2016). Still, these feminisms fall short of explanations which incorporate factors at play for women participating in this particular study, namely race, ethnicity, colonization, sporting traditions, and sexuality, amongst other elements

Recognizing the harm done by white feminism over many decades, Black, Indigenous, and women of colour around the world have developed their own strands of feminism. This includes black feminist thought (Collins, 1990, 2015), Chicana feminism (Garcia, 1997), postcolonial feminism (Mishra, 2013), decolonized and decolonizing feminism (Grande, 2003; Vergès et al., 2021), and Indigenous feminisms (McGuire-Adams, 2020a, 2020b) to name a few, all of which

reject “the long Western tendency to homogenize and universalize women and their experiences” (Mishra, 2013, p. 129) and instead celebrate and make visible differences which emerge in women’s experiences around the world. Feminisms specific to geographies and demographics allow women within those contexts to adopt intersections of their identity (i.e., a feminist identity and their ethnic identity) simultaneously, as opposed to abandoning one in favour of the other (Sang, 2018). The ways in which gender, culture, and ethnicity intersect to make context-specific histories and feminisms become very important for those contexts, but would not necessarily be as impactful elsewhere, for different women.

Patricia Collins considers black feminism in America and describes it as a knowledge project working toward social justice. Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) advocates for a feminism which places black women’s knowledge and experiences at the center of research regarding black women (in America), so as to “include the missing” from feminist literature in America at the time, but also to give voice to “black women’s interpretations of [their] social worlds” (p. 2349). It emphasized the inappropriateness and subsequent inaccuracy of data and research regarding topics within black communities that existed without the input and insight of black women. Black feminism sits on four main tenets: oppression, epistemic agency and taking responsibility over individual learning, a commitment to social justice (hence “project”), and the identification of race-only and gender-only solutions as insufficient for intersectional oppression. This last feature in particular highlights the importance of intersectionality in each of these variations of non-white feminism, valuing both feminist and ethnic identity simultaneously.

Chicana feminism is another form of non-white feminism which originated in America, founded by women in Mexican-American communities within the Chicano political and civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Garcia, 1997). The birth of this particular feminism brings to light the ways in which cultural movements and civil rights movements for/by ethnic groups did and do not necessarily encompass all members of that ethnic group. In this instance, Chicanas developed

a feminist movement in response to patriarchal domination they were experiencing within their wider Mexican-American movement. This further reinforces the fourth tenet of black feminism: that focusing entirely on racial oppression (as the wider Chicano movement and *Chicanismo* did) impedes the struggle against gender oppression. This inevitably informed the rise of Chicana feminism, which subsequently involved confrontation with both racism and sexism. Like black feminism, Chicana feminism sought to emancipate Mexican-American women from cultural expectations surrounding the role of women, which was uniquely intertwined with Catholicism (Garcia, 1997). This demonstrates how, even within a single country, variations of non-white feminisms can vary significantly based on cultural traditions and expectations within ethnic and racial groups, calling attention to the importance of employing contextually appropriate feminisms for the study of women in different contexts, influenced by unique cultural and social forces.

At the core of postcolonial feminism lies this very principle: critiquing the homogenizing tendencies which characterize Western feminisms, and instead specifically highlighting the plight of women in previously-colonized countries (Mishra, 2013). Postcolonial feminism acknowledges another layer of complexity faced by women in former colonies. Not only do they navigate their own culture's gendered and social beliefs, but they are forced to battle a colonial legacy that was "powerfully patriarchal" (Mishra, 2013, p. 130) weaved into that postcolonial fabric. This fabric has built "oppressive structures of racism, discrimination, and exploitation" (Mishra, 2013, p. 130), hence a feminism which was developed after the collapse of colonial empires, and argues for social justice, emancipation, and democracy within those postcolonial settings. Postcolonial feminism is also a "project", as an ongoing critique of the persisting (post)colonial relationships of today.

Similar to postcolonial feminism is decolonized or decolonizing feminism, which again originates from postcolonial contexts, but moves beyond simply critiquing the (post)colonial relationship, and instead continuing processes of decolonization for women in those societies. Grande (2003) argues that this form of feminism places decolonization, not feminism, as *the* central

political project, and points toward colonialism, not the patriarchy, as the structure within which the collective oppression of Indigenous women is located. Grande (2003) further acknowledges that whilst experiences of decolonization will differ amongst former colonies, women in these countries share a common history of conquest and colonization, underlined by white supremacy and global capitalism. Vergès et al. (2021) similarly locate the decolonial feminist struggle in the repercussions of global capitalist exploitation of women who suffer due to the international division of labour (i.e. North/South). They highlight the role of women from the Global South in the current economic world order. Hence, decolonial feminism is often more concerned with exploitation and economic outcomes, and unlike the geographical focus of postcolonial feminism, can apply to women from former colonies who may now live or work outside that initial postcolonial setting.

Within multiple postcolonial and decolonizing settings exist Indigenous populations which have been oppressed through colonial efforts, and hence, many postcolonial and decolonizing feminist projects take into account Indigenous women. However, Indigenous feminisms specifically advocate for Indigenous populations, and acknowledge how their experiences intersect with decolonization, Indigenous empowerment and sovereignty, and Indigenous rights (Gaeron, 2021). Green (2020) further differentiates Indigenous feminism from postcolonial and decolonial projects through the ways in which it draws upon Indigenous knowledges and core elements of Indigenous cultures, such as connections to the land, relationships based around reciprocity, and identity.

Taking inspiration from such work, Indigenous feminist scholars have examined the intersections of gender, culture, ethnicity, and race in sporting contexts. For example, in considering Indigenous women in Canada, McGuire-Adams (2020) acknowledges the importance of combining her Indigenous Canadian knowledge within Indigenous feminist theory. McGuire-Adams (2020) highlights Indigenous feminism as “a lens through which Indigenous women can define, articulate, and envision what Indigenous feminism means to them” (p. 34), reinforcing yet again the need to not only make feminism appropriate to the context of study (i.e., Indigenous feminism), but to make that

indigeneity specific as well. This contributes to aforementioned decolonization literature. McGuire-Adams also argues that Indigenous research paradigms formulated with specific regional or national Indigenous knowledges engage and enact decolonization within academia and within that specific region or country (McGuire-Adams, 2020b). Although incorporating specific Indigenous knowledge into Indigenous feminist research is of significant value, that does not go to say that only Indigenous women or even only women can conduct Indigenous feminist research (Ratna & Samie, 2017). Researching Indigenous women and ethnic “other” women (i.e. non-white women) is complex regardless of who the author is, and will require reflexive and engaged researchers (Ratna & Samie, 2017), regardless of ethnic background or gender.

What this section seeks to emphasize is the variety of feminisms which have been born of the unique contexts in which women are and have been struggling. Feminism takes many shapes, and has been reconfigured in an array of contexts, with a plethora of historical, cultural, economic, social, racial, and ethnic forces at work, such that local women have adopted, adapted, modified, and created their own forms of feminist activism and research approaches, which work within and for that community of women. Thorner & Krishnaraj (2000) write:

[there is no] universal female subordination for which there is some unitary causation but realize the historical processes occurred in different places at different times and in different ways; subordination was never uniform even within the same period across all groups nor even within the same group. (p. 5)

Hence, feminism is not (and has never been) globally uniform, and utilizing the relevant variation for the context at hand is vital for establishing a truly culturally responsive study which highlights the voices of women and values their experiential knowledge. It is important to acknowledge the globality of these issues, as this section has done. However, in this study, it is vital to glocalize feminism and feminist methodologies to suit the contextual specificities and uniqueness of Aotearoa, its post-colonial history, and its Pacific connections.

Chapter Summary

This chapter offered an overview of the three key bodies of literature that have shaped by research. This project sits at the intersection of literature focused on the experiences of women in rugby, sportswomen on social media, and Indigenous social media usage. It noted numerous gaps in existing literature that this study seeks to fill, namely, that whilst research exists on experiences of women's rugby players, less investigation has gone into their use of social media. Furthermore, while research on women's social media is growing, much of this literature is predominantly focused on white women, and only rarely considered team sports. There exists a very limited amount of research on the roles and experiences of Indigenous sporting role models on social media, however, none of this research takes place in the context of Aotearoa. From the perspective of research design, although studies may investigate Indigenous women, few studies utilize Indigenous methodologies. To date, no studies use a combination of the two to consider lived experiences of Indigenous sportswomen in using social media. This is a particularly unique aspect of this study, which seeks to shed further light upon an otherwise under-researched topic in the digital New Zealand sporting context for Māori and Pasifika women.

This chapter acknowledged the paradoxes that come with being a woman rugby player in a male dominated sport characterized by a masculine hegemony, the need to seemingly balance femininity with athleticism, and the simultaneous experiences of marginalization and empowerment that come with taking on such a role. It also considered the challenges that come with being a sportswoman on social media, the battle between reinforcing and breaking traditional gendered sporting stereotypes, redressing inequalities in media coverage, and differences between trivialization and ownership of sexualization revealed through feminist discourse and interviews. It also considered the dilemma faced by Indigenous people on social media, and the opportunities it brings for Indigenous activism and collective organization, alongside increased racism and threats. This is by no means a simple series of balances to maintain as an Indigenous sportswoman on social

media. It is a platform which holds the power to increase visibility of role models, especially for minority communities, but not without the drawbacks associated with vulnerability and over-exposure in what can be a very antagonistic digital space. This chapter also served to highlight the diverse feminisms born of women in unique contexts globally, and the different realities these frameworks highlight. Ultimately, this seeks to reinforce the importance of utilizing a feminist perspective informed by the context in which this study takes place.

Chapter 3: Whakamahere - Research Design

In this chapter, I describe the methodological inspiration for this thesis, which sits at the intersection of feminist, Indigenous, social media, and sporting research. This study seeks to establish the role and impact of professional sportswomen on Instagram on women's rugby in Aotearoa, through a mixed-methods enquiry grounded in a critical paradigm, pragmatically incorporating methods and methodologies best suited to the contextual and cultural specifications of this study and the participants in it. Namely, this study employs feminist methodologies that seek to highlight the voices of the participants, and Indigenous and Māori methodologies that seek to adequately analyse and interpret the lived experiences of these athletes. These methodologies intersect in what can be referred to as a mana wāhine approach to research. This approach guides the entire investigation. The ultimate purpose of this study is to contribute to a growing body of decolonized research, specifically as it pertains to the experiences of women's rugby players and the roles they play for other players of the game. This is of value in a country where national identity and rugby seemingly go hand-in-hand (Miao, 2021; Wensing, 2003; Wensing & Bruce, 2003), characterizing it as a major component of many young athletes' lives in Aotearoa. The ability for the women's game to reach a broader audience and shift dynamics of engagement through social media is a newfound phenomenon deserving of further investigation, which is precisely what this study seeks to offer, alongside a thematic breakdown of content shared and remembered on Instagram.

A Critical Paradigm

This study takes place within a critical paradigm, which founder Max Horkheimer describes as a theory which seeks human emancipation to liberate people from circumstances of oppression. It seeks to challenge the status quo, with particular concerns for power relations within societies and interactions between social institutions like race, class, and gender (Asghar, 2013). Studies within a

critical paradigm are not solely expected to identify and explore a topic of issue in society: they are expected to identify strategies which can seek to contribute towards those issues (Asghar, 2013).

The critical paradigm aligns with the Indigenous and feminist methodologies utilized in this study (Leckenby & Hesse-Biber, 2007), as both frameworks seek to be acutely aware of power differentials and dynamics in research (Smith et al., 2019). While there are many different approaches to feminist methodologies, a key feature is encouraging data collection processes that not only acknowledge power differentials, but also advocate for processes and dynamics which shift power to the participant, highlighting their voice and respecting their truths (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2017; Leckenby & Hesse-Biber, 2007). Likewise, Indigenous methodologies are inherently compatible with critical theory, as they seek to give power and voice to groups which have been marginalized in traditional social research. This enables opportunities through academia for Indigenous groups, knowledges, and ways of knowing to exist freely, beyond the constraints of historically dominant western research methodologies (Naepi, 2015, 2019; Nemani, 2013; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

Let Me Start by Knocking Over the Pillar

The research design of this project and the methodologies utilized are largely a product of the decolonized knowledge and pedagogical practice imparted on me since my return to Aotearoa, after years of being presented with Western objective research practice as the sole acceptable way to conduct research. But how could Western objective methods be best practice in studies which take into account people, places, and experiences beyond the confines of the Western world? The answer was simple: they could not be.

Leenen-Young et al. (2021) articulate that there is a tension that exists for Māori and Pasifika academics and researchers in modern day tertiary education. It is a tension born of the contradictions that exist between our ancestral knowledge systems and those which exist within the world of

academia. For individuals in this environment, there exists a need to understand and be a master of both systems, whilst simultaneously not being given permission to combine the two, or employ one in the other's domain. Over recent decades, there has been a growing body of literature on this decolonization of knowledge (Andreotti et al., 2015; Simmonds, 2011; Smith et al., 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). The ultimate goal of literature on this topic is to eventually dismantle the coloniality of academia as an institution (Leenen-Young et al., 2021). Traditional Western positivistic methodologies originating from an enlightened Europe called upon hypothesis, observation, and tests to procure knowledge and answer questions about the world. Researchers were expected to be objective, analytical, and personally removed from their studies. This "research through imperial eyes" was deconstructed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) through a feminist, critical, and Indigenous lens for which she advocates, in the place of the colonized methodologies and colonial paradigms which dominate much of global academic literature and continue to marginalize "othered" communities (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). The groundbreaking work of feminist Indigenous scholars, such as Tuhiwai Smith, and feminist Indigenous sport scholars such as Dr Farah Palmer, have inspired this project.

Whilst this study seeks to contribute to this growing body of decolonized and decolonizing literature, amongst other topics, it exists within an even smaller subsection, where these knowledges are specifically applied to experiences in the sporting realm. There are very few former colonies which operate at the apex of sport the way New Zealand rugby does. In conjunction with this growing acknowledgement of decolonization within existing institutions, World Rugby's new legislation regarding player eligibility is a direct product of World Rugby acknowledging post-colonial realities for rugby players, predominantly in the Pacific, and in turn providing the necessary redress. As such, it is clear that this topic of decolonization and Indigenous empowerment is of importance to World Rugby, the sporting body which governs rugby globally, as a whole, not just the experiences of women players in Aotearoa alone.

This study seeks to navigate away from Western methodological expectations, and instead gravitate towards practices which best suit the environment in which this study is taking place, encompassing a pragmatic approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) within a critical paradigm. Where Smith et al. (2021) claimed that “pillars of the colonial institution are like a knowledge prison”, this study seeks to knock down these pillars, and engage in culturally responsive Indigenous methodologies and knowledges that reveal deeper insight into the lived realities of women in a stereotypically masculine sport in a country that continues to struggle with processes of colonialism. Knocking down these pillars means this study can be framed around the participants who gave it life. Engaging in culturally applicable methodologies ensures the voices of the participants are centered throughout the study (Naepi, 2019), and that their accounts are adequately understood, accurately interpreted, and insightfully analyzed. Sereana Naepi’s (2019) Masi methodology highlights the importance of 11 values in researching women of the Pacific, all of which can be applied to this study, which considers a diverse group of participants from Māori, Pasifika, and pākehā backgrounds: respect, relationships, cultural competency, meaningful engagement, reciprocity, utility, rights, balance, protection, capacity building, and participation (Naepi, 2019). These values shape research practice. As this study includes Pasifika participants, not only *can* the above values be incorporated into the methods, analyses, and products of this study: arguably, they *need* to be, in order to establish a broadly culturally responsive study, despite it being predominantly grounded in Māori methodologies. The term “masi” itself – referring to a woven Fijian bark cloth, which is also made throughout the Pacific and includes symbolic patterns and designs – as a metaphor in the research space invites this ability to weave values and practices from around the Pacific, including Aotearoa, provided the voices of the participants remain central to the study.

This study seeks to provide insight into the digital and real-world spaces within which these sportswomen simultaneously operate, and to understand the relationship between these sportswomen and their digital mahi and those developing and playing women’s rugby, across a variety of levels.

Weaving the experiences of all these participants across common themes will allow me to create an understanding of the complex and multi-layered fabric of this dynamic, behind the screen and in front of it. However, there is another element that is woven into the methodological framework of this research: feminism.

Feminism Matters

Integral to this study are the feminist research frameworks which guide it throughout, with one inherent goal: to highlight the voices of the participants and give weight and respect to their lived experiences. Kanemasu and Molnar (2017) highlighted the duality of feminism in research as both a methodology and method(s). As a methodology, it does not advocate for impartiality so much as it does for a researcher-participant relationship which will yield a comfortable environment for the participant, emphasizing the importance of developing rapport, a stark departure from the conventional focus on detachment and impartiality (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2017). As a method, Kanemasu and Molnar (2017) demonstrated how feminism can be applied to the data collection process through conducting semi-structured interviews guided by the participant, so as to mitigate issues associated with power differentials. In these settings, topics are not dictated by the researcher, but rather, space is given to the participant to incorporate topics which may not have been present on the interview schedule.

Furthermore, as Kanemasu and Molnar (2017) demonstrated, feminist methodologies do not merely extend to interpretive frameworks and methods of data collection, but can indeed inform methods of analysis as well, as the researchers used talanoa between themselves until they came to an agreement around the themes which emerged. Kanemasu and Johnson (2019) used exploratory mixed-methods research including surveys and focus groups in a study that was more empirical in nature, and aimed to achieve notions like validity and maximum variation sampling. This is a departure from the aims of this thesis. Instead, it seeks to value the anomalies present in anecdotal

research, consisting of personal accounts, and experiential knowledge to broaden global understandings of experiences of sportswomen online.

This emphasis on feminist methodologies and ethics of care indicates that these researchers chose to emphasize the commonality of being women over being Fijian, in operating within a feminist as opposed to an Indigenous methodology. This may be because of the ethnic diversity present in Fiji's post-colonial landscape, complete with both British and Indian influences. The researchers may have established femininity as more cross-cutting than ethnicity in this particular case. However, as discussed in the literature review, the glocalization and global modifications of feminisms which intersect with different realities have generated varieties of feminism more appropriate for specific contexts. In the context of this study, that modification takes the form of an Indigenous feminist approach which accommodates for Aotearoa's realities and histories.

Weaving the Perfect Fit: a Mana Wāhine Approach

The variations of feminism were discussed in the previous chapter. Building upon this literature, the feminist approach used in this study needs to actively create space for the participants and their voices, including those of Indigenous Māori and Pasifika women and knowledges. The feminist framework of this thesis aims to adequately acknowledge the plight of various women in Aotearoa, who, like many of the participants in this study, may be simultaneously fighting feminist, Indigenous, and decolonization battles. Similar to Collins (2015), in acknowledging the inadequacy of gender-only or race-only approaches and perspectives, this notion of both feminism and Indigenousness having equal importance brings forth the value of intersectionality in formulating this study and shaping analyses of the qualitative data collected.

Intersectionality acknowledges the differences amongst and within women and their multiple identities, noting that one should not supersede another (Ahmad, 2019), nor should those components be separated: they are interrelated and constantly interplaying with one another. In this sense, it would be inappropriate to assume the prioritization for any one identifying factor of any participant,

including gender, race, or ethnicity. Prioritizing both elements simultaneously lends itself to an Indigenous feminist perspective, which can be referred to as a mana wāhine approach. A mana wāhine approach exists to explore the intersection between being Māori and being wāhine, and the diversity which exists within that space.

Tuhiwai Smith (1992) conceptualizes four essential strands of mana wāhine research. The whanau strand is inherently inclusive, prioritizes setting pathways for future generations, and seeks to empower young wāhine. Similar to Collins (2015), Smith refers to these strands as projects, again highlighting that feminism is not simply a concept: it requires action and work over time. The spiritual – or *wairua* – project is incorporated as Smith sees it a spiritual struggle as fundamental to the women’s struggle in Aotearoa, and concerns itself primarily with gender roles. The third project is the state, highlighting the role colonization played in reconstructing the role of women in Aotearoa, shifting it considerably from what that role was in *Te Ao Māori* (the Māori world), and prior to the introduction of colonizers. The fourth project exists in two parts: Indigenous women and white women. The former is concerned with locating the Māori women’s struggle within the international context. This was accomplished in the literature review. The latter acknowledges that the plight of Māori women in Aotearoa has not been left untouched by white women, and to build on Tuhiwai Smith’s (1992) original argument, Pasifika, Asian, and other women who now populate modern Aotearoa. All women have influenced New Zealand’s feminist struggle, but it is important to recognize that there is a difference between the struggles of the different groups.

Simmonds (2011) considers Smith’s (1992) framework, and contends that applying a mana wāhine approach to research not only challenges dominant hegemonic discourses, but “validates *mātauranga wāhine* (Māori women’s knowledges) and subsequently *mātauranga Māori* (Māori knowledges)” (Simmonds, 2011). This is particularly valuable for the critical perspective taken on by this thesis. As a type of feminism, a mana wāhine approach seeks to grant visibility to the narratives and experiences of women. It is, at its core, a space where Māori women, both participants and

researchers alike, “can, on [their] own terms and in [their] own way, (re)define and (re)represent the multifarious stories and experiences of what it means, and what it meant in the past, to be a Māori woman in Aotearoa” (Simmonds, 2011, p. 12).

Dr Farah Palmer has considered Indigenous Māori feminism specifically as it pertains to sport. In her consideration of haka in women’s rugby in Aotearoa, she notes how Māori cultural practices like *pūrākau* (legends, stories) and haka can be understood through the modern research lens as storytelling methodologies (Palmer, 2016). She calls for these Indigenous storytelling methodologies to be embraced by academics, so as to widen the scope of what is collected and retold, “to produce more accurate truths that are empowering rather than demoralizing” (Palmer, 2016, p. 2170) for Indigenous people involved. This search for empowerment through methodological underpinnings is staple in feminist and Indigenous research alike. Palmer (2016) identifies this, and affirms that storytelling articulates not only Indigenous, but also feminist perspectives, both of which “challenge the predominantly Western masculine discourse associated with elite sport” (p. 2170) which exist globally. Palmer also articulates an important point of origin for the mana wāhine movement which inspires mana wāhine feminist approaches to research. The approach acknowledges that Indigenous women experience the world differently to white and Western women, but also that Māori women’s experiences are different to those of Māori men, with male voices having often eclipsed Māori women’s in an effort to unite against racism and colonialism (Palmer, 2016).

In this study, I draw inspiration from the powerful mana wāhine scholars before me. Adopting a mana wāhine approach is central to the ability to articulate experiences of Aotearoa’s most prominent sportswomen, and the experiences of those who they impact in their sport, through a consideration of voice, quantitative data, whanau, wairua, and the state, whilst incorporating Indigenous, Pasifika, and white women within the framework which prioritizes respect and comfort.

Methods

This mixed-methods study incorporates three essential elements to explore the intricacies of online interaction between professional players and rugby in the community. I conduct culturally responsive feminist one-on-one interviews with Black Ferns 7s players to gain perspective on their digital mahi, understand their motivations in posting, and clarify their intentions when it comes to sharing content on Instagram. I carry out a quantitative social media analysis using the accounts of the women interviewed, alongside an additional six accounts of players purposively selected. This is done to quantify thematic frequency of content and establish a numerical understanding of what the public engages with the most. I also conduct culturally responsive group interviews with players, administrators, and coaches of community women's rugby, in order to gain insight into the impact these sportswomen and their digital mahi has had on their experiences in and with women's rugby. All three elements draw upon the themes which motivate Black Ferns 7s players, and themes which are digitally engaged with the most from a quantitative standpoint. Weaving these understandings together allows for a multi-layered image of the women's rugby ecosystem in Aotearoa to be drawn, informed by perspectives present on multiple ends of women's rugby, from professional and grassroots.

While I am aware of critiques of mixed methods and supposed paradigmatic clashes (Creswell et al., 2006; K. Howe, 1988), when coming from a cultural weaving perspective, this mixture of methods and methodologies becomes very intentional in this critical lens. Mixed-methods accommodate for two important factors in this study that are inherent to feminist research: interest in marginalized voices and the empowerment of both researchers and participants (Leckenby & Hesse-Biber, 2007). The concept of mātauranga wāhine acknowledges ways of knowing unique to Māori women. The mixed-methods objective of breaking down the (false) dichotomy between qualitative

and quantitative, similar to the feminist research objective of eliminating hierarchies, may give new space for these unique knowledges to be articulated (Leckenby & Hesse-Biber, 2007). Similarly, Hesse-Biber (2012) notes that feminist mixed-methods can uncover subjugated knowledge. Hence, this study follows that advice: to veer away from notions of validation and confirmation, and towards embracing dissonance in and across data sets. Lastly, mixed-methods have the ability to empower participants to speak to their experiences and data, regardless of what form that data takes. Interviewing sportswomen whose accounts are quantitatively analyzed is an example of this: their numerical Instagram breakdown is accompanied by the opportunity to expand and explain, giving voice, power, and depth to what was previously just a series of numbers. In this sense, it is clear mixed-methods enhance the ability for this study to profoundly gauge the experiences of sportswomen online, and their impact on community rugby.

Participant Selection & Ethical Considerations

There were two criteria used to select participants for this study. For the one-on-one interviews, the participant needed to be, or have been, a member of the Black Ferns 7s squad, over the age of 18. For the group interviews, the participants needed to be either a player, coach, administrator, or referee of women's rugby in the Bay of Plenty, that was over the age of 18. I had a pre-established relationship with all of the participants, as did the participants with one another, which I believe helped facilitate very free-flowing and honest *kōrero* (chat). In total, there were 16 participants who contributed to the qualitative data used in this thesis, including two individuals who provided additional qualitative data through direct messages, ranging from 18 to 57 years of age. The participants identified as pākehā (n = 4), Māori (n = 9), Samoan (n = 1), and Māori-Samoan (n = 1) and Indian (n = 1).

Some of the accounts analysed in the quantitative analysis were not done so with the explicit consent of the account holder; however, guidelines for ethical social media research do not always necessitate this when the account is public, and thus provides publicly available information (Moreno

et al., 2013). Public Instagram accounts, and in particular verified accounts (accounts which Instagram has deemed an authentic account of a public Figure or celebrity), are not utilized with the expectation of privacy: the account holders expect to be observed by strangers (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Furthermore, aligned with Townsend and Wallace's (2016) guidelines for ethical social media research, this study does not add to the vulnerable situations sportswomen have opened themselves up to by nature of engaging with the public on social media, nor does the subject matter of this study touch on anything these players have not already chosen to share and make public.

Accessibility was both an advantage and a drawback. I was limited to community rugby in the Bay, and as such could only accept people from this region. Fortunately, however, women's rugby is very popular here, and thus presented a very large pool to select from. Furthermore, whilst in close physical proximity to Black Ferns 7s athletes through work, training, and friendships, their gruelling schedules in a World Cup year made things difficult to line up. Understandably, this pool of participants is therefore restricted by a number of factors. Despite these limitations, however, participants' experiences in rugby have not all taken place solely in the Bay of Plenty, or even solely in New Zealand, which presents opportunities for these findings to be applicable beyond solely a local context. Their experiences as women of all ages and backgrounds, from all parts of Aotearoa and beyond, enriches this study. With that said, the goal with this sample-size is not generalizability. This paper highlights sportswomen's voices and values the importance of their true lived experiences as rich, insightful qualitative data. In understanding that "all knowledge is marked by its origins" , it has further been emphasized in feminist research that such lived experiences are not universal, but rather contextually specific; this is not a flaw, but rather a reminder of the diversity of experiential knowledge (Toffoletti et al., 2021). This study seeks to draw upon that diversity within the process of participant selection, in order to contribute to diversity in existing global literature surrounding understandings of sportswomen's experiences online.

The consent form supplied to the participants requested whether they would like to remain anonymous, be named, or use a pseudonym. This granted participants the opportunity to decide against reducing their contributions to a number, or choosing to remain secure behind anonymity, which may be valued in their high-profile lives. In the case of the one-on-one interviews, participants were able to make a final decision after reading their transcript. All participants had up to three weeks from the day of our kōrero to change this answer. All participants were also frequently reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any point during the kōrero, and up to three weeks post.

It is important to note that, in using a mana wāhine methodology, I have been careful not to exclude the Pasifika and pākehā identities also present in participants. In many ways, the participants in this research, both as Black Ferns 7s athletes and as players and administrators in the wider community, are enveloped in the Māoritanga which accompanies rugby in the Bay of Plenty. Karakia is said before food is served at aftermatch functions, haka are performed before and after games, and waiata are performed alongside post-match speeches and during trainings. In this sense, an inclusive approach which reflects the diversity of the local rugby environment was utilized for the data collection process. These practices are also familiar to the Black Ferns 7s squad, who keep various cultural values, including haka and waiata, central to their daily activities as a team, despite the multicultural makeup of their team and their management.

Social Media Analysis

The first element conducted in this study was a digital social media analysis. The Instagram accounts of two Black Ferns 7s players who were interviewed were analyzed, along with six other Black Ferns 7s players, who were purposively selected through being specifically mentioned in the group discussions as particularly impactful or memorable. This makes a total of eight accounts analyzed. 15 posts were analyzed per player, however, one individual only had seven posts on her account, so the total number of posts analyzed was 112. It was revealed through the interview

process with Black Ferns 7s players that the Olympics was a game-changing event for their social media usage. In these interviews, players acknowledged the increased audience they were sharing with, and the amplification of their voice across this platform during such an iconic event. This in turn impacted the way they chose to present themselves online moving forward. Therefore, the posts were selected around the time of the Tokyo Olympics, which also controlled for external life factors. I selected one image posted from between the 29th and 31st of July 2021 – the three days over which the women’s rugby 7s games were played –, centered it on the screen of a mobile phone, and captured the 15 posts around it, including that central post, as 15 is the total number of posts visible on Instagram when on a mobile phone at any one given moment. An example of this is visible in Figure 1. The images were then thematically coded into groupings of themes which emerged visually, as well as verbally across both the individual interviews and the group interviews.

In doing feminist digital cultural research, Toffoletti and colleagues outline the careful steps taken to avoid obscuring human subjects in studies that use big data, as is often the case when conducting social media analyses. They detail the paradox of using big data for a feminist study, which may erase the contextual specificities in which the data was created (Toffoletti et al., 2021). In order to avoid these challenges, this paper does not conduct a vast enough quantitative social media analysis to qualify as big data. Furthermore, to ensure participants’ autonomy over their data is not diminished, the one-on-one interviews further serve to allow the sportswomen room for justification and clarification in their intentions and Instagram posts. Therefore, whilst the quantitative findings are thereafter utilized to illustrate thematic frequency and audience engagement, the numerical findings are explored through statements made in both the one-on-one and group interviews. Conversely, statements made in the interviews are supported by the numerical findings. The result is a discussion of the core themes which emerged from behind the screen and in the community, all of which are grouped together.

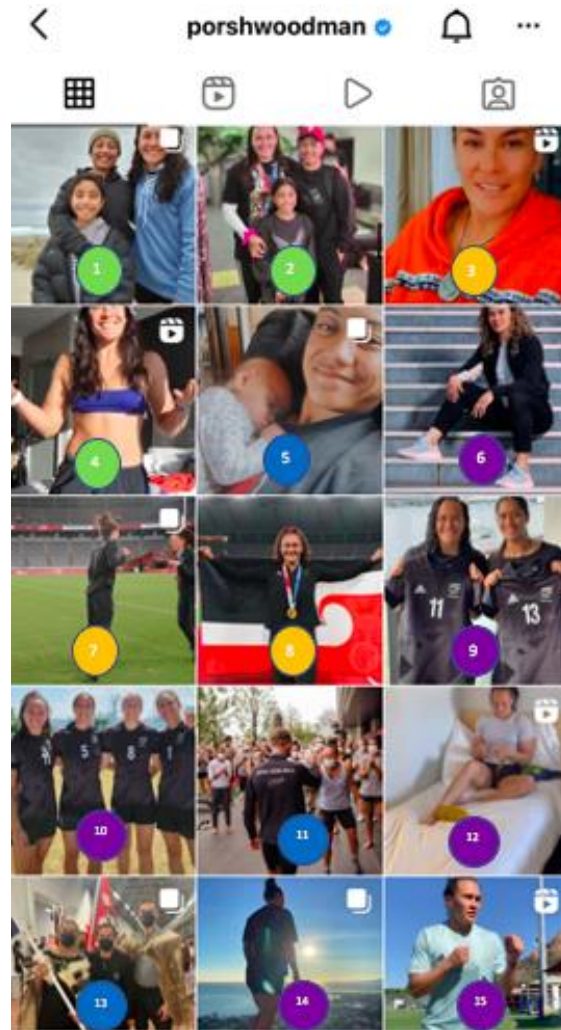


Figure 1: Portia Woodman's Instagram coded analysis (available at: <https://www.instagram.com/porshwoodman/>)

Interviews

With ethical approval from the University of Waikato (HECS2021 #66), semi-structured interviews were carried out with two current and one former Black Ferns 7s players. A separate informational interview was also conducted with one inaugural Black Fern. These participants were recruited using Whatsapp and Instagram direct messaging, as well as through in-person interaction, and varied in age, ethnicity, and amount of time in the squad. Where quotes from individual interviews are used in the analysis, an asterisk is used by the player's name, pseudonym, or "anonymous" status, depending on the title they chose. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, and was centered around *kai* (food). As such, space was always given for the participant to say a *karakia* or prayer prior to eating, in line with Smith's (1992) *mana wāhine* pillar of *wairua*. The

lives of these sportswomen are extremely busy, so a dual-individual microphone was purchased to ensure these interviews could take place in any location, at any time, and still be picked up in an audio recording, which was later transcribed. One interview took place at a café, another over breakfast, one over kai on the marae, and one at the beach following a tackle training session.

The transcribed version of the interview was sent to the participant within 72 hours of meeting. The participant then had a total of three weeks from the day of our kōrero to read the transcript, provide any adjustments or clarification, and request any redactions. The conversations were guided by the participant following a short introductory korero between the two of us, and Robards and Lincoln's (2017) act of scrolling back was used as a prompt whenever the conversation began to slow, to guide our kōrero through the experiences they have chosen to share on Instagram. As each of their accounts are unique and individualized, it would not have been appropriate to have these discussions in a group setting: individual interviews were vital to enabling a setting which encouraged deep, meaningful discussions, resulting in quality data.

Group Interviews

A total of 10 people participated across two group interviews (one of seven people, and one of three people, myself excluded), and were recruited by responding to a “call for participants” posted to my Instagram account and Instagram story. These participants were members of the women’s rugby community, either as players, coaches, managers, or referees, and two of them were male. Outside of the group interviews, two other participants also engaged in one-on-one discussions with me via direct messages on Instagram, sparked by the “call for participants” posted on my Instagram story. One was a spectator of women’s rugby, and the other was a Black Fern (whose account was not one of the eight analyzed), both of whom added to the qualitative data analysed for this thesis.

The group interviews took elements of both wānanga and talanoa methods (and methodologies), given that the participants were of diverse ethnicities, including Māori and Pasifika backgrounds, which importantly both share oratory traditions throughout their histories (Vaiotei,

2013). I ventured away from making our experiences monocultural, and instead followed the guidelines that Pan-Pacific cultures value and prioritize: the centrality of kai, circular seating, music (and in one instance, impromptu background haka), and reciprocity. This was to ensure the discussion created an environment of cultural respect and care, so as to yield in-depth discussions which shed light on issues of tension in some instances. Both qualitative elements implemented *kānohi kitea* (meeting face to face), an important kaupapa Māori principle which forms *whanaungatanga* (close connection/relationships), and thus removed Zoom or video calls as alternative options to in-person kōrero (Ruru, 2017; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

To further facilitate this, the discussions took place in a familiar environment, at the Blake Park Rugby Club in Mount Maunganui. The discussions began with *whakataua*, which are used to commence *hui* (meetings) and are less formal than a *pōwhiri* (traditional welcoming). Following short introductions from each of the participants, including a *mihimihi* (introduction giving thanks) from myself, images of some of the most popular recent Instagram posts by Black Ferns were displayed on a computer screen for the rest of the discussion, in the event a prompt was required. Children were allowed to attend, as some of the participants were also (single) mothers, which reflected Smith's (1992) pillar of whānau. Again, the discussions were physically based around kai, seated and standing in circular formations, insinuating that each individual was equal in our knowledge sharing *across* power to one another, instead of talking up to a position of power or authority, as some researchers position themselves in non-feminist context (L. Smith, Pihama, Cameron, Mataki, Morgan, & Te Nana, 2019). These discussions emphasized the sharing of experience and knowledge, which has been noted by Smith et al. (2019) as a decolonizing strategy for knowledge institutions which set rules and norms around research impact. This further allows this study to contribute to wider bodies of decolonized and decolonizing literature.

Analysis

The group and individual interview transcripts are thereafter coded in a bottom-up process of thematic analysis, whereby initial codes and labels form subtopics, which thereafter form topics, which then converge in thematic groupings. This allows the data to form its own themes, and although it is impossible to entirely separate myself as the researcher from the data, this works to balance my “insider” status and the subsequent tendency to apply preconceived ideas or frames to data, by instead emphasizing emergence and focusing on that which emanates from the data once it has been read (Charmaz, 2006). This draws directly from the worlds and experiences of those interviewed, which is reinforced by taking on a mana wāhine framework which validates both mātauranga wāhine and mātauranga Māori. Braun and Clarke (2019) argue that themes do not passively emerge from data, but rather are created at the intersection of the researcher’s assumptions and experiences, their analytical skill, and the data itself. This is not necessarily problematic, given the reflexive and reflective nature of studies like this thesis; however, there are still ways to limit researcher influence upon the generation of thematic grouping. This includes utilizing methods and methodologies which make space for the development of themes not expected or previously thought of by the researcher (Charmaz, 2006). Instead, importance is placed upon the reflective and reflexive work of the researcher to generate a nuanced understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2019) of the stories told by the participants. As such, researcher reflexivity is particularly emphasized in this study.

Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity is of particular importance in feminist studies, where positionality of the researcher is acknowledged to play a profound role in the formation of the study. My position as both an African and Māori woman places me both within and outside Te Ao Māori. In my eyes, I navigate both worlds as an insider, but simultaneously as a guest. It is through this “guest” lens that I also approached these discussions: I was a guest in their space and time which they had kindly given in order for this study to take place. I am confident in my mātauranga such that I can comfortably

navigate a culturally responsive discussion, but not so much that I would attempt to assume a leadership role, which I think was important for the power dynamics of these kōrero, as it meant I never placed myself in a position of authority.

As a rugby player and coach, I took on multiple roles in this study: I was a friend, a teammate, a student, a rival, and a colleague to the different participants, and I must critically reflect on my multiple positionalities, and the way this influences my research, data collection, and interactions. Undertaking “insider research” (Rose, 1997; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) comes with its challenges, including the need to explain terminology and the understanding that I am approaching this research with preconceived ideas of what I anticipate to find. Adopting a critical feminist lens of seeing what *is* there, as opposed to what we are *taught* is there (DuBois, 1983), was vital to countering this. Like Nemani (2013), I argue my insider status, as a woman, as Māori, and as a rugby player, grants me deeper understanding of the sport and community dynamics, and thus I can better contextualize statements. It is both a restriction and a resource, that I navigate with care throughout this thesis.

Chapter 4: Raraunga - Quantitative Analysis

In this chapter, I carry out a quantitative social media analysis of eight Instagram accounts belonging to Black Ferns 7s players, two of whom were also interviewed. Those who were interviewed chose whether to remain anonymous, use a pseudonym, or be named in the study. Those who were purposively selected and named during the group interviews were named in the study, acknowledging that they, as individuals, have had a powerful and profound impact on the lives of people in the wider women's rugby community. This quantitative analysis had a medium sample size of 112 images posted; however, it does not seek to be generalizable across all women rugby players or all women in team sports. Rather, it seeks to provide a foundation upon which a numerical understanding of content production and Instagram interaction, as depicted by likes and comments, can be formulated, so as to better interpret the qualitative findings from the interviews and group discussions, specifically for this study. Evidence, quotes, and qualitative support for some of the claims will be presented in the following two chapters.

The Sportswomen Analyzed

There are a total of eight Black Ferns 7s players included in the social media analysis. Six of the sportswomen in this analysis are named, due to being named by the group interview participants as influential, impactful, or otherwise memorable. By naming them, I seek to acknowledge and grant respect toward their influential role in the lives of those within the women's rugby community. Two sportswomen are not named, and have instead chosen to go by "anonymous" and the other by the pseudonym "Candy Floss".

Stacey Fluhler (née Waaka) (26), known affectionately as "The Smiling Assassin", has been a staple player for both the Black Ferns 15s and 7s squads. She is Māori (Ngāi Tūhoe), from the East Coast town of Ruatoki, and has frequently been one of the top try scorers on the Women's World Rugby Sevens Series since her debut in 2016. She runs a business, Stacey Fluhler Scrunchies, via

Instagram, where she sells colourful and customizable scrunchies, alongside notable brand sponsorships with Māori activewear brand Hine and sports brand Asics.

Shiray Kaka (née Tane) (27) is Māori-Samoan, and has battled a significant injury history throughout her time with the Black Ferns 7s squad, for whom she debuted in 2013. After three years of consecutive surgeries and contemplations of quitting rugby, which she documents openly on her Instagram page, she has remained a core part of the team since her comeback from injury in 2018. Mental health and meditation are two focuses of her social media representations. Shiray shares many comedic videos of her life on the farm she lives on, with dog training and psychology a noticeable passion of hers. Her husband is also a former All Blacks 7s athlete and appears in a number of her posts.

Portia Woodman (31) is arguably one of the most well-known sportswomen in this study, and arguably in rugby globally. She is a Māori woman from Northland, with a family history of rugby success, with both her father and uncle being former All Blacks. She dominates the field in both 7s and 15s, and is one of the sport's top try scoring women in both codes. Portia has won World Rugby's Women's Player of the Year and Seven's Player of the Decade, and continues to be one of the greatest women in the sport. She shares a daughter with fellow Black Fern star Renee Wickliffe, whom are both frequently posted on her Instagram, alongside many images of her expansive family. They, alongside images of her teammates and action shots, are the dominant focus of her Instagram.

Tyla Nathan-Wong (28) is a Māori-Chinese player from Auckland, and the youngest to ever be selected to the Black Ferns 7s team in 2012. Although she has been committed to 7s since the early years of the Black Ferns 7s programme, frequently being one of the top points scorers on the World Series, she recently was also selected for the Black Ferns 15s squad. In 2018/19, Tyla was the top points scorer on the World Series, supported by her accurate kicking. This earned her a nomination for World Rugby Women's Player of the Year, but her teammate Ruby Tui instead claimed the title.

Ruby Tui (30) is one of the most recognizable women in 7s. She is of Samoan and pākehā descent, from Wellington, and has been part of the Black Ferns 7s since their official inception in 2012. She is often remembered for her comedic post-match interviews and bubbly personality. Despite this humorous side, her recent tell-all novel “Straight Up” details the difficult upbringing, including drugs, abuse, and neglect, which Ruby overcame to become the powerful sportswoman she is today. As such, much, if not the majority, of Ruby’s Instagram content speaks about mental health. She also has a brand deal with Māori brand Awa, a period underwear brand which she has frequently shared her use of. Her success in 15s also sees her as a member of the Black Ferns 15s squad for the 2021 Rugby World Cup.

Sarah Hirini (née Goss) (29), a Māori woman out of Fielding in the Manawatu, is a natural leader, captaining the Black Ferns 7s for a number of years now. She was the first woman to make 200 appearances on the 7s World Series. Of note on her Instagram page is Sarah’s sponsorship with Tudor, and Matakese Rugby Club & Hirini Rugby Academy, which she co-founded alongside her husband. Sarah has been nominated numerous times for World Rugby Women’s Sevens Player of the Year, and has translated this success into the 15s game as well, where she joins Ruby, Portia, and Stacey for the upcoming Rugby World Cup.

Thematic Groupings

Whilst a multitude of sub-topics and themes emerged, images from all eight accounts were ultimately thematically coded into four groups: the team & rugby, achievement, life outside of rugby, and culture & vulnerability. These identified themes will be interrogated more deeply and discussed in more detail in the following two chapters. Similar categories were found and utilized in studies by Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016), Kane et al. (2013), and Pegoraro et al. (2018), but this thesis reveals the importance of cultural and national context in how such themes are communicated by athletes and engaged with by their audiences.

The bulk of the images in the analysis (n = 41) fell into “the team & rugby” (36.6%), which included any images of trainings or matches, whether they were in-action or posed shots, provided those in the image were clearly identifiable as Black Ferns 7s athletes, namely by their uniform, as seen in Figure 2. A number of the categories in Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016, Kane et al. (2013), and Pegoraro et al. (2018) contained images of athletes dressed in their identifiable sporting apparel, but separated the images into sub-categories, such as “athletic action” and “dressed but posed”. These sub-categories were combined for this study in order to reflect the team sport nature of the participants (i.e., “the team”, not just “rugby”) and to gain insight into the activities undergone as a team, as well as pragmatically due to sample size.



Figure 2: Examples of “team & rugby” images in the analysis (images available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRgH8wvjMyd/>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/CR8o3J3pabZ/?hl=en>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/CR-314Jrrrf/>)

The next category was “achievement”, which contained any images which clearly displayed achievement, including images on the podium, with a medal, group celebrations on the field, or a team-naming image, as seen in Figure 3. There were 22 images in this category (19.6%). This

number was likely bolstered by the timing around the Olympic Games. Similarly, the format of rugby 7s and its HSBC World Series, whereby tournaments are played in various locations throughout the year, also influenced the formation and size of this category. In the 2020 World Rugby 7s Series, there were eight locations on the women’s series, meaning there were eight opportunities for a trophy to be won in a single season. This does not take into account regional tournaments, or Olympic, Commonwealth Games, and World Cup opportunities, to further display achievement. Hence, this category is unlikely to be as prominent in other team sports with competition formats that do not repeatedly grant opportunities for championship wins.



Figure 3: Examples of “achievement” images in the analysis (available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSDJwRHBwwi/>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSD7QoWJbpx/?hl=en>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSBOHjuLWCZ/?hl=en>)

Whilst being a rugby player is a core part of these sportswomen’s identities, as was reinforced during the one-on-one interviews, they still engage in a variety of activities off the field, maintaining active social and family lives. These sub-topics of hobbies, friends, holidays, and more, were grouped into “life outside of rugby”, which broadly encompasses any and all activities these

sportswomen engaged with away from rugby and sport, as seen in Figure 4. This category is reminiscent of Geurin-Eagleman & Burch's (2016), Pegoraro et al.'s, (2018), and Toffoletti & Thorpe's (2018c) non-sport setting categories, and made up 22.3% of the images in the analysis.

The fourth category was arguably the most difficult to name, and also contains a number of sub-topics. However, two sub-topics in particular stood out: images about sensitive topics (such as mental health), and images portraying their Indigenous culture(s). These substantial sub-topics were grouped together into “culture & vulnerability”, which includes any images whereby an athlete was being vulnerable, such as them crying or revealing personal struggles or dreams, or providing deep insights into their family or culture, such as performing haka or explaining *tā moko* (Māori tattoo), as seen in Figure 5. This category in particular lends itself to the Indigenous emphasis of this study. “Culture & vulnerability” had the third highest number of images, with 24 total posts (21.4%).



Figure 4: Examples of “life outside rugby” images in the analysis (available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSYgSoElOLA/>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTA3atDhO3E/>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSU-wT3Bg-V/?hl=en>)

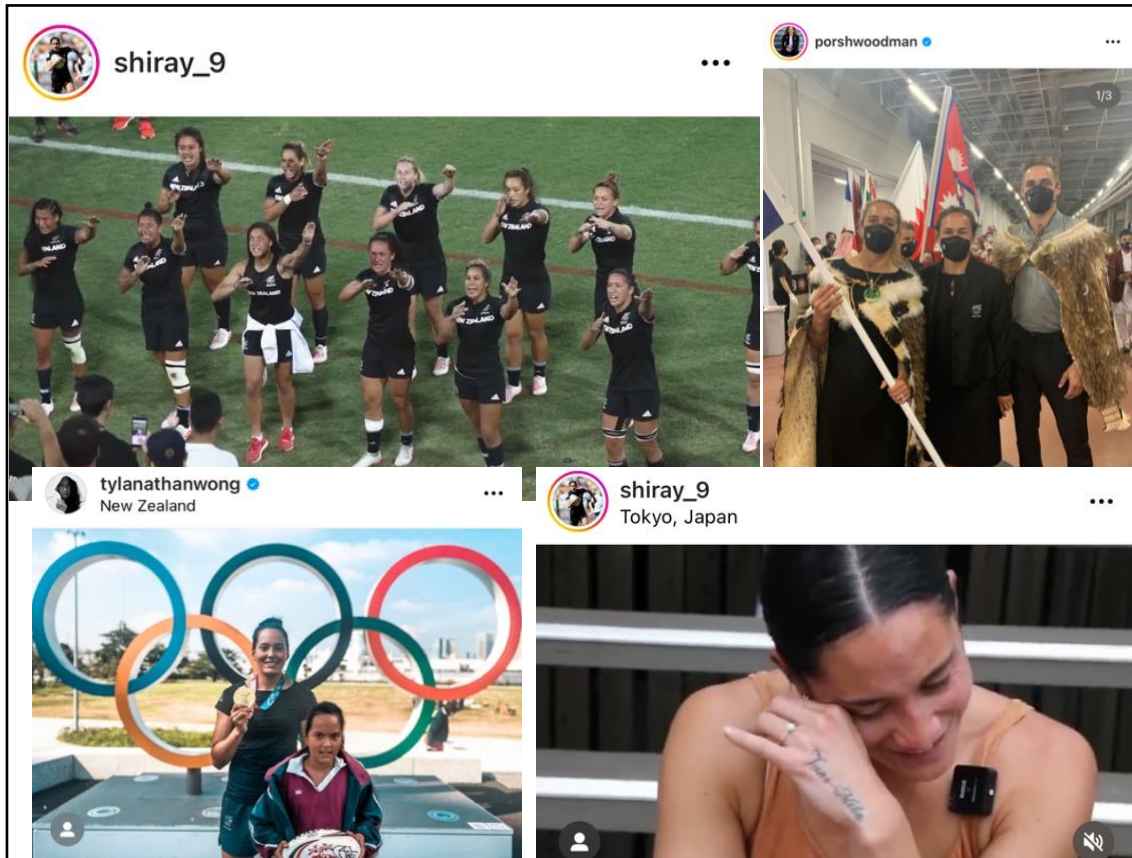


Figure 5: Examples of “culture & vulnerability” images in the analysis (available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRfjRJyloXK/>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRsnH17L9gH/>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSLpChZL6Cd/?hl=en>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/COzjlhBFdKc/>)

In the event an image alone did not clearly fit into a given category, one of two options occurred: consultation with the sportswoman herself, or referencing the caption of the image for clarification. If the post was a carousel (a post with more than one image in it), the post was thematically coded into the group to which the majority of the images belonged, and the above two options were again referred to in the event that this was not clearly distinguishable. It was rare, however, that a carousel of images did not collectively follow a central theme that was evident in both the images and the caption. Whilst the need to consult players or captions in order to code an image was very rare, it happened most often in the “culture & vulnerability” category, with five images requiring clarification.

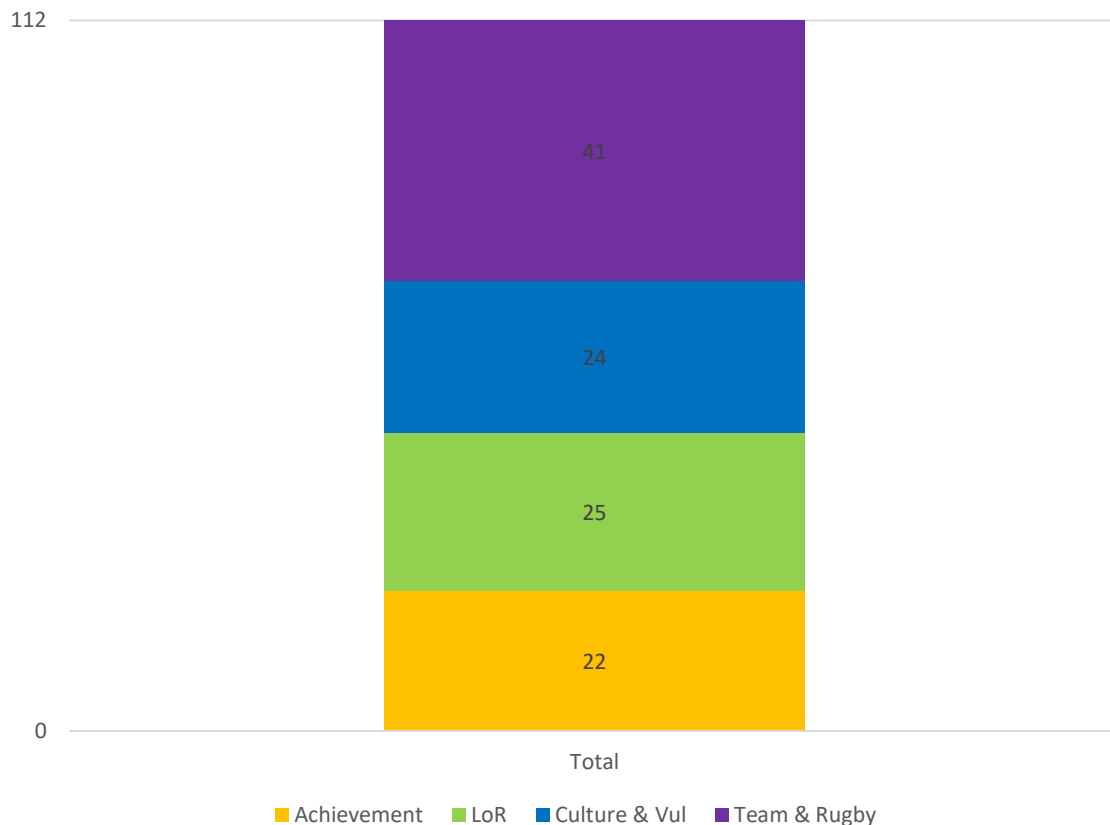


Figure 6: Thematic distribution of all images

As can be seen in Figure 6, 41 of the images analyzed were images of these sportswomen playing rugby, in their Black Ferns kit, or on the field, demonstrating two things. Firstly, convenience: the team has a professional photographer and content creator present to capture images of the players. As such, there exists a plethora of images of these women playing rugby and training, as it is always digitally captured. Secondly, importance: having the image is one thing, however, choosing to share it with their audience demonstrates the importance these sportswomen attach to these images, and, in turn, to their life in rugby with this team. This also indicates that these sportswomen predominantly choose to present themselves online as women athletes and members of this team, at a higher rate than they choose to portray other aspects of their identity.

Self-presentation as an athlete first and foremost is apparent, with the overwhelming majority of posts sitting in this category for all but two players. This coincides with findings from Pegoraro et al. (2018), whose research found that players at the 2015 FIFA Women’s World Cup predominantly

represented themselves on Instagram through “athletic action” images, correlating with Kane et al.’s (2013) findings that athletic competence is the dominant self-representation strategy used by sportswomen on social media. Fink et al. (2014) also found that sportswomen overwhelmingly desire to be portrayed as athletically competent in endorsement campaigns. Similarly, Coche (2017) found that sportswomen overwhelmingly self-present as athletes on Twitter, and although not the dominant category, images regarding athletes’ professional lives was the very close second largest category in Burch and Zimmerman’s (2019) study of Instagram’s most followed sportswomen. Likewise, Krane et al. (2010) found that college-age sportswomen choose to emphasize physical strength and athleticism in images of themselves, demonstrating this commonality across age groups.

Contrastingly, Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) and Burch and Zimmerman (2019) found that photos regarding an athlete’s personal life were most commonly posted, and Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018b) similarly found that lifestyle images were more prevalent on their Instagram profiles, which would both fit in the “life outside of rugby” category. However, it should be noted that Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) and Burch and Zimmerman (2019) considered only athletes who competed in individual sports, who consequently participate in solo – and not team – training sessions. Importantly, this category considers “the team”, not solely the sport or the individual athlete. Social media has made it clear that the Black Ferns 7s players spend significant amounts of time together with their teammates off of the field and outside of the gym, for the purpose of bonding, for cultural events like practicing waiata and haka, and for professional development workshops, as was clarified through the interview process. And of course, not all team sports celebrate cultural practices such as waiata and haka, which, in Māori contexts, hold particular significance to women’s rugby, its history, and the intersecting identities within rugby in Aotearoa (Palmer, 2016). This factor is unique from the international literature on this topic.

This necessity to establish a strong team bond and group cohesion is not present in individual sports, and undoubtedly demands increased time commitments from team sport athletes. Athletes’

social media accounts do not necessarily reflect all aspects of their lives in real time, but participating in a team environment requires extended periods of time with teammates, and this is reflected in what these athletes post. Thus, although modified, Instagram is still a (carefully) curated representation of one's life, and when more time is spent with a team in a group setting, more of that will be reflected and posted on social media.

“Life outside rugby” had the second highest number of posts, with 25 images depicting activities these sportswomen engage with off the field. A large number of these images were with family or friends, but a number of the posts were also videos or reels which indicated interest in off-field hobbies, including TikTok, as TikTok videos can be uploaded directly to the linked Instagram account. Little research exists on athletes' use of TikTok due to the application's relatively newfound fame, however, Su et al. (2020) found that its usage by athletes increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was further reinforced through the one-on-one interviews, whereby athletes expressed that TikTok provided a significantly helpful pastime during their time in the Olympic Village, where social interaction was extremely limited, and during their 14-day stays in quarantine upon return to Aotearoa. Su et al. (2020) also revealed that relationships with family and friends was a core theme across TikToks posted by American athletes during their Covid-19 lockdown. The findings in this quantitative analysis support Su et al.'s (2020) two points in the New Zealand context as well, whereby eight out of the 20 videos posted concerned family, friends, or teammates, and a further six specifically referenced being in quarantine, totalling 14 of the 20 videos contained in the analysis. The relationship between TikTok and rugby continues to grow, as demonstrated by TikTok becoming the primary sponsor of what is now the TikTok Women's Six Nations, the European women's rugby competition. It is thus an area of significant interest, worthy of further research.

Regression Analyses

In order to statistically establish whether there is a relationship between certain factors and the thematic content of images these sportswomen post, regression analyses were conducted. In

particular, I looked at the relationship between two important variables and the themes players posted about on their Instagram accounts, namely, their seniority in the squad and the size of their following. The interviews revealed both of these elements as impactful, with emotions regarding respect, the need to earn rights and privileges, and gratitude for senior players trailblazing in the women’s game surrounding the former, and an acknowledgement of the reach and influential power of an account with a large audience regarding the latter (see Chapter 5). These analyses consider the first part of the research question: how do Black Ferns 7s players navigate Instagram, and what factors might have a statistically significant impact on the thematic content of their posts? When the sportswomen (as in Figure 7) are organized from least to most time spent in the Black Ferns 7s squad, a few quantifiable differences become evident.

Distribution of Themes in Posts by Order of Seniority

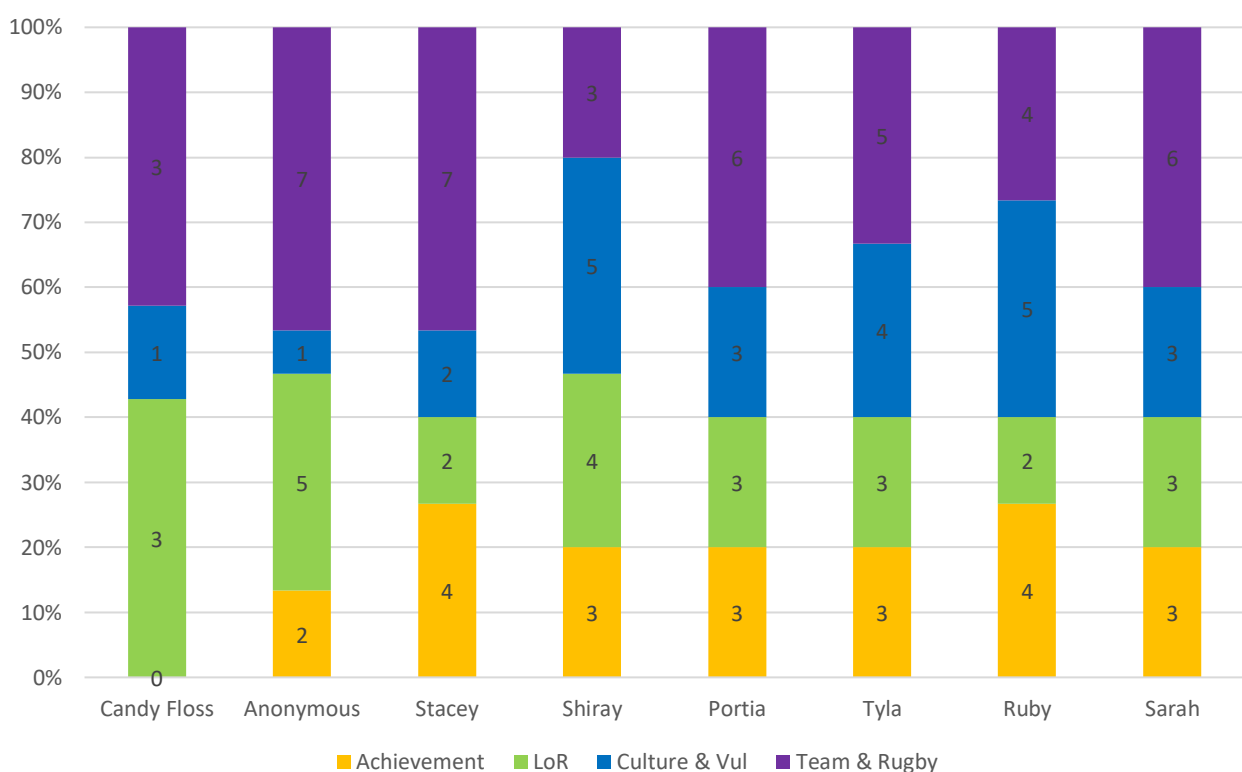


Figure 7: Thematic distribution of images per account by order of seniority (left to right)

Firstly, newer players posted less content regarding “culture & vulnerability” in comparison to players who had spent longer in the squad. This difference in thematic frequency based on

seniority was statistically significant ($p = 0.0421$) for images in this category, and there was a strong positive correlation ($R = 0.7244$) between seniority in the squad and the sharing of highly personalized images regarding “culture & vulnerability”. Newer players instead dedicated a larger portion of their Instagram posts to “life outside rugby” than those who had spent more time as a Black Fern, in a relationship that had a strong negative correlation ($R = -0.7823$). This was also statistically significant ($p = 0.0218$).

Regression Analysis for Seniority vs Thematic Distribution

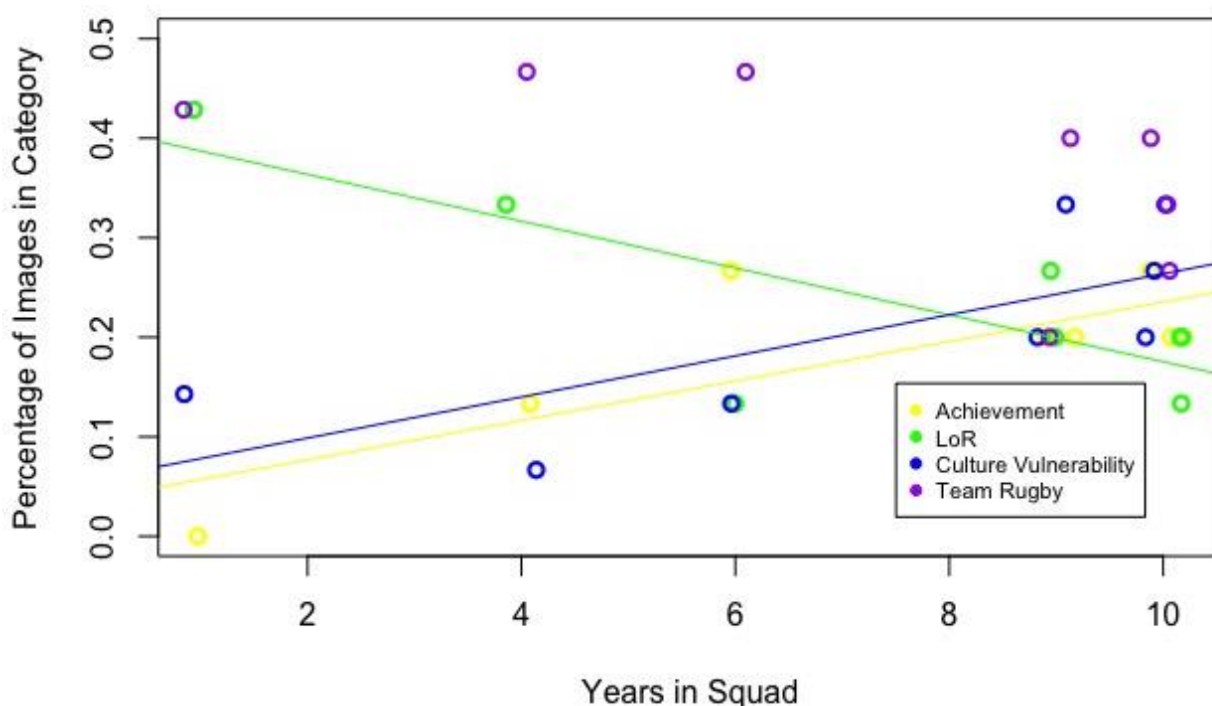


Figure 8: regression analysis of relationship between seniority and theme distribution, * regression lines only visible for statistically significant results

For the newest players, the most common images posted fell into the “team & rugby” category, exceeding 40% (42.1%, 46.7%, and 46.7%) of all of their posts for the three newest members in the analysis. No other category exceeded 40% for any other player, other than “life outside rugby” for the newest player in the team. There was no statistically significant relationship present in the “team & rugby” category. Lastly, newer players also engaged less with “achievement”. The newest player analyzed had not posted any images relating to “achievement”, compared to 20%

of all posts for the most experienced members of the squad. “Achievement” was the smallest category for all but two athletes, and it was the smallest category overall. The regression model in Figure 8 demonstrated a strong positive correlation ($R = 0.7836$) between seniority and the percentage of images posted about “achievement”, a relationship which was statistically significant ($p = 0.0214$).

Although rugby players interviewed in Hardy's (2015) aforementioned study revealed that newer players were more likely to display apologetic behaviour, that is, apologizing for transgressing gender norms through masculine displays associated with playing rugby, this was not evident in the social media usage of the Black Ferns 7s players analysed. To date, no research on sportswomen's use of social media therefore has revealed intra-team differences in social media usage as this analysis has in terms of internal team dynamics based on seniority. This is important, because the intra-team differences in social media usage related to seniority have been revealed to be very statistically significant here, and demonstrate a particularly linear relationship. Throughout the interview process – which will be discussed in depth in the following two chapters –, seniority, respect, and the need for younger players to earn certain rights and statuses within the team environment were very salient themes, and this extended to the perceived right to post about certain themes and topics on social media. This was not a literal point in time or within a hierarchy that needed to be met within the team environment, but rather a perception felt by younger players in the environment, who want, and subsequently feel the need, to prove themselves as worthy of their role model statuses, which they automatically adopt by being a Black Fern.

This “digital voice” is something a player develops over time as she builds her online community, which the Olympics accelerated, and gains confidence in her place on the team and as an achieved athlete. According to this analysis, it would therefore appear that “achievement” is one of said themes posted more about once a player feels they have earned their place on the team and the

subsequent right to share their achieved status, as it was not an individual achievement, but rather a success earned through a team effort.

This hierarchical team culture seems to be reflective of the team culture of the Black Ferns 7s, but also of Māori and Pasifika cultures alike, which reinforce principles like respect for your *kaumātua* (elders) and *tuākana-tēina* (literally big sister-little sister, a form of teaching and learning). It also alludes to rugby culture in general, which frequently makes use of initiation and hazing for new athletes (Johnson, 2002; Johnson & Chin, 2016). The implications of hazing in rugby are twofold: on the one hand, it establishes a clear power hierarchy between the new and old players (Johnson, 2002); on the other hand, it may facilitate cohesion and even shift power relations (Johnson & Chin, 2016). Team hierarchies have been found to impact other factors in the Black Ferns 7s environment, such as what Thorpe et al. (2020) found with regard to nutritional practices amongst Māori and Samoan players within the high performance sport space.

Another differentiation worth considering is the size of the athlete's following. Athletes in Figure 9 have been rearranged to reflect this, from largest to smallest, as of when this analysis was carried out in mid-2022: Ruby Tui (67,513), Portia Woodman (49,981), Tyla Nathan-Wong (37,922), Stacey Fluhler (33,532), Sarah Hirini (29,220), Shiray Kaka (21,781), Anonymous (<10,000), and Candy Floss (<2000). To put these followings into context, other women's rugby 7s players women players from other countries where rugby 7s is a popular sport can be considered. For example, of the players on the last Australian 7s World Cup champions squad who were also part of the Australian Tokyo Olympic squad, the majority have between 7000 and 20,000 followers. Emma Tonegato (34,500) and captain Charlotte Caslick (>133,000) are significant outliers. In another example, players from the Great Britain women's 7s who attended the Olympics generally have less than 10,000 followers, with four players having followings between 14,000 and 17,500, and with veteran 7s and 15s athlete Natasha Hunt being the only outlier (21,500). Outside of rugby, some of the sportswomen with the largest Instagram followings include Ronda Rousey (14.7M), Serena

Williams (14.3M), and Simone Biles (6.6M). A regression analysis was again performed based on the following of each athlete. Results from this analysis are visible in Figure 10, and shed light upon whether, statistically, being more or less well known, as indicated by the size of their following, is related to posting more or less about certain themes and topics.

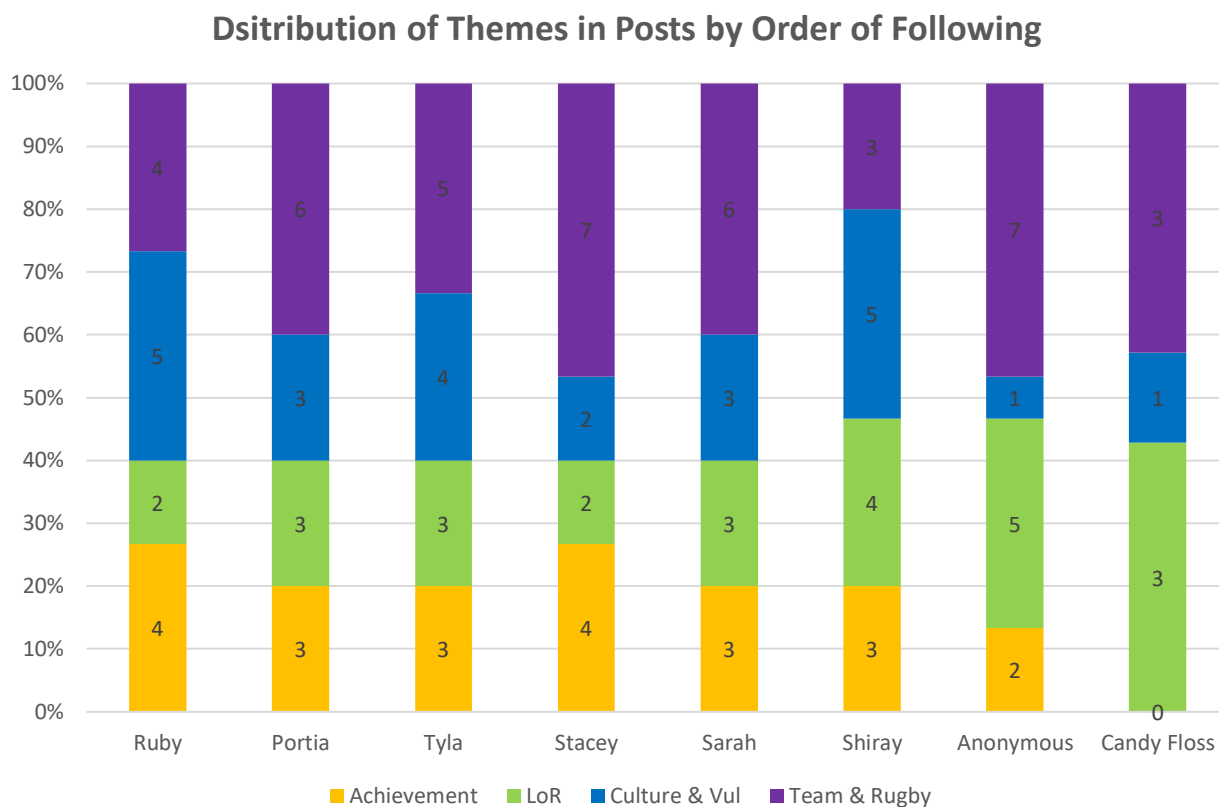


Figure 9: thematic distribution of images by order of following (most to least; left to right)

The results for “achievement” posts were once again statistically significant ($p = 0.0194$), demonstrating there is a relationship between having more followers and an increased frequency in posting about “achievement”, with a strong positive correlation once again ($R = 0.7911$). This is visible in Figure 10. “Life outside rugby” posts also demonstrated a statistically significant relationship ($p = 0.0064$) with following size, with a strong negative correlation ($R = -0.8579$), indicating there is a relationship between having fewer followers and posting more about one’s life outside of rugby. There was no statistically significant relationship between posts about “culture & vulnerability” and the size of an athlete’s following, although there was a medium correlation between the two variables ($R = 0.5890$). Lastly, there was no relationship between following size and

the frequency with which the athletes posted about the “team & rugby”. The quantity of “team & rugby” and “culture & vulnerability” posts were not dependent on how many followers an athlete had, whilst on the other hand, “achievement” and “life outside rugby” posts were.

Regression Analysis for Followers vs Thematic Distribution

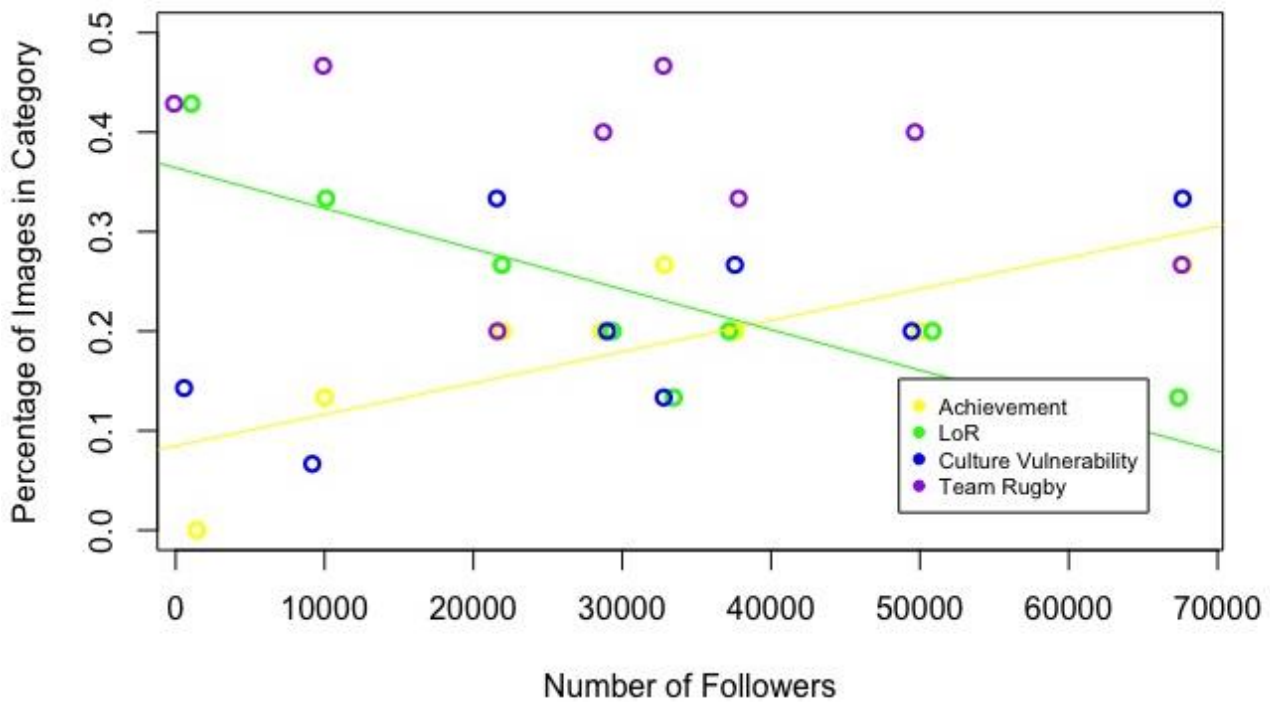


Figure 10: regression analysis of relationship between number of followers and theme distribution, *regression lines only visible for statistically significant results

The thematic frequency of images published revealed what athletes choose to post and emphasize on their Instagram pages, which partially answers the first half of the research question: how do Black Ferns 7s players navigate Instagram? This portion of the quantitative analysis revealed five important things:

1. Newer athletes’ Instagram profiles feature posts more focused on “life outside rugby” compared to athletes who have spent longer in the squad;
2. Newer athletes tend to post less about their culture and vulnerable topics than their more experienced counterparts;

3. Newer players post much less about achievement than players who have been in the squad for longer;
4. Players with more followers are more likely to post more images regarding achievement;
5. And players with fewer followers are more likely to post more images about their lives outside of rugby.

As the above analyses determine whether there is a statistically significant relationship between two variables and not causation, we cannot say whether having more followers induces these posting patterns, or whether posting images regarding certain themes begets more followers. Previous literature has demonstrated that sportswomen who post more feminine or sexually suggestive images tend to have larger followings, garner more likes and comments (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a), and utilize their feminine bodies as a method of empowerment, marketing, and branding in order to increase digital popularity and success (Thorpe et al., 2017; Toffoletti, 2016; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b). Likewise, Burch and Zimmerman (2019) found that sexually suggestive images received the highest average likes and comments than images of any other type.

These aforementioned feminine image types tended to consist of overtly (hetero)sexy pictures, and/or images regarding themes around body-image, beauty, makeup, or fashion, which thematically would have fit in the “life outside rugby” category. However, it is important to differentiate between image theme and image type: an athlete could have posted an overtly hyper-feminine type of image in a training setting or celebrating an achievement, but this would have thematically placed the image in the “team & rugby” and “achievement” categories, respectively. Hence, whilst many of the hyper-feminine, beauty-related, and body-image photos were in the “life outside rugby” category in this study, they were not limited to *solely* this category. Hence, whilst relevant, this finding can neither be seen to reject nor follow this pattern. More research regarding this topic amongst women rugby players in Aotearoa would be of great interest.

Whilst the above differences are quantifiable, explanations as to *why* this is the case can be understood through the interview processes. These processes work to complement these findings and allow these athletes power over their data and the ability to explain their motives, aspirations, and desires when posting a particular image, as well as what that image might mean to them when they posted it. Whilst causal relationships can be statistically established, they can also be convincingly qualitatively made clear.

Quantifying Engagement

The first half of the research question has been considered above, but the second half of the research question requires investigation into public engagement with posts across these four core themes, in order to understand what the impact of this digital labour has been on the wider women's rugby community in New Zealand. This engagement can be quantified through likes and comments on Instagram, in order to demonstrate the thematic concepts that fans interact with the most. Although an analysis of the demographics of these athletes' followers was not conducted, Haugh and Watkins (2016) found that women were more likely than men to use Instagram to follow their favourite sports teams. Their study had important implications for sports teams and individual athletes looking to reach female audiences (as BF7s players attempt to do), promoting the use of Instagram first when it comes to targeting a female audience.

In terms of absolute value across the entirety of the analysis, considering all images posted by all athletes, the five posts with the most likes were all in the "achievement" category, and three out of the top five most commented posts were also in the "achievement" category, with the other two sitting in the "culture & vulnerability" category. The top five most liked images are visible in Figure 11, from most to least likes: Ruby Tui (post of her and Portia Woodman: 16,521), Shiray Kaka (video of the team after receiving Olympic gold: 13,659), Ruby Tui (post of players celebrating their

Olympic win: 10,626), Stacey Fluhler (10,518), and Portia Woodman (9234). The likes and comments for all of the images in the analysis are visually represented in Figure 12.

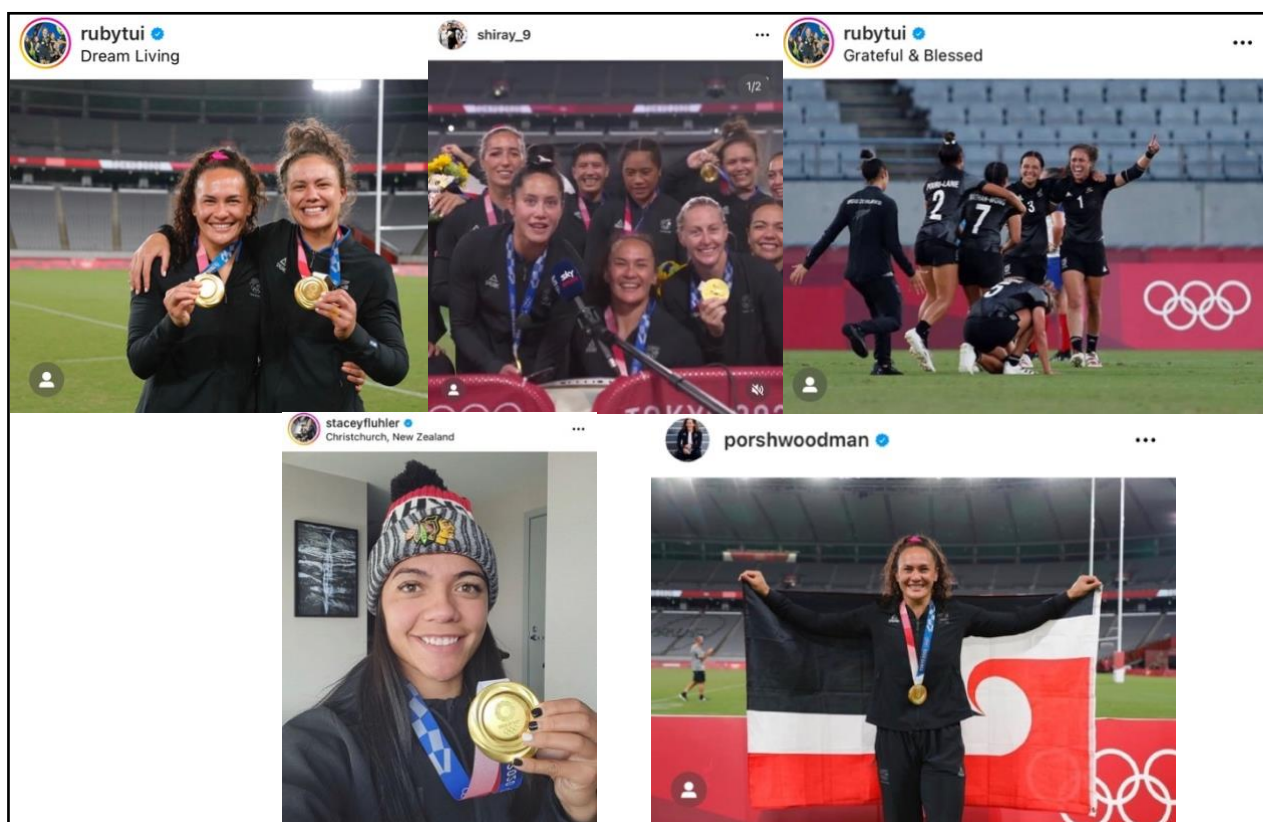


Figure 11: Five most liked posts in the analysis (available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSBOHjuLWCZ/?hl=en>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSJEGS1FjnR/>, https://www.instagram.com/p/CR_xHIZnRIC/?hl=en, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CS15FwsBkmk/>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSBcb4DLJNT/>)

These findings contrast those of Burch and Zimmerman (2019), who found photos relating to athletes’ personal lives (i.e. “life outside rugby”) received on average a statistically significant higher number of likes. Furthermore, Burch and Zimmerman (2019) found that Goffman’s “conversationalist strategy”, which includes interactions with family and friends (i.e. “life outside rugby”), garnered the most likes and comments, despite not being the most utilized strategy by the athletes they analyzed. It is clear that there is dissonance to be embraced with regard to what athletes post most often, versus what the public engages with the most.

Posts in the “achievement” category received the highest average likes per post for all but one athlete, and excluding the one athlete who had no images regarding “achievement”. “Culture &

vulnerability” posts received the highest average likes for those two athletes. In terms of comments, “achievement” posts received the most average comments for all but one athlete, and again excluding the one athlete who had no images regarding “achievement”. Those averages are visible in Figure 13.

Geurin-Eagleman and Burch’s (2016) results of their likes and comments analysis also revealed a positive correlation ($r = 0.49$) between the two actions, noting that as likes on an image increases, so do the number of comments. Their correlation coefficient, however, was much lower than those found for “team & rugby” and “achievement”, as seen in Figure 12, meaning images in those categories had a more consistently positive relationship between number of likes and number of comments than the images in Geurin-Eagleman and Burch’s (2016) study. This is an indication of greater and more consistent engagement with images in these two categories than existing research would anticipate.

It seems, therefore, that the “achievement” category was strongly engaged with despite the risks posed by posts regarding winning and being a champion. These posts can potentially be perceived as “bragging”, as indicated by both the interviews carried out in this study, and by existing literature. In fact, the positive engagement with “achievement” posts found here contradicts with Na et al.’s (2020) findings regarding content which can be perceived as “bragging”. The study determined that source, as in individual athlete accounts versus official team accounts, impacted consumer perception of content, and that self-promotional comments as well as acknowledgements of role-model status were more likely to be perceived as bragging when posted by the individual. The strategies therefore used by individuals in this study to mitigate these risks are considered at length in Chapter 6.

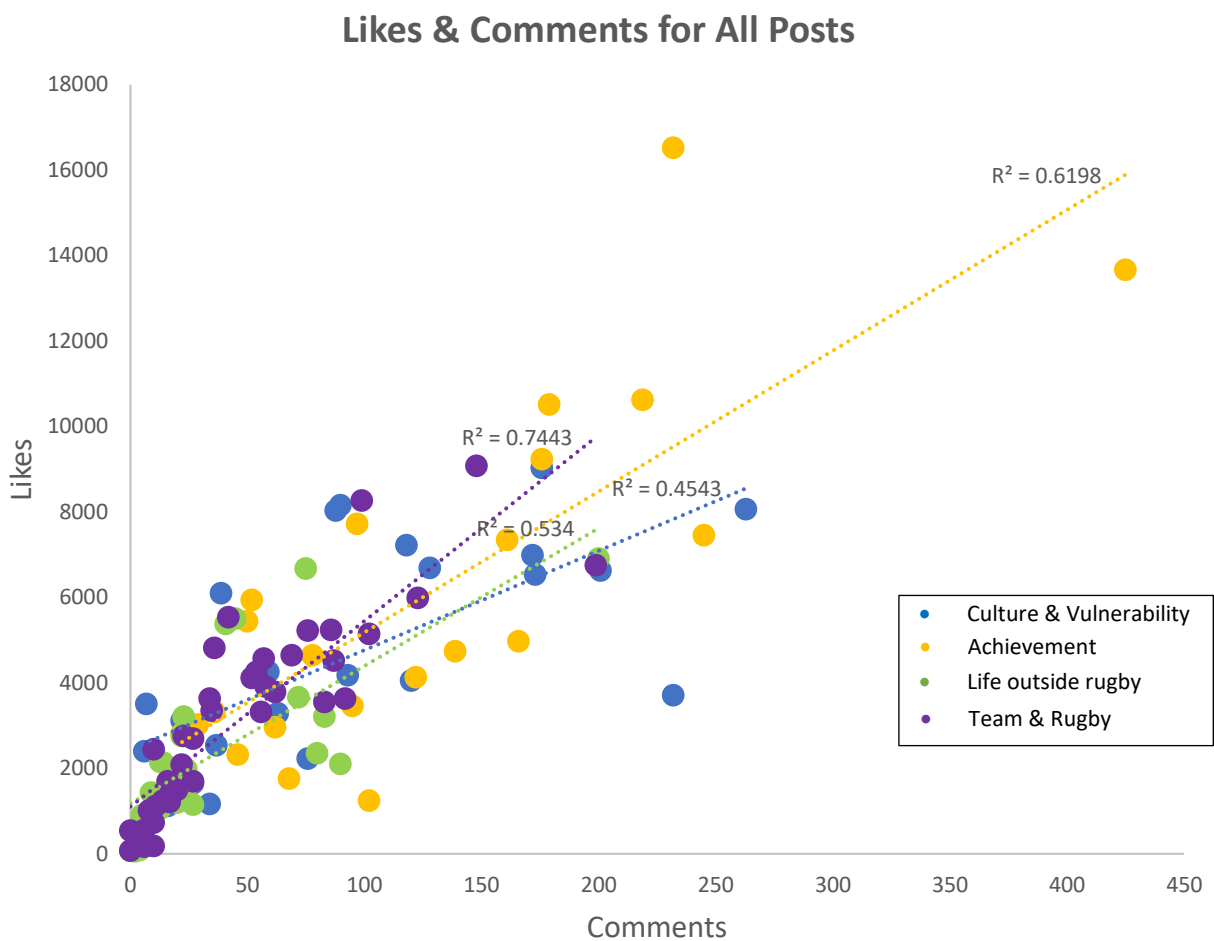


Figure 12: likes and comments for each individual post analyzed, per thematic grouping

Matley (2018), who explores bragging in digital spaces via a hashtag analysis, has already noted that strategic use of self-praise, coupled with mitigation strategies such as self-denigration, can counteract some of the threatening aspects of bragging in digital spaces. Instead, “positive self statements” can serve to reinforce group solidarity (Matley, 2018; Dayter, 2014), which may be particularly important for team sports and members of Indigenous communities. This demonstrates the importance of contextualizing “achievement” posts. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2021) demonstrated how text is very important in contextualizing images, by providing additional information which clarifies how the post was intended to be interpreted; however, video and audio can also be used (see Chapter 6). These are some of the ways in which current research has found “achievement” to be perceived as acceptable and positive in digital spaces, and not as a form of “bragging” or self-indulgence.

Parasocial Interaction

Strong engagement with (curated) “achievement” posts, understood through both likes and through congratulatory comments, is a complex psychological phenomenon. It can be understood through viewing these interactions as a component of parasocial relationships (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Parasocial relationships are a product of consistent parasocial interaction, which Instagram allows for between fans and sportswomen. Displaying images across various thematic categories collectively works to provide snapshots of sportswomen’s daily lives, so as to enhance and increase parasocial interaction with their followers (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b). A parasocial relationship refers to the illusionary friendship(s) fans establish with sportswomen via social media, and supplemented by television coverage, game footage, and other sources of media, that leads a fan to respond and interact with a celebrity as if they were a friend or personal acquaintance (Marwick, 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b). Although social media has allowed for fans to deepen emotional ties with sportswomen, this has occurred on an almost entirely one-sided basis, with fans perceiving increased connection through greater access to a sportswoman’s life as she portrays it on Instagram, or speaking to athletes through comments, but often with little-to-no response (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b; Ward, 2016). However, research has demonstrated that, despite celebrities on social media not personally responding to each individual’s comment, audiences may still have emotional responses. Particularly when given insight into personal lives of celebrities, audiences may feel like they are part of that person’s life and network (Ward, 2016). Hence, strong engagement with particular themes, namely “achievement”, may be a reflection of this perception amongst followers.

As visible in Figure 13, images tend to receive many more likes than comments from followers. The axis for likes goes up to 9000, whilst the axis for comments only reaches 200. This is entirely reasonable and expected based upon existing literature (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Ward, 2016), as liking a picture can be an instantaneous action requiring a simple tap, whilst a comment can take longer to draft, type, and post. An individual may like hundreds of posts a day as

they scroll through their Instagram feed. Writing a comment, however, requires greater interaction and engagement with a post and its content (Ward, 2016). In keeping with the rules of parasocial interaction, it could be deduced through this description that a comment is “worth more” than a like when it comes to quantifying engagement. Thus, posts with more comments can be understood as having greater engagement.

Using an example, stronger follower interactions with “achievement” might indicate the desire to celebrate that success with them and share their joy, reminiscent of the notion that fans feel they are winning when their country(wo)men win. Sport is very important to the way New Zealand and New Zealanders view itself and themselves nationally (Bruce, 2009). Wensing (2003) found that during the 2002 Commonwealth Games, stories and photographs of female New Zealand athletes outnumbered those of male athletes, and concluded that images of women in sport at that event were just as, if not more, valued by the public than images of men. Wensing (2003) determined that this occurred because NZ women won more medals at this event than NZ men. “Winning appeared to be the key element in media interest” (Bruce, 2009, p. 159), and this appears to be the same when it comes to social media. This occurred again at the 2004 Olympics when the most photographed and discussed New Zealand athletes were also women, who were regularly described in relation to winning. In a study regarding media representations of sportswomen participating in traditionally masculine sports, including women’s rugby in New Zealand, and specifically taking into account the 2016-17 World Rugby Sevens Series and the Rio 2016 Olympics, Miao (2021) found that nationalism discourses temporarily created more inclusivity for sportswomen and their gender performances during major international sporting events. During events which strongly aligned with nationalism, namely rugby 7s at the Olympics in the NZ context, sportswomen received similar or more media coverage than men.

Miao’s (2021) study shed further light upon this public engagement with Black Ferns 7s achievement through examining comments on a New Zealand Herald article about the Black Ferns

7s' silver medal at the Rio 2016 Olympics. The study found that 55% of readers connected the Black Ferns 7s' achievement with New Zealand through language like “our”, “we”, and “us”, suggesting a collective identity grounded in a sense of pride. Images used thereafter supported this framing by emphasizing medals and podiums. These same images are found throughout the “achievement” category, the impact of which is twofold: firstly, it focuses public attention on the team’s victory; secondly, it invokes a collective identity associated with nationalistic pride in favour of that team’s success. Thus, there appears to be a clear relationship between winning (or, “achievement” in this specific case), nationalism, and media popularity, in print media (Wensing, 2003), sporting media (Bruce, 2009; Miao, 2021), and now social media.



Figure 13: individual average likes & comments per category

In Figure 12, the linear correlation between likes and comments is also visible for each thematic category. The closest correlation between likes and comments was in “team & rugby”, demonstrating the most consistent interaction is with content in this category. Although fewer people in general like images in this category, more of those who do like images in this category are also moved to spend the time to comment on the image. The loosest correlation between likes and comments was in “culture & vulnerability”. Images in this group had the largest average gap between number of likes and number of comments, demonstrating that although individuals may like the image as it comes across their feed, something about the image or its associated topic stops them from taking the next step in that engagement and producing a comment. This may be indicative of the more controversial, thought-provoking, or sensitive topics present in the “culture & vulnerability” category. Furthermore, it could be an indication of audience members who are not of the same cultural background, and who may not feel comfortable engaging further with culturally specific content. This relationship can also be considered in Figure 14, which shows the average like-to-comment ratio for images in each category. This analysis revealed that for every 58.9 likes in the “achievement” category, there is one comment, demonstrating the lowest ratio, and indicating more people who like the image are moved to comment on it too. The highest was in the “culture & vulnerability” category, where every 91.76 likes generated a comment. This again demonstrates that there are fewer comments per like in the “culture & vulnerability” category than any other category.

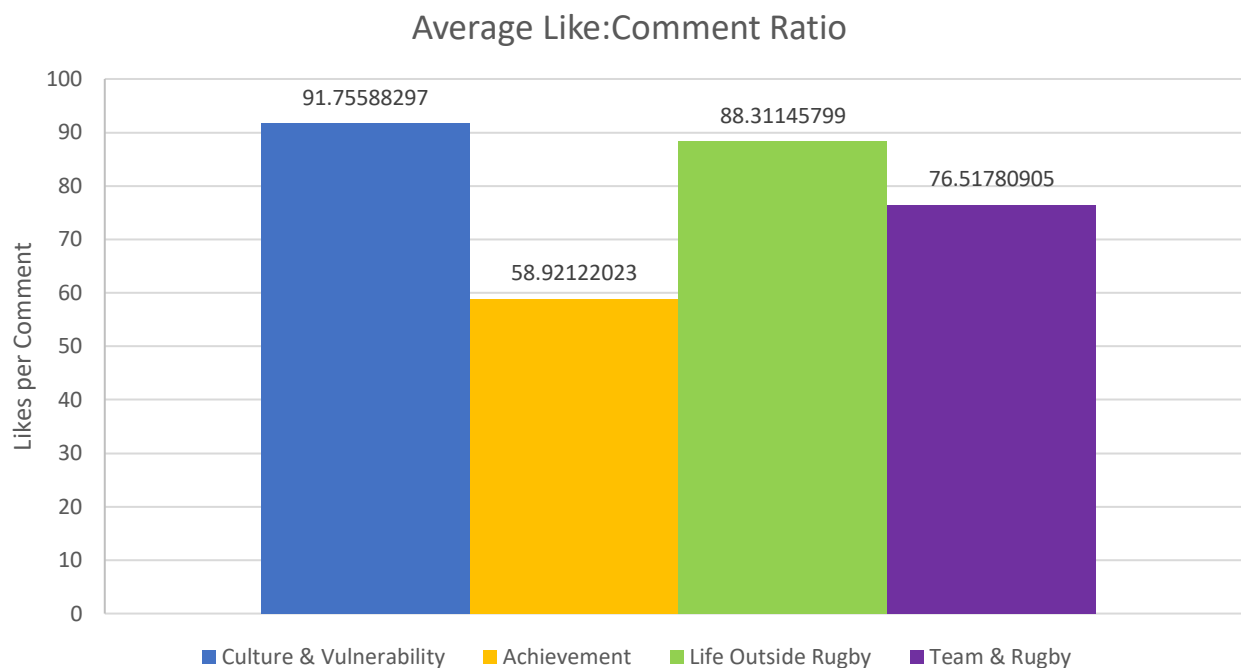


Figure 14: average likes to comment ratio for each category

Chapter Summary

The quantitative analysis conducted in this chapter sought to quantify dynamics on both sides of the research question, both the sportswomen behind the screen, and their audience members' engagement. This highlighted the thematic frequency of content posted, which revealed that these sportswomen primarily choose to present themselves as athletes and members of the Black Ferns 7s squad first. Overall, athletes posted the least in the category of "achievement", despite images in this category receiving the highest average likes, the highest average comments, and the highest ratio of likes to comments (91.76:1). This increased engagement is best explained by the phenomenon of parasocial interaction, which therefore may indicate that posts regarding winning and achieving generate greater amounts of emotional connection and a greater desire to engage with a particular parasocial relationship, than images regarding other themes. This was reinforced by media practices at the 2002 Commonwealth Games and 2004 Olympic Games (Bruce, 2009; Wensing, 2003).

Seniority had a statistically significant relationship with posts regarding "culture & vulnerability", "life outside rugby", and "achievement". As time with the squad increased, so did the

frequency with which players posted about their culture and vulnerable topics. Newer players instead shared more about their life outside of rugby, but significantly less about “achievement” than more experienced players. An athlete’s number of followers had a statistically significant relationship with posts regarding “achievement” and “life outside rugby”. Athletes with more followers posted significantly more about “achievement” and less about their “life outside rugby” than players with fewer followers. This is a statistically significant quantitative finding, which demonstrates the influential role seniority plays in the digital practices in these athletes, as will be outlined in Chapters 5 and 6.

There are limitations to this analysis. Firstly, the regression analyses were able to establish a statistically significant relationship between seniority and “culture & vulnerability”, “life outside of rugby”, and “achievement”, and with following size and “achievement” and “life outside of rugby”. However, this does not determine whether this relationship was causal, nor in which direction causation might have been. This was due to another limitation: sample size, as a larger sample size could have produced values of greater statistical meaning, but that is precisely why this analysis was not conducted on its own, but rather in conjunction with the qualitative elements of this study. Hence, the qualitative elements of this study shed greater light upon causation through the lens of these sportswomen’s motivations, reasons for posting, and insight into team dynamics. There were also only four thematic groups to which images could be allocated, demonstrating less detail and less sub-topical differentiation than previous studies. Instead, additional detail is provided by the nuances made clear only through the interview processes, instead of relying entirely on data to draw the picture and answer questions of how these sportswomen use Instagram, how this digital presence is perceived by the public, and the impact or role this relationship plays on women’s rugby in Aotearoa.

Chapter 5: *Ēhara tāku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini*

My strength is not mine alone, but that of the collective

Team Culture & Individual Digital Practices

In this chapter, I reveal the results of the interviews and group interviews as they pertain to five important themes which emerged, revealing the agentic roles of these athletes in using social media for their own purposes within a team environment. Charmaz (2006) highlights that language plays a crucial role in coding: that despite codes being generated from the data, the names of those codes are still defined through language that is decided upon by the researcher and their own empirical observations. Therefore, the themes which emerged from this data have been grouped using *whakataukī* (Māori proverbs), which are able to be interpreted in many different ways, allowing for dissonance in the titling of each section, and making space for (albeit limited) interpretation throughout.

The themes discussed here are not restricted to solely one of the four themes in the quantitative chapter: they weave across the four themes, and may surface in images from different groups. It is important to embrace dissonance (Hesse-Biber, 2012) throughout this analysis, and not only accept, but welcome the multiplicities of individual realities of Instagram accounts and how they are used by athletes and their followers. Here, intra-team differences amongst athletes in a single squad are further revealed. This discussion builds upon and extends the quantitative foundations described in the previous chapter. This way, it can be understood not simply as *how many* posts about certain themes each athlete shares, but *why* that is the case: what were their motivations and considerations in posting on particular topics? Furthermore, interpretations surrounding engagement can move away from quantifying “likes” and establishing numerical engagement rates per athlete per theme, and toward a qualitative understanding of *why* those themes

are engaged with at greater rates than others. In this chapter, I also consider what resonates with audience members who play, referee, administrate, and coach women's rugby in the Bay of Plenty.

The factors which determine posting habits of Black Ferns 7s players can be most clearly understood in three layers: external, internal, and individual. External factors are expectations placed upon players by external bodies (i.e. organizational policies and sponsor regulations) which broadly regulate digital conduct for these players. The internal layer refers to that which is internal to the Black Ferns 7s squad, and includes non-official guidelines and dynamics which shape digital conduct. Individual-layer considerations are chosen factors which are unique to individuals, and may change drastically from person to person. Across each of these layers, I reveal the importance of the unique team culture in (re)defining the players' social media usage and engagement.

1. He aha te kai a te rangatira? He kōrero, he kōrero, he kōrero.

What is the food of leaders? Communication: Instagram & how it's used.

The ways in which Instagram is used varies from player to player, however, there are particular aspects which act as common motivators and drivers for the Black Ferns 7s athletes when it comes to their digital conduct. Firstly, the interview process made it clear that Instagram is the preferred platform for interacting with fans, building a public persona, and sharing with large audiences. Contrastingly, Facebook was perceived as more documentary in nature, as a space to store memories with greater longevity than Instagram, which is comparatively more “in the now” and utilized to share life “in the moment”, as it happens. Facebook was also seen as more private and used more with family members. Robards and Lincoln's (2017) characterization of Facebook was consistent with this finding, referring to Facebook as “an archive of memories” (p. 717).

Instagram was particularly seen by the Black Ferns athletes as a platform vital for communication amongst youth, who were repeatedly noted as a target audience for them, in the form of “the next generation”:

“I use Instagram the most. I think it’s an important platform for the younger generation because they go on it a lot” – Candy Floss*

“You’re helping the next generation come through, which is our job” – Anonymous*

This communication with the next generation and “future players” is perceived as an integral part of being a Black Fern in the current social and digital landscape. There was an acute awareness of “young girls coming through” different rugby development pathways and programmes making up a portion of Black Ferns’ imagined digital audiences, and with this awareness came heightened responsibilities among the players in terms of their online content:

“I just know all these young kids are watching all my stuff” – Anonymous*

Pocock and Skey (2022) found similar motivations existed for elite women’s track and field, boxing, and swimming athletes in the United Kingdom. The athletes in their study highlighted the significance of their young female followers and building connections specifically with them, within a non-antagonistic digital space for all of their followers. Pocock and Skey (2022) further reinforce the concept of leadership of the next generation as a “job” through explaining how the elite sportswomen they interviewed articulate “a duty of care to younger people” (Pocock & Skey, 2022, p.8) through their self-representation on social media. This characterization of elite and professional sportswomen points to a perceived obligation amongst BF7s athletes to, firstly, communicate specifically to younger female athletes via social media platforms, and, secondly, to ensure this communication is supportive and provides guidance. The role of the imagined and intended audience is thus twofold: it drives the use of specifically Instagram for communicative and demonstrative purposes, and it also influences the way in which that usage is carried out.

However, posting to this new audience is not a skill developed overnight. Athletes who are new to the programme are provided with professional guidance on how to use social media as a professional athlete. This is something the programme realized was a necessity following the increased importance of social media, and the significant presence of professional athletes in online

spaces. However, these workshops did not always take place, and this lack of guidance did have repercussions on athletes within the programme:

Yeh, well [the] girls that didn't know how to cope with it [Instagram] fell away in the shadows, and those that used it as a platform ran away with it. So there was a big imbalance around how people knew how to cope with it [the sudden increase in the importance of Instagram). – Tiana*

Our team had a talking-to, just around what we post. Cause it was just something we didn't realize. Like we were oblivious to it [...]. We're just posting stuff [the same way anyone else would on social media] – Anonymous*

Social media training is now included in all new player inductions, providing posting guidelines to players in order to protect their safety and wellbeing. Therefore, alongside motivating factors brought to the surface by audiences and an acknowledgement of who that audience consists of, what these players post is also guided, very generally, by that which has been imparted to them by members of their management and administration. These learnings are predominantly focused on protecting players' privacy and upholding their digital and physical safety whilst in the public eye:

When I first started and came in [...], we had our induction [and] introduction to everything and rugby, on and off the field for the team. And I remember we had a social media part to it, and then they stalked all of our pages, and found dirt on all of us – Anonymous*

The idea of maintaining safety is another audience-centered factor which influences what these athletes post. Athletes are encouraged to be aware of the unknown, understanding that anybody could be watching their social media accounts. For this reason, they are encouraged to place a broad filter across all of the content they share publicly online:

“In our environment, if you can't show your grandmother, then why would you post it?” –
Candy Floss*

(The suspicion of) “thinking you’re posting to all these people, and you don’t know what they could use it for” – Anonymous*

In this sense, it can be understood how these athletes make use of other social media platforms in order to navigate their own safeguarding: where Facebook is largely used with and amongst family members, and Instagram is used largely to interact with fans, Snapchat is used for their closest friends, demonstrating that the type of content posted across applications is highly dependent upon who the publisher is sharing that content with:

Black Ferns will post stories, for the public, and then they’ll have a “close friends”. And that’s the other stuff that they do with the rest of their life. And it’s cool! Because it shows that they’re human [...] and shows that they can have a good time too! [...] and if you’re friends with them on Snapchat, that’s only for the close peoples [who] they trust. – Hannah Montana

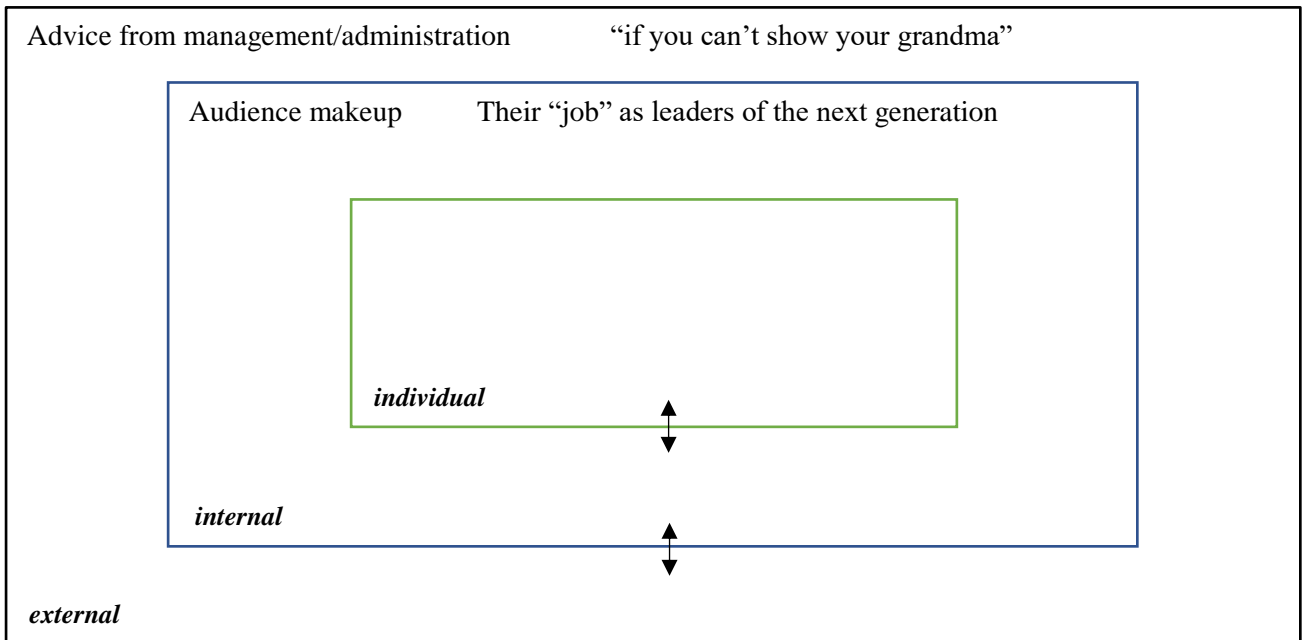
Being safe online therefore requires navigation of different applications, the usage of the “close friends” feature on Instagram, and careful self-representation restricted by official safety guidelines.

Audiences and administration-led guidance are therefore two key elements which impact the content shared by Black Ferns 7s athletes on Instagram (and other applications), and broadly define the space within which these athletes navigate the freedom to share what they seek to make public. The former constitutes internal factors which influence Instagram usage:

- Audience makeup (often assumed audiences rather than evidence based on social media data)
- The players’ perceived job as a leader of future generations of rugby players

The latter are external factors which regulate posting habits by Black Ferns 7s athletes:

- Advice from management, administration, and other official groups
- The guideline “if you can’t show your grandmother” from New Zealand Rugby, encouraging athletes to take individual responsibility for their content online



How & Why BF7s Post

Figure 15: Layers of impacts on Instagram usage for Black Ferns 7s athletes within theme 5.1

2. *Ki te kotahi te kākaho, ka whati; ki te kāpuia, e kore e whati*

If a reed stands alone, it can be broken, if it is in a group, it cannot: insight into Black Ferns team dynamics and social media etiquette.

Another important boundary within which these players operate is unique to the team sport environment: whilst these athletes as individuals feel motivated to “be themselves” in digital spaces and create their own distinctive online personas, they are constantly aware of the team of which they are a part. In this sense, players feel they are not only representing themselves, but also the entire Black Ferns team:

“Cause I’m not just representing myself, I’ve got the Black Ferns brand on me as well” –

Anonymous*

This collective identity shines through in the images that players post to their Instagram accounts, where, to an extent, respecting the BF7s “brand” can be equated to respecting and enhancing the *mana* (power, authority, or essence) of the team. The mana-enhancing tikanga of the BF7s team

strengthens the collective (i.e. the reeds that would otherwise stand alone). These images are instrumental in providing audience members with valuable insight into team relationships within this squad, including their dynamics, cohesion, and humour, the latter of which is delivered often through the use of videos and TikToks. The ability to give audiences insight into intra-team dynamics is particularly unique to team sports, and social media is an unparalleled delivery system for these extraordinary behind-the-scenes glimpses into how the team functions as a unit. Thus, that which sets this research apart from existing literature, with respect to this particular function of social media, is grounded in one important feature: it is unique to team sports. These athletes use Instagram to not only represent themselves, but also to represent the Black Ferns 7s brand, and the social dynamics within which they are situated as a member of this team. To date, very little, if any, research on sportswomen's social media usage has considered how team dynamics and culture shape their online practices.

The bond between players on this team is frequently visible across their Instagram profiles which utilize images, videos, and Instagram stories (videos which are automatically removed after 24 hours) to share the moments they spend together, on and off the field. Examples of this include images of the team and players at each other's weddings and birthday celebrations (see Figure 16), amongst other important milestones (e.g. children's parties or social gatherings such as music festivals). It is also present in the comments of images posted, where supportive statements from fellow teammates are frequently visible.



theresafitz_12
Blueberry Farm



Figure 16: The Black Ferns 7s team at the wedding of Stacey Fluhler, posted by Theresa Fitzpatrick (available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/B7bf7mhHKsP/?hl=en>)

Players within the Black Ferns 7s team repeatedly portray themselves as a family unit which would most closely resemble a sisterhood, through their digital interactions with one another, and the content posted to Instagram. This is reinforced by the title of Rikki Swannell’s recent book *Sevens Sisters*, which covers the story of how the Black Ferns 7s squad reset the team following their 2016 Rio Olympics loss in the finals, using a people-first culture grounded in tikanga Māori. The players themselves note that this characterization of their team is an accurate representation of what they feel in the Black Ferns 7s environment. This was eminent when asked about the team culture:

“You look at your family, and the love and the essence of whanaungatanga, and that’s nothing different to what you would experience being around any one of those girls.” – Tiana*

“I think just the culture is authentic. And nothing different to what you would feel in a really tight family network.” – Tiana*

This distinctive team culture grounded in Te Ao Māori directly shapes the players’ approaches to social media engagement.

Young women's rugby players in the group interviews noted that this closeness among players was highly admirable, even aspirational. Many of them contrasted the distinctive team culture of the BF7s with the clique-formations they encountered in girls' team sports at school level. Weiss et al. (2021) found that intra-team conflict between teenage female volleyball players was a de-motivating factor for players. Vazou et al. (2006) further touched upon this peer-created motivational climate within adolescent sport teams, and additionally established that intra-team conflict decreased effort, concluding that "unsupportive behaviours by peers [...] are likely to reduce athletes' behavioural investment in their sport" (Vazou et al., 2006, p. 229). Thus, depictions of strong, positive, and supportive team dynamics online may serve to counter these impacts in adolescent sport teams where this sort of intra-team conflict may discourage players from continuing in their sport. These positive dynamics were looked up to by the younger participants in the group interviews, as a connection they strived to have within their own teams:

"A lot of teams that I have played for [...] there's like, groups... and it's just like, why can't we all get along?" – Anonymous

In this sense, these insights into the dynamics of the Black Ferns 7s develop an aspirational team culture which may act as encouragement for some young girls who may be experiencing frustration and discouragement within the social makeup of school-aged rugby teams.

Although understandings of this supportive dynamic can be constructed through depictions of their lives outside of rugby, much of the team-related content posted depicts training on the field and in the gym. The same whānau-based dynamics were present here, whilst simultaneously providing audiences with a glimpse into the professional side of their lives as BF7s athletes, particularly via training videos, comedic TikToks on the rugby field and in the gym, and through their stories. Of the 20 videos included in the analysis, 10 were related to rugby, with five each from the "team & rugby" and "achievement" categories. Li et al. (2021) found similar results in their study of female football

players' self-presentation on Instagram via stories, which concluded that sportswomen did use Instagram stories to portray their private life, but also to demonstrate their athletic expertise. This is in line with the quantitative finding that Black Ferns 7s athletes present themselves predominantly as athletes first. Thus, this thesis, like Li et al. (2021), provides contradictory findings to existing literature, like Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2016) and Smith and Sanderson (2015), which found that sportswomen predominantly showcased their private lives over their athletic competence and skills. Extending upon Li et al. (2021), however, my research highlights the importance of team culture in shaping such online presentations of self and teammates training and competing.

In this context, the use of videos to display athletic ability and a stated self-representation as a part of the “Black Ferns brand” characterizes these sportswomen as athletes in conjunction with their other personality traits and individual undertakings. There is no effort to distance themselves from their sport, team, or athleticism. On the contrary: members of this team see the Black Ferns 7s brand as part of their own brand and digital identity. Only by taking on board this team brand alongside their own online personas are these athletes able to provide so much insight into team dynamics and connections within the Black Ferns 7s squad. The players acknowledge the whanaungatanga which exists in their squad, see themselves as part of the team, and know they are an extension of the Black Ferns 7s brand at all times. Their online posts and self-presentation on Instagram quantitatively reflect these statements made in the interviews, through the finding that these players present themselves as athletes first based on quantities of “team & rugby” images. As such, the two – the team and the player – cannot be separated for these players. They find much pride and sense of identity and belonging through their team identification, and this is evident in their social media posts and through our interviews.

It is clear that the content shared to Instagram by players provides audiences with an understanding of how their team functions, as a cohesive family unit made up of the “Sevens Sisters”, who provide one another with a positive support network. There is no explicit term

which describes this in the English language, however, in Te Ao Māori, this can be understood as *tuākana-tēina*: the relationship and dynamic between an older/more experienced person or sibling and a younger/less experienced one. This is particularly relevant to the older/younger sister dynamic of the “Sevens Sisters” in the team. It is through social media channels that members of the public grow to understand the internal *tuākana-tēina* workings of the BF7s team, and potentially use this as motivation for the pursuance of an elite and/or community rugby environment characterized by the positive, supportive dynamics displayed on social media.

Although these dynamics are made visible to the public, many of the ways in which the players support one another are not evident in the content they post. Processes leading up to the act of posting are hidden from the public, but often involve support from the internal BF7s network in order to safeguard representations of the Black Ferns 7s brand. For example, the NZ 7s sponsorship with Adidas and Team New Zealand’s sponsorship with Peak means players must refrain from posting content to their accounts depicting them in competitors’ clothing whilst participating in tournaments or matches for those entities. Ensuring players abide by the correct posting guidelines, down to the miniscule detail of the logos visible on their body, is a team effort. This uncovers how sportswomen’s digital labour, as explained by Ahmad (2019) in the context of Muslim sportswomen, and Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) in the context of creating marketable and brand-building femininities in online self-representation, incorporates the *mahi* (work) of not only the individual, but of the entire team in the context of team sports. In this team environment, digital labour becomes a collective effort of *mahi tahi* in support of the individual, as a player explains:

We call each other out before we get [caught], cause we have a fine system. Yeh so we keep each other accountable. So if someone’s wearing like, [a competitor brand] or forgot to tape

their stuff we're like "ey sis, quickly tape it up" or, "put it away before someone – like a manager – sees it" so ya know like, we have each others' back just in case – Anonymous*

International research has focused on individual digital labour, but this research reveals the collective digital labour involved in the BF7s online engagement. Their collective digital labour was shared amongst all members of the team, however, it is still led by those with greater experience, who are considered leaders within this group.

This highlights a hierarchy (older/more experienced and younger/newer players) acknowledged by those interviewed within explanations of their team dynamics and Instagram posting habits. Like *tuākana-tēina*, the existence of a hierarchical dynamic in accordance with age and experience is not unexpected in the context of a team guided by *tikanga* and *mātauranga Māori*, whereby *kaumātua* (elders) are held in high regard. This is not to confound experience with age, or a 32-year-old with "elder", however, in Te Ao Māori, age is accompanied by respect, recognition, and expectation, and part of that expectation involves the provision of guidance and the assumption of leadership roles within their *whānau* or *hapū* (extended family group). In this elite sporting environment, players who are older can be seen as holding such positions, and, by consequence of this, such expectations. Elements of *kaumātuatanga* have been documented to present burdens to some in leadership positions, but most still derived enjoyment from earning the title (Dawes et al., 2022). This challenging aspect of internal leadership is recognized by members of the squad as well:

So within a team like Black Ferns, the responsibility of the older ones to navigate the younger ones in that space has been quite a, not a challenge, but just they have to role model what the behaviour and what the attitude is. Yeh, yeh, I mean it's just another opportunity to teach what's good practice. – Tiana*

These findings, of respect for older/more experienced players (*kaumātuatanga*), and of learning through sharing experiential knowledge (*tuākana-tēina*) are in line with understandings of

whanaungatanga, which Bruce and Hippolite (2013) found transcended cultural boundaries and enhanced the mana of peoples of all cultures within a group. This is reinforced by the acceptance of these tikanga by the Black Ferns 7s squad and management team as a whole, regardless of cultural background. Overall, the whanaungatanga which underpins the team culture has over time developed to create internal dynamics revolving around *ako* (to teach and to learn), which is closely related to *tuākana-tēina*, and describes a reciprocal learning relationship between players of different ages and experience levels.

Whilst these hierarchies are essentially hidden from public view, despite playing an influential role in the structure of the team and the content posted to Instagram, they are evident in the quantitative analysis of the athletes' posts. A sense of seniority within the squad is reflected in the thematic frequency of content shared on Instagram, whereby it was established that newer players posted less about their culture and vulnerable topics, more about their life outside of rugby, and significantly less about achievement than their more experienced counterparts. The statements made by players in the interviews elaborate upon the statistically significant relationships between posting and squad seniority. This solidified that being younger and/or newer means sharing more surface-level content and limiting the depth at which vulnerable topics are spoken about:

“Because a lot of us young ones we don't dive into that deep stuff that people wanna hear.” –

Anonymous*

This confirmed, both statistically and qualitatively, the impact age and experience has on posting habits, particularly of those new to the team and the environment.

Teaching and learning is vital for the assimilation of new players to the professional environment. Whilst official social media guidance was useful for new members of the squad, players acknowledged the role of senior players (*tuākana*) in helping guide and support them through their increasingly populated digital landscape. This again reinforces the importance

and impact of ako and the tuākana-tēina reciprocal relationships within this team. When asked which was more helpful, Anonymous* responded:

“A bit of both. I think it sort of gave me an idea of what I should post on social media.”

“All the girls definitely give us a lot of learnings, teaching me”

Hence, official structures provided important boundaries, but navigating the space within those boundaries was supported by senior players (tuākana), as well as the player’s own time and experience within the squad. This is the players’ tikanga: the way they do things.

Senior players are instrumental in introducing newer players to the (digital) platform Black Ferns 7s players have, as their experiential knowledge exists in contrast to the formal guidelines and restrictions offered by management members who have not experienced the same online exposure. This becomes increasingly important as newer players’ online platforms begin to grow, often accelerated by large events like the Olympics:

One of the older girls [and I] just had a massive yarn, just about how much [one] thing can change your perspective of someone. So boy, girl, old man, woman – just by posting, especially with the Olympics its just... such a big platform that you can show stuff on. – Anonymous*

Interactions between the tēina and tuākana of the squad for purposes of learning and growth is indicative of the perceived value of this Indigenous method of knowledge acquisition, namely the sharing of experiential knowledge via a sisterly ako dynamic.

This indicates that formal training may not be as useful as Indigenous-led decolonized forms of education, like ako, encouraging the provision of education outside academic or formal spaces (Andreotti et al., 2015; Schick & McNinch, 2009). Through informal structures and processes of teaching and learning, like a tuākana-tēina relationship, in line with Indigenous knowledge practices, players move within the team’s hierarchy, grow in confidence

both on the field and online, and expand the breadth and depth of the content and discussions they post to Instagram:

Being in there [X] years, you sort of learn what to post and what not to post. And then just like, for me, I sort of know what I want to portray now as an athlete, and which way I sorta wanna navigate through it. We all have different kinds of pages too so, just trying to Figure out what I wanna show: what parts I wanna show, what parts I wanna keep private. – Anonymous*

It's a real deep self-awareness trait you have to have. And the higher you get up the scale the more you've got to have that awareness at the forefront. Protection of you, your family, your friends. – Tiana*

This is indicative of both the external guidance and the internal confidence required to grow within this elite sporting environment.

This discussion clarified posting and following motivations for athletes and audiences. Externally, these players' digital representations are influenced by two particular expectations:

- The responsibility of upholding Black Ferns 7s brand and mana
- Sponsor requirements (e.g. clothing during mega-events)

Internally, tikanga-led hierarchical team dynamics uncovered the ways in which players related to one-another, work together, and develop individual and group public images:

- Whanaungatanga, including collective digital labour (mahi tahi)
- Tuākana-tēina: teaching and learning from older and younger players/sisters

This team tikanga works to enhance the individual and collective mana of players and the team as a collective.

Qualitative analysis clarified that the quantitative differences in the previous chapter pertain to a reluctance to share vulnerable information amongst newer players. With regard to this, the following factor impacts Instagram usage:

- Kaumātuatanga: the impact of the amount of time you have spent in the squad

For audiences, the aspirational team culture displayed by the BF7s may serve to counter the negative demotivational impacts of intra-team conflict within adolescent sport teams.

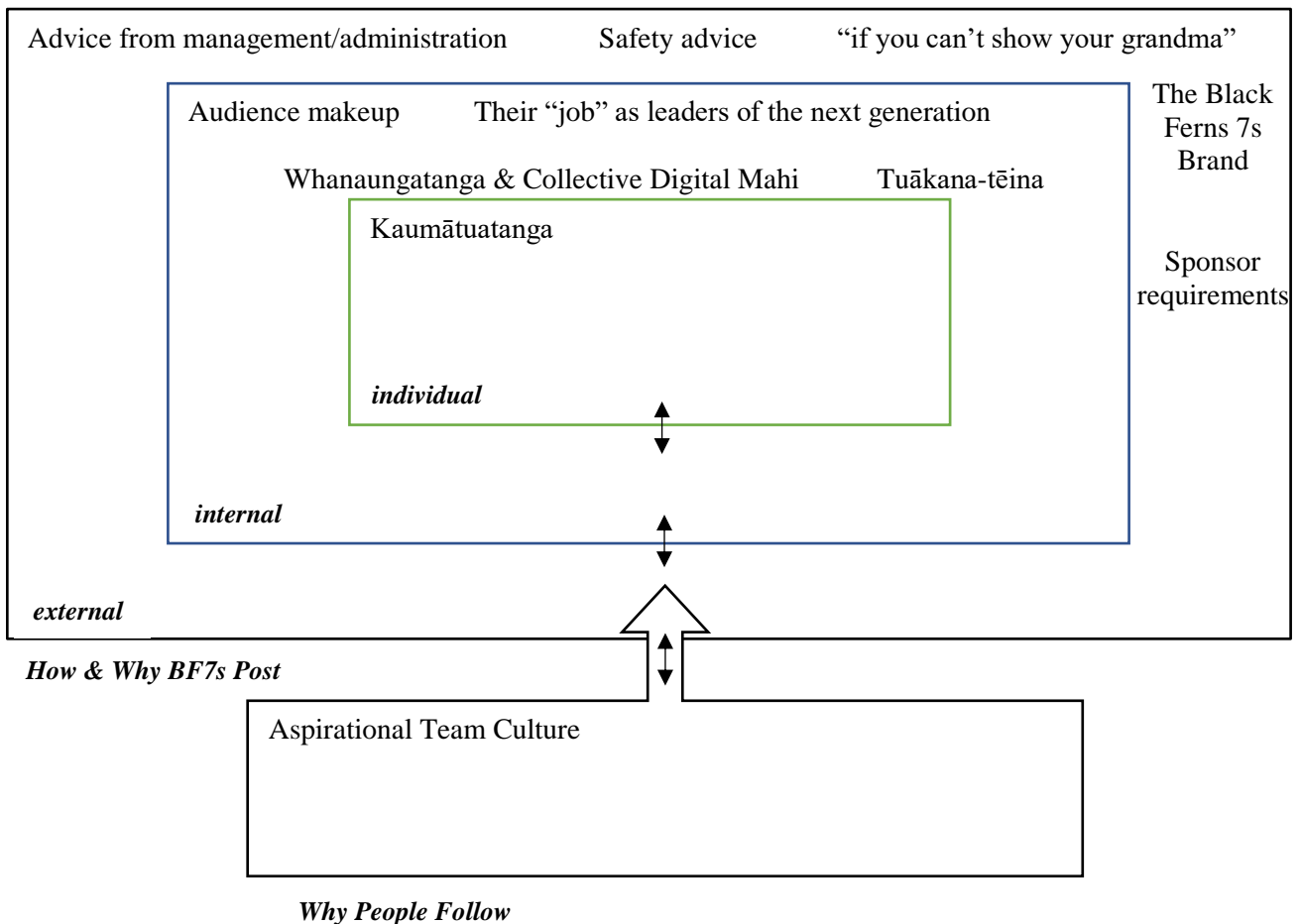


Figure 17: Layers of impacts on Instagram usage within themes 5.1 and 5.2

3. He tina ki runga, he tāmōre ki raro

In order to flourish above, one must be firmly rooted below: the importance of life outside and beyond rugby.

Whilst this whakatauki may directly apply to “knowing your roots”, it can also refer to having or being involved in more than simply what is visible “above”, and having a solid underpinning beneath the soil, or behind the scenes, to support oneself. In this context, I am interpreting and applying this whakatauki to players having passions off the field and potential plans for when their rugby career comes to an end. There was a distinct understanding amongst players that a career as a professional athlete is not permanent, hence the importance of their life outside of rugby:

...having a balance around rugby and life. Like rugby is not your life. A lot of people think rugby is your life but it's really only a 10 year commitment of your whole life, and a lot of girls don't realize that, that's why they need to – if they want it now they have to train hard now, because once you turn 27/28 you're done. – Candy Floss*

“... everyone's kinda just doing their own thing and finding what they love” – Anonymous*

Players within the squad live in accordance with this whakatauki by engaging in various activities and hobbies outside of their contractual obligations with the team.

Much of these external undertakings are shared online, such as Sarah Hirini's work with Matakesi Rugby and Hirini Rugby Academy, Stacey Fluhler's studies, or Shiray Kaka's introductions to farming. But depictions of their diversification do not end here:

There's so many girls in our team who [are] doing like crazy things, crazy things. Gossy's just become a pilot, Gee's DJing, half of us are all studying” [...] one of our girls is doing like a beauty workshop – like nails and lashes, real cool – Anonymous*

As demonstrated by this quote, some of these undertakings counter the hegemonic masculinity and anti-femininity associated with rugby (Fallon & Jome, 2007). Thorpe et al. (2017) found that surfer Alana Blanchard navigated Instagram in a manner which reclaimed traditional demonstrations of femininity as empowering. To embrace these complexities, such as embodying traditional feminine qualities whilst simultaneously displaying strong physicality

and typically-masculine attributes (Cocca, 2014), as the aforementioned player undertaking a beauty course does, counters longstanding stereotypes associated with rugby and women's rugby players. The diversity of choices across the team are reflective of Third Wave feminism's celebration of an individual's personal choices, including negotiating with (and resisting) dominant ideas of femininity and masculinity (Cocca, 2014; Thorpe et al., 2017). This choice is not solely limited to a reclamation of femininity amongst sportswomen who have been otherwise hyper(hetero)sexualized, as much of existing literature focuses on, but also extends to taking ownership of all of one's intersectional identities in public digital spaces.

This public "embrace of the messiness" of these elements of Third Wave feminism, namely "diversity and individual complexity [and] feminism and femininity" (Cocca, 2014, p. 98), amongst other things, highlights the important ways in which these athlete's digital conduct and self-presentation contribute to and extend feminist discourses surrounding the development of professional women's sport in Aotearoa and beyond. As Moritz (2011) articulated in reference to the both feminine and athletic identities created by competitive cheerleaders, sportswomen can be more than one thing, "not [having] to choose between femininity and athleticism", or any other hobbies alongside their careers – "they can be both simultaneously and in a fluid, moving context" (p. 668). Celebrating and representing their intersectional identities highlights the reality that they are not just rugby players, which is something players expressed was important for them.

By highlighting their lives outside rugby, these mana wāhine repeatedly demonstrate that they can be both a student and a Black Fern, a pilot and a Black Fern, a mother and a Black Fern, beautiful, strong and powerful, and a multitude of intersecting identities at once. Considering these sets of images through Third Wave feminist and postfeminist lenses, which may display, on the one hand, a muscular or successful athlete, and on the other hand, a "hetero sexy" individual, allows us to better understand how multi-layered self-representations of

sportswomen online may generate inspiration (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b) among other women's rugby players. Demonstrating intersectional diversity allows these players to appeal to a broad audience, and garner the attention of followers who may themselves identify with or see parts of their intersectional identities represented by the players, outside of solely the "team & rugby". Furthermore, these present challenges to stereotypes of women rugby players, which can also be appealing or interesting to some followers, and described as "important" by others:

women are coming out of that stereotype from like the 1900s [...] where you grow up, you get married, you have kids, and that was your life. I think we're just totally changing the direction now, and that it's so important for women to portray such an image. – Hannah Montana

Members of the wider women's rugby community thus saw significant value in portraying the diversity of women who play rugby in Aotearoa, and in ensuring visibility of professional sportswomen from all backgrounds for aspiring players:

[some BF7s players] are mums, and that's incredible! To feel like, we could go and have kids and come back and play rugby – that never would have happened [before]! And I think like that's why it's so important right now that those women are posting, and that those women are just great examples, and they understand that that's half their job too. – Hannah Montana

This emphasizes how visibility of players with various different lives and undertakings outside of rugby was perceived as important by members of the community.

Members of the wider women's rugby community noted how they could relate to and connect with players through visibility of other intersections of their identities in addition to rugby: on a cultural basis, through other sports, or, like the above, through being a mother:

I'm a mum, so I feel like I'm more than a mum? I've always just been committed to being a mum for the last 7 years [...] And for me I just needed to get out of that [...] and find myself again. Cause I know I'm more than a mum [...] So yeh, I enjoy the game. I love rugby, I love the atmosphere, everyone, everything in it, [...] – all of it. Except for the cardio. – Jasmine

This helps us understand how digital connections can be built with players through that which they engage with outside of rugby.

In this discussion, a disconnect was made clear. Whilst the importance of having a life outside of rugby and its subsequent impact on that which is posted on Instagram is clear for Black Ferns 7s athletes, as evidenced by both interviews and by the quantitative analysis, this importance was not translated to digital audiences. In the group interviews, some participants demonstrated a hyper-focused attitude on solely playing and pursuing rugby, disregarding external hobbies and their importance within the uncertainty of professional sport. The value of life outside of rugby in the context of the temporary and unpredictable nature of a career as an athlete was not fully grasped. This allows us to understand how audiences engage with sportswomen's posts regarding life outside of their sport. They enjoy seeing the content, and may establish additional ways in which they connect with these sportswomen through other intersections of their identity beyond solely sport; however, the importance of having fulfilment outside of sport seemingly does not translate, at least not in its entirety, to some audience members (i.e. ambitious young players).

At the internal level, BF7s athletes shaped their posts and representations around one main feature discussed in this section:

- Ensuring rugby is not all-consuming

Despite this being a value which these players uphold, it seemingly was not fully grasped by audience members. Instead, their focus remained fixed on a perception of these players as “athletes first”, which may be a result of these players posting the vast majority of their images on topics surrounding the “team & rugby”.

Factors at the individual level which dictated posts centered around this theme reinforced postfeminist and Third Wave feminist perspectives of social media usage, which emphasize and celebrate freedom of choice in self-representation. This can be understood as:

- Personal choice and passions

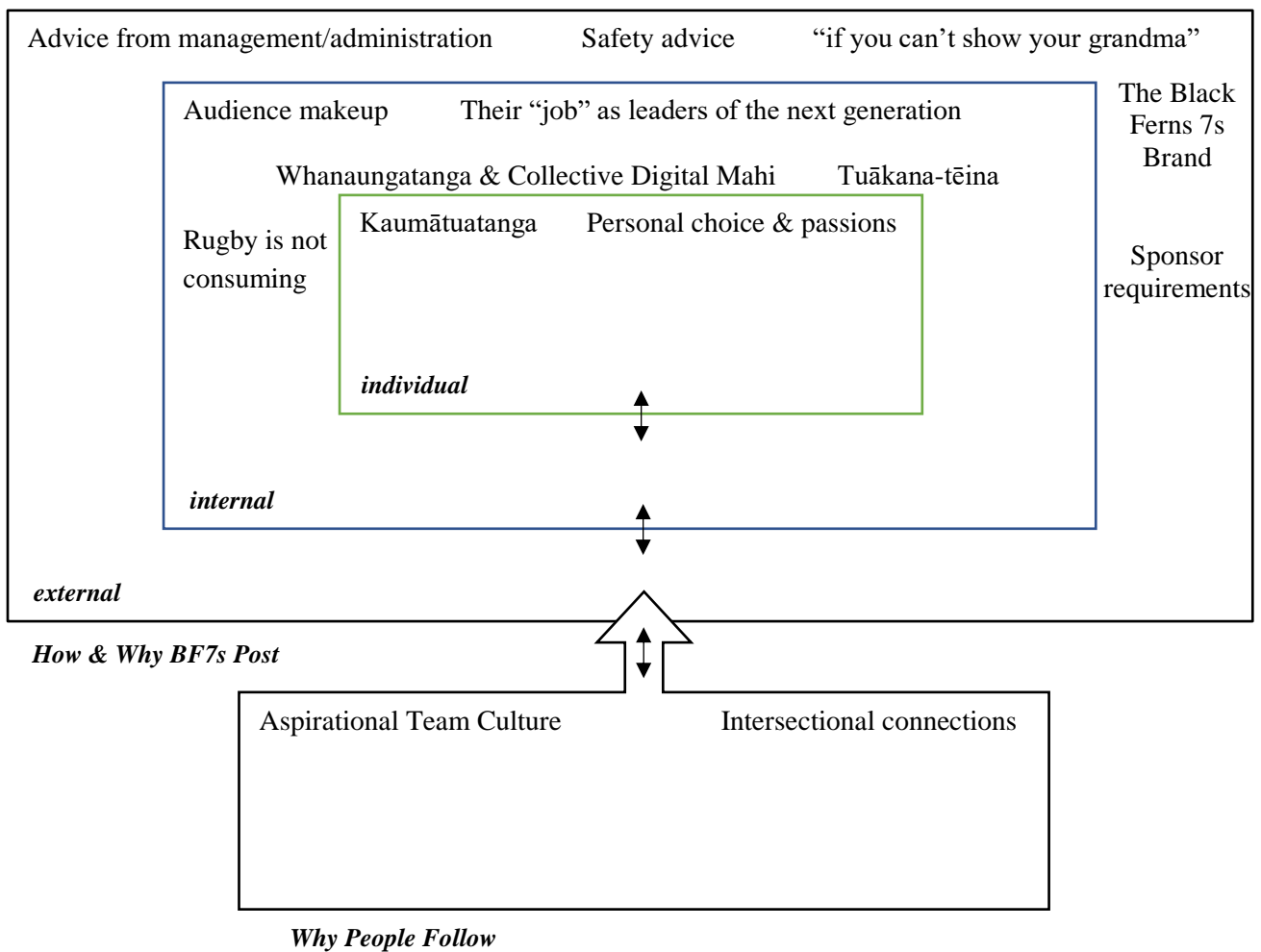


Figure 18: Layers of impacts on Instagram usage within themes 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3

4. *Mauri mahi, mauri ora; mauri noho, mauri mate*

Industry begets prosperity; idleness begets poverty: economic ventures and side-hustles.

The previous section describes how online content regarding life outside of rugby can consist of a hobby, a future plan, education, friends, or weekend antics, but sharing this content in digital

spaces can also lead to the generation of extra revenue streams and personal brand cultivation.

Previous literature has identified this function of social media as important, particularly for women athletes, who typically earn less than their male counterparts (Mogaji et al., 2022; Na et al., 2020; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, 2018b).

When it comes to economic ventures like securing brand deals with major sponsors, the process does not come easily for sportswomen, who Mogaji et al. (2018) found have fewer opportunities to partner with brands than sportsmen. The higher profile status of many sportsmen who have comparatively larger digital followings means male athletes are chosen as brand ambassadors more often (Mogaji et al., 2018). In order to redress this imbalance, Mogaji et al. (2020) suggests the cultivation of a personal brand by women athletes is imperative, indicative of the digital labour required by sportswomen in order to establish themselves in the increasingly commercialized and commoditized landscape of sporting social media (Rahikainen & Toffoletti, 2021). Generating a personal brand means sportswomen align themselves with particular values and ideas, which helps generate engagement amongst followers over time, and constructing additional avenues through which audiences can manifest connections with and to those players. Thereafter, having an engaged following has the potential to translate into external brand partnerships and sponsorships. In some cases, players even cultivate their own passions and hobbies within their personal brand into revenue streams themselves, demonstrating everyday entrepreneurialism instead or on top of external partnerships. The commercialization and commodification of sportswomen's Instagram accounts begins, therefore, with a personal brand in the form of a digital identity, which may then translate to partnering with other existing brands or creating a business themselves.

The ability for social media to enable and empower sportswomen’s entrepreneurialism has been demonstrated by a number of players, and Shiray Kaka is a prominent example. Her frequently-posted passion for dogs led her to pursue studies in dog training and a side job in dog walking, turning a passion outside of rugby into an additional income source, a process which she disclosed on Instagram. More recently, her comedic videos posted to Instagram, whereby she interviewed her teammates in a manner which reinforced the bond between BF7s players, captivated audiences with their authentic humour. The segment was picked up by Spark Sport NZ, who holds the broadcasting rights to Black Ferns 15s rugby in Aotearoa. “Rayze the Roof” became a segment published in weekly episodes by Kaka and Spark Sport, in the form of a collaboration post on Instagram.



Figure 19: Shiray Kaka’s “Rayze the Roof” with Spark Sport (available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIAdi6fNVAG/>)

When players accomplish entrepreneurial feats like these, the aforementioned supportive team dynamics of the Black Ferns 7s squad frequently come into play. The players demonstrate a collective (and individual) effort to be their own marketing team, acknowledged by audience members in the group interviews and through direct messages (DMs) on Instagram. Posts and stories published by Black Ferns 7s players on Instagram promoting events, products, books, shows, and rugby tournaments were noted. Members of the team took it upon themselves to fill in the gaps

where traditional media might be lacking in representations of women athletes and women’s rugby. Whilst the fact that most of this self-marketing is only seen by existing followers of Black Ferns 7s athletes is a limitation of this collective digital labour, it does not go entirely unseen. For example, fans and non-fans alike acknowledged the publicity generated on social media by players around the recent Women’s Rugby World Cup captured their attention:

“I heard more people talk about the NZ vs France [semi final] than any of the men’s ones. I don’t watch rugby but will tune into the final cause of all the hype around me now” – Manit

Intra-team support for one another’s economic side ventures does not end here. For example, we see widespread support of Stacey Fluhler Scrunchies, worn and marketed by multiple teammates.



Figure 20: Black Ferns 7s athletes promoting Stacey Fluhler Scrunchies (available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLdyiOmAocr/?hl=en>, https://www.instagram.com/p/CM3_VaNAEs0/?hl=en)

There was significant support and publicity for Ruby Tui’s recent book, *Straight Up*, including proclamations of pride from her teammates, sharing her promotional content to their stories, and comments on her posts regarding the launch of the book.

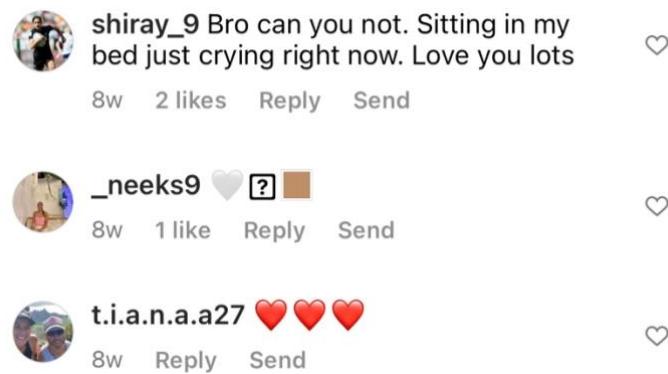


Figure 21: Comments from two current and one former teammate on a video promoting Ruby Tui's book (available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CiW0YPnAffj/?hl=en>)

Support of videography and photography business Takitimu-Cook Productions, run by a wider-squad member, was also clear, with captain Sarah Hirini and veteran Kelly Brazier both hiring the player's services for their weddings. Players also collaborate with one another, as was demonstrated when Stacey Fluhler Scrunchies hired Takitimu-Cook Productions for a recent advertising campaign. When spoken to specifically about her business, the owner of Takitimu-Cook Productions credited much of the shift from photography and videography as a hobby to an economic venture to the internal support network provided by the Black Ferns 7s squad, which ultimately kickstarted her business. This internal support network therefore can be seen as vital not only to the health and connectivity of the team on the field and in the high-performance environment, but to the prosperity of these players beyond rugby, who help market their teammates' passions into popular products.



Figure 22: Takitimu-Cook Productions collaborations with Black Ferns 7s teammates (available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZn0R-OhM91/?hl=en>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BtHPTclow4/?hl=en>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bs40jPeAzO6/?hl=en>)

Digital labour is seemingly commonplace for many Black Ferns 7s athletes based on the above. In contrast to most athletes, however, the BF7s players brought a collective approach to this digital labour, sharing knowledge and insights, and supporting one another both offline and online. Whether supporting their teammates through keeping each other accountable in the outfits they wear in public and online, being each other’s marketing teams, cultivating a personal brand and digital identity, or transforming their digital spaces for economic gain in demonstrations of everyday entrepreneurialism: Black Ferns 7s athletes put in the online work, for themselves, for each other, and the team.

Athletes specifically mentioned the ways in which they seek to configure their Instagram accounts and usage in a manner that makes it more conducive to economic ventures:

“if I get my follower count up, I could get more sponsors and you know... ads, promotions, make money on the side of rugby as well.” – Anonymous*

This, however, was much more prevalent in younger and newer athletes. Newer players looked up to the amount that senior players were paid for sponsored and partnered posts, acknowledging that they aspired to do the same with their accounts, once they had achieved that level of recognition.

“The cool thing is when you become mean [awesome], you get paid a lot of money just to post a photo.” – Candy Floss*

Although younger players aspired to the economic benefits Instagram fame can provide sportswomen as they become successful (“when you become mean”), there was no mention by the athletes interviewed as to *how* that was to be accomplished.

Existing literature reaffirms that becoming a marketable sportswoman on social media requires the adoption of a personal brand to which consumers respond and engage with (Mogaji et al., 2022). However, athletes still did not recount any processes used to build their personal brand in order to earn money on Instagram, only that they eventually sought to utilize Instagram as a platform through which a supplementary income could be made alongside their rugby priorities. There were goals that athletes had for their Instagram usage, but no articulation of strategies to reach those goals.

Existing research strongly reinforces this reality for professional sportswomen: there is no handbook for brand-building or methods to guarantee brand-sponsorship success. Geurin (2017) found that elite sportswomen had no specific strategies for their new media usage when it came to their online goal of “sharing their lives”, other than aiming to make authentic posts. Likewise, in their study of Alana Blanchard’s social media usage, Thorpe et al. (2017) found that Blanchard “implied a lack of intent or strategy” (p. 373) when it came to explaining how she amassed such a large digital following. Similarly, Pocock and Skey (2022), who explore the difficulties in navigating appropriate distance from fans online, found that sportswomen balance relatability, authenticity, and sexualization in a calculated manner so that they gain and

retain followers whilst simultaneously avoiding fan disengagement and online abuse. However, there was no strategy to this navigation. It is a difficult and dynamic process that sportswomen on social media perpetually have to deal with, but with no explicit way in which they can or should do so.

In the absence of a clearly articulated Instagram strategy, having a relatively carefree (yet undoubtedly still calculated) approach to social media usage embodies an authenticity which audience members in the group interviews engaged with strongly:

My favourite [to follow] would be Shiray Kaka [because] I feel like she just keeps it real. [...] [she] shows that she is a real person at the end of the day, like us. We're just all [a] person at the end of the day [...] she just brings it back to reality. – Jasmine

This suggests that, particularly in the context of Aotearoa, perceived “authenticity” (keeping it real and not taking their online engagement too seriously) may be key to developing a successful, marketable personal brand, with little attention given to the acquisition of fame, and keeping the pursuit of additional income behind the scenes (Thorpe et al., 2017). Similarly, other research has indicated that appearing indifferent, unfussed, and/or unedited with regard to the content posted on Instagram is vital to being deemed as authentic (Murad, 2019; Reade, 2021). As such, this indifference works to ensure that members of the wider community do not perceive the athletes’ online activity as motivated by additional revenue. Audiences are instead left to focus predominantly on rugby prowess and authenticity off the field.

This reciprocal dynamic is indicative of the ongoing digital labour which characterizes the development of a personal brand: it is not only a reflection of an individual athlete’s values and personality, but also a reflection of that to which their audience best responds. As explained by Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018b), followers play a crucial role in building a personal brand as a sportswoman, in line with consumer culture and market desires, which ultimately demand to see empowered, entrepreneurial, and individualized women athletes on Instagram.

By uncovering the “complexities that female athletes must negotiate when attempting to produce an authentic feminine sporting identity and brand in a postfeminist consumer culture” (p. 313), Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018b) again touch upon the importance of authenticity. Authenticity strategies highlighted in existing literature (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Geurin, 2017), have been shown to increase fan engagement (Su et al., 2020). Group interviews in this study reiterated this when discussing why participants chose to follow specific players online:

“I like the realness for me. And also she talks about their marriage and how she’s doing long distance and everything, [...] the farm life, like yeh. She just keeps it real I think.” – Jasmine

This acknowledgement of “realness” reinforces previous findings that authenticity is appreciated by audiences (Geurin, 2017; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018c).

Similarly, players themselves stated that they seek to show that they too are “normal people” and aim to share authenticity-building content:

“We’re also just a normal person on the street” – Anonymous*

Furthermore, BF7s athletes’ imagined audiences, alongside their perceived “job” as a leader of the next generation, further encourage the integration of authenticity strategies on Instagram:

“Cause you know more people are gonna see it. So you just be more of who you are really than try to fit a... a mold or a bubble” – Anonymous*

Videos facilitate these authenticity strategies, and BF7s athletes are known for their use of TikToks, and frequently upload videos to their stories. Su et al. (2020) found that this precise unedited and “less-polished” nature of videos, specifically as they take place on TikTok (which, as established, are frequently posted to Back Ferns 7s athletes Instagram grids upon uploading), lends itself to increased authenticity, and, in turn, engagement.

Therefore, similar to sportswomen researched in previous literature (Pocock & Skey, 2022; Stronach et al., 2022), an awareness of their audience encourages sportswomen to share about

aspects of their lives in a style that they perceive to be in an authentic manner. These athletes are cognizant of the public's desire to know more about them, and this shapes what they choose to post. In Geurin's (2017) aforementioned study, athletes expressed "the importance of providing an authentic picture of themselves to their followers" (p. 352). One particular athlete that Geurin interviewed specified that she prioritized being genuine and honest, which group interview participants echoed when naming the features they appreciated seeing from Black Ferns 7s athletes they followed. This dynamic is therefore present on both ends of the screen: the athletes want people to know that they are just normal people, who lean upon support networks and have hobbies outside of sport; audience members appreciate seeing celebrity athletes keeping it real and remaining grounded. Here, Toffoletti and Thorpe's (2018b) characterization of sportswomen's self-representation online as more than an economic strategy is important: it is not simply the pursuit of an authentic image for the purposes of making money through brand deals. Rather, the pursuit of authenticity in online self-presentation is constitutive of an ongoing cultural phenomenon whereby "being one's 'true self' and striving to be the 'real you' are ubiquitous within consumer culture" (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b, p. 303).

Thus, authenticity remains at the core of players' Instagram usage, guides their self-representations and brand building, and is one of the most influential aspects when it comes to retaining audience members. Around this theme, there are two important internal-level factors:

- Opportunities for monetization and brand partnerships leads athletes to want to build a brand
- The authentic brand they want to be is limited by the "authentic" brand the audience wants to see

At the individual level, two factors which most significantly impact athletes' use of Instagram were highlighted:

- Entrepreneurship, if so desired
- Shaping digital identity around authenticity

Directly related to this is the importance the audience places on the ability for athletes to be – or at least appear as – authentic versions of themselves online. Importantly, this study reveals the importance of national context (Aotearoa) and team culture in particular definitions and understandings of athlete “authenticity” online. In New Zealand, it was evident that players and their followers engage most with those who appear “down to earth” and valuing of the collective (i.e. team, friendships, family) over the individual, with a strong sense of humour.

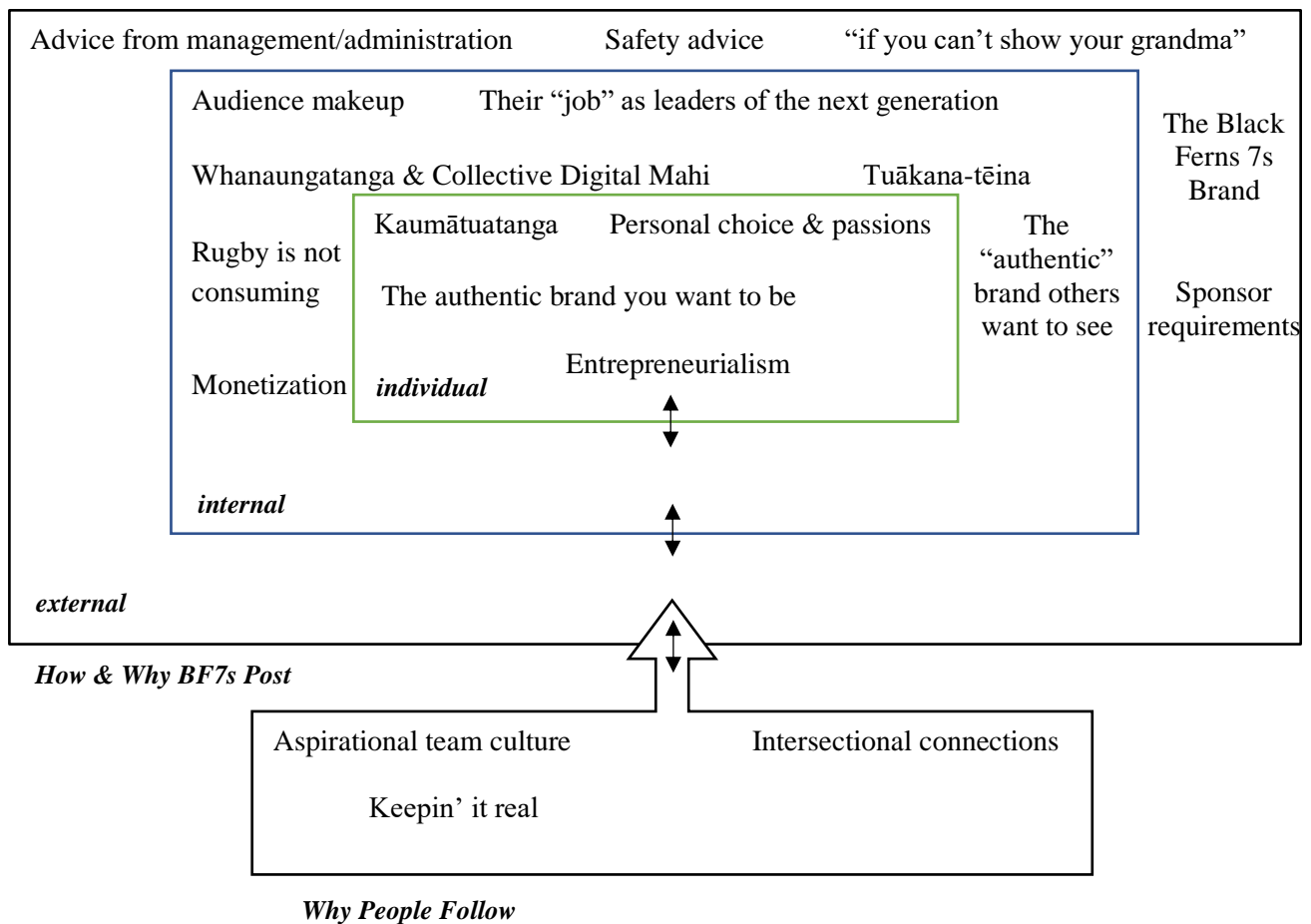


Figure 23: Layers of impacts on Instagram usage within all Chapter 5 themes

Chapter Summary

Here, the use of Instagram specifically for communication with fans was articulated, with the use of alternative applications restricted to different audiences. The many ways in which BF7s athletes highlight their individuality, whilst locating themselves in the culturally unique Black Ferns team environment to simultaneously represent both their individual and collective identity, was clarified. It is clear that, as a player's time with the squad increases, their comfort with using Instagram and their self-presentation enhances, leading to the development of a digital identity, through guidance from both management, but more importantly, from senior players. The *tuākana-tēina* and *kaumātuatanga* which regulates the internal dynamics of the team is representative of the *tikanga* which guides the players' social media usage. Therefore, although research calls for the formal guidance and education for sportswomen around social media usage (Pocock & Skey, 2022), in the context of Aotearoa and among Indigenous women, this may be less appropriate, and alludes to why formal social media training is largely absent from the BF7s environment, beyond the induction phase as mentioned by Anonymous*. *Ako* is instead more important and influential.

The convergence of three factors in particular demonstrate an important dynamic between how BF7s athletes use Instagram, how they self-present, and what digital audiences within the rugby community are drawn to. At the individual level, authenticity strategies guide athletes in their personal brand cultivation. Likewise, audiences want to see BF7s athletes being authentic and keeping it real online. Thirdly, as articulated in the quantitative analysis, "achievement" posts were engaged with the most, receiving the most likes, the most comments, and the most comments per like, indicating stronger engagement as parasocial interaction literature suggests. This tight-knit team of athletes celebrate their individuality, whilst grounding themselves within the BF7s team, through revealing their lives outside of rugby, to varying extents depending on application-type and audience demographics. However, both qualitative discussion and quantitative social media analyses point to

the development of digital identities which primarily encapsulate three marketable qualities: “authenticity, athleticism, and success” (Lobpries et al., 2018, p. 11). Importantly, however, these particular qualities are shaped by the players’ national and cultural context, such that online authenticity and success look very different for the BF7s players than sportswomen in other parts of the world.

Chapter 6: *He kokonga whare e kitea; he kokonga ngākau e kore e kitea*

The corners of a house may be seen and examined; not so the invisible corners of the heart

Powerful things which influence actions, and yet are not spoken of

This chapter picks up where the previous left us, focusing on the national and cultural context which shapes BF7s players' digital practices and perceptions of authenticity. It pinpoints four themes which emerged during the analysis regarding culturally specific factors which shape posting habits and audience engagement, such that wellbeing, authenticity, success, and role modelling look very different for sportswomen in Aotearoa. The role of Indigenous culture is revealed as a significant force in shaping Instagram use for players and followers alike. This chapter considers that, although unapologetic in their depictions and ownership of their culture(s), the influential ways in which culture influences the posting habits of these athletes work both overtly and covertly.

This chapter identifies and explores four additional themes from the qualitative data sets, supported by quantitative evidence, which shape authenticity and self-presentation in Aotearoa from a cultural perspective. Firstly, I discuss the importance of *hauora* (wellbeing) as informed by Indigenous ways of knowing in reflecting an authentic version of the self online. Secondly, I explore how this authenticity is framed by humility, particularly in portrayals of success and achievement. This cultural tenet can be extended to the often-cited Tall Poppy Syndrome in New Zealand society (Holmes et al., 2017; Phillips, 1996; Pierce et al., 2017). Thirdly, I explain how players curate an authentic, culturally appropriate digital identity through engagement with these two features, which leads to their selection as role models, and the subsequent motivations which follow the acknowledgement of their role model status. Here, the particular value of BF7s players as role models for Indigenous girls and women is emphasized. In doing so, this chapter highlights the importance of culturally authentic female Indigenous role models in sport, who are courageous in speaking out about topics of importance to them and their communities.

1. Ka mahi te tawa uho ki te riri

Well done, you whose courage is like the heart of the tawa tree: unapologetic self-representations

Through analysing authenticity amongst these athletes in the previous chapter, it became clear that they unapologetically celebrate the individual features and factors which set them apart. Displaying themselves as proud of their bodies, as proudly Māori or Samoan, or as proudly in a same-sex relationship are amongst the unapologetic representations observed in the Instagram accounts in this analysis. When discussing features, themes, images, or posts which stood out or were memorable, the lack of attention given to these points of difference in the interviews and group interviews is indicative of an internalized normalization of these unique features of these players' lives. Broad (2001) considers unapologetic behaviour by female rugby players to be an in-your-face confrontation of stigmas and stereotypes, which particularly relate to heteronormativity and femininity. By nature of unapologetically presenting themselves online in a manner consistent with authenticity strategies, BF7s players provide Instagram audiences with counter-heteronormative images of sportswomen. These athletes frequently post examples of non-traditionally feminine bodies (strong, powerful, and muscular) and heterosexy-fit identities (Ezzell, 2009), amongst other demonstrations, as part of their authentic approach to Instagram.

As is visible in

Figure 24, audiences often respond to these images in very positive and supportive manners. However, challenging gender norms is not easy, and players have shared previous experiences of online trolling in the form of body shaming, as is visible in *Figure 25*. As explored in the literature review, global research demonstrates this occurs frequently with sportswomen online (Litchfield et al., 2018a), particularly those who portray bodies which do not conform with traditional conceptions of femininity (MacPherson & Kerr, 2021). Choosing to publicly embrace this abuse through humour

With the size of BF7s followings increasing following megaevents like the Olympics, the potential to combat this abuse is amplified. Miao's (2021) findings regarding women in traditionally masculine sports in Aotearoa highlighted that when a multiplicity of sporting femininities were represented, it enabled a wider range of sportswomen and athletic female bodies to become valued in society. Thus, BF7s athletes' unapologetic authenticity online contributes to the multiplicity of femininities transforming society-wide acceptances in Aotearoa of what it means to be feminine. There exists potential therefore for the players' digital labour to contribute toward societal shifts toward gender and femininity, as research has demonstrated gendered discourses are not as prominent in media surrounding sportswomen whose success is tied to a country's national identity (Bruce, 2009; Wensing, 2003; Wensing & Bruce, 2003). This would in turn reduce discussions surrounding expectations of femininity.

Not apologizing for being non-traditional normalizes modern sportswomen's bodies and presents alternatives to traditional conceptions of what a (sports)woman "should" look like. This is reflective of societal shifts in perceptions of what it means to be a sportswoman, and demonstrates that there is more than one way to be a marketable woman online (Lobpries et al., 2018). Highlighting sporting success ("achievement" posts), athleticism ("team & rugby" posts), and strong, powerful bodies is one way in which BF7s athletes embody these diversifications. These BF7s athletes are therefore part of a movement and an era of sportswomen moving away from traditional conceptions of heterosexually attractive women as the only marketable version of women online. Lobpries et al. (2018) interviewed an athlete who articulated this shift, explaining how she feels it is "now cool to be a female athlete", and that "it's now considered beautiful according to society to see a woman with muscles and strength" (Lobpries et al., 2018, p. 12). This "emergence of new forms of femininity that embrace 'girl power' [...] have radically altered the ways in which media depictions of athletes are produced, disseminated, and interpreted" (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 360). In this way, BF7s athletes do challenge and reinforce gender stereotypes through content they share online, as

Olive (2015) noted is possible for sportswomen to do. But in balancing accordance and divergence, these athletes are less confronting (Pocock & Skey, 2022) for the societal expectations of what a woman (rugby) athlete is anticipated to look like, be like, or present as.

Beyond bodies and femininity, this authenticity is also strongly shaped by the cultural context within which this study takes place. Players' "authenticity" online is informed by their cultural and ethnic identities, and involves embracing multiple elements of their culture(s). It is clear that rugby athletes in Aotearoa value their Indigenous identities: from beginning post-match interviews and speeches with a mihi on the field to the crowd (which is now common practice for men and women players), to haka becoming a post-game ritual (Palmer, 2016), to the names attributed to national tournaments such as "Super Rugby Aupiki": Indigenous culture is increasingly woven into the rugby fabric of Aotearoa. This inherently impacts digital self-representations of athletes who play the sport in Aotearoa. Audiences articulated that "cultural authenticity" was extremely valuable to them:

"when they push Māori issues it means a lot to me [...] to see mana wāhine really proud of themselves" – Hannah Montana

The Black Ferns 7s in particular embody a cultural pride, generated by the tikanga and whanaungatanga which guides their squad, that is discernibly "unapologetic". This external perception was confirmed by a member of the squad:

"our teams are very cultural, very strong Māori/Polynesian culture in our team." – Anonymous*

In one example, the entire 7s contingent from Team New Zealand travelled to the Tokyo Olympics wearing lavalavas, a traditional skirt worn across the Pacific but mainly in Samoa. In discussing how and why that came about, Anonymous* explained:

[it was] something [...] to tie into the cultural aspect to. And it was cool for some of the girls to wear that kind of stuff and embrace it as well – just something different for them too. So we had a lot of comments about it, saying that 'aw its cool seeing all the girls wear that kind of stuff!'. But yeah we wanna embrace more of our cultural side, and really tie into that identity of

where we from, who we are [...]. Like it might've been uncomfortable, for some of the girls, but everyone really embraced it! It was really cool to see

Another prominent example is the use of haka and waiata throughout the NZ Sevens programme. During the Olympics, this included welcoming medal-winners back to the village with a waiata or a haka, showcasing and embracing Indigenous culture on a global stage.

“that’s something I really love about both teams, is that kind of stuff that they do, like haka, waiata, song. It’s real big in both teams, not just ours, but the boys too.” – Anonymous*

Public perception of haka in women’s rugby has changed since the early years of women’s rugby in Aotearoa, as articulated by Palmer (2016). The challenge which haka in early women’s rugby presented was twofold: it challenged the hegemonic masculinity which characterized rugby in Aotearoa for decades, and it challenged the aforementioned expectations surrounding femininity and feminine bodies (Palmer, 2016). Then and now, haka is still a way in which rugby players portray cultural authenticity (Palmer, 2016).

In this sense, part of the value of being unapologetically Māori was also located in the ability to counter stereotypes, just as unapologetic representations of non-traditionally (hetero)sexually attractive bodies counter stereotypes surrounding femininity. This is because of the influence of these players in Aotearoa, and their ability to shape public perceptions, as Tiana* noted:

[positive representations have] to be at the forefront of social media [...] cause it has such an influence, you look at Maori in fucking media, everyone [sees] drugs, gangs [and] blah blah blah.

Unapologetically representing themselves via a cultural lens, which is important for combatting these negative stereotypes, is acknowledged as a difficult undertaking.

In line with this, Ahmad (2019) interviewed a Muslim athlete, Rania, with a very similar perspective on this undertaking, which can be understood as athletes becoming Figureheads for an entire group of people, even if that is not a role they choose for themselves. In Ahmad’s (2019)

study, Rania sees herself as an extension and representation of Muslims, and aimed for her posts to represent positive stories about Muslims which would shift public focus and “[hopefully] ‘normalize what it means to be a Muslim’ especially due to the ‘heightened number of negative stories about Muslims in the media’” (Ahmad, 2019, p. 184). In the context of this study, players take care to offer positive representations of Māori and Pasifika peoples:

It’s like me, like I won’t post anything or do anything in my life that would bring Māori people down, [but] that’s the consideration that we [Māori] have to take on our shoulders, because we’re trying to change a whole way of life. And that puts a bit more pressure on us – Hannah Montana

This was reiterated by Tiana* when she spoke about players learning Te Reo Māori in their adulthood, and taking on the (perceived) cultural responsibility to learn and carry on a language:

“I commend Stacey and Portia and Sarah for taking on that responsibility, because it’s a huge responsibility”

This pressure shapes athlete’s posting habits, encouraging them to adopt and publicly share their leadership roles in cultural spaces.

Group interview participants alluded to the importance of seeing these examples:

“Stacey Waaka, to be going back to Te Reo classes, for them to be going and investing in their Maoridom is really important” – Hannah Montana

There is pressure therefore placed on Indigenous athletes to make engagements with their culture public, because in Aotearoa, authenticity is shaped by and arguably grounded in the cultural attributes that make Māori and Pasifika athletes (and people) unique. This constitutes an important individual factor which influences posting habits of BF7s athletes:

- Being unapologetic

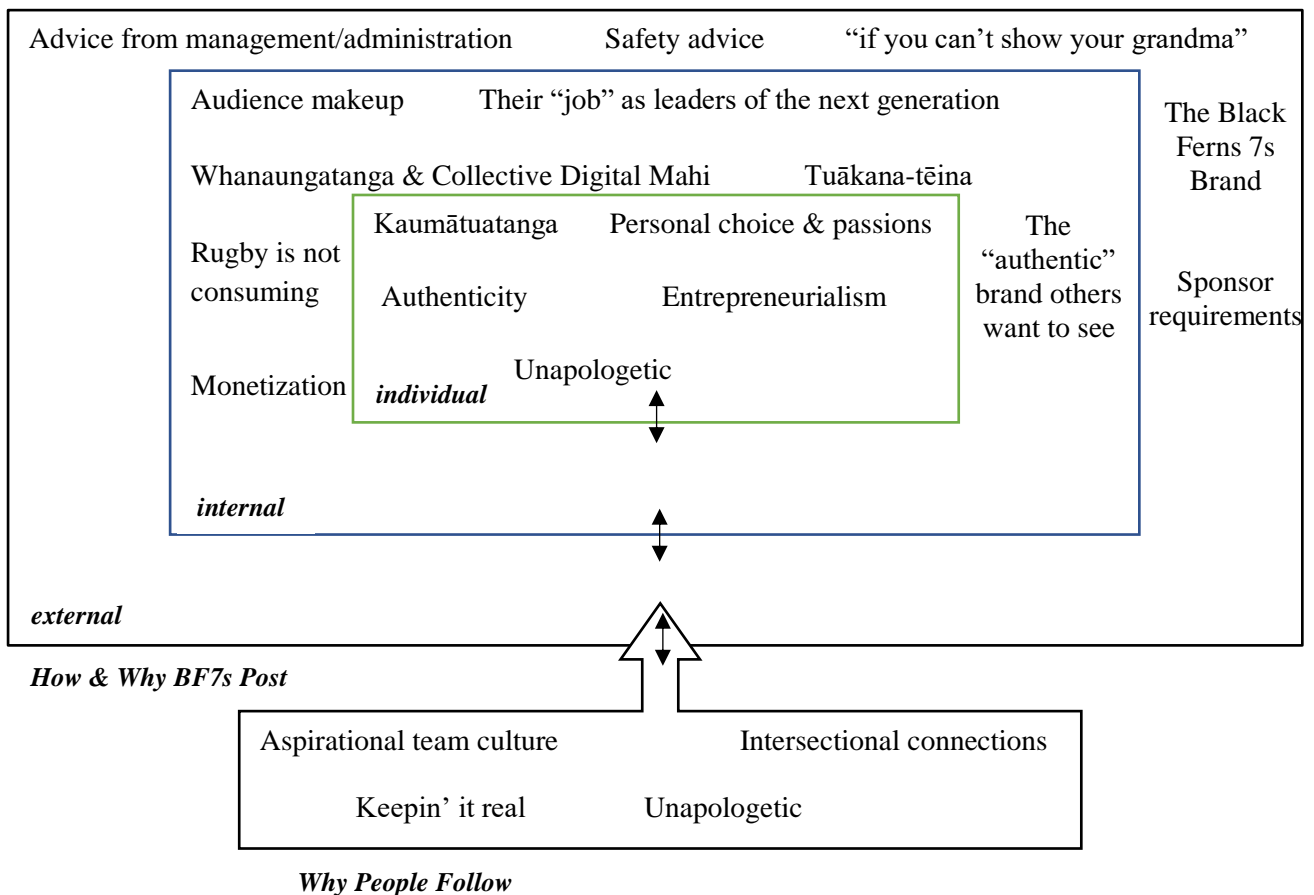


Figure 26: Layers of impacts on Instagram usage within all Chapter 5 and 6.1 themes

2. He tao rākau e taea te karo, he tao kī e kore e taea

A physical strike can be avoided, but a tongue lashing cannot: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" is a lie – Hinemoa Elder (2021, p. 127)

Instagram has been known as a "happy" social media platform (Toffoletti, Thorpe, et al., 2021) where people share positive aspects of their lives in a manner which emphasizes perfection (Freitas, 2017; Su et al., 2020). Previous studies of photographic representations of "happiness" have found that elements including strong social relationships and belonging, enthusiasm, careers, physical appearance, and success generally coincide with "happy" images. The analysis has already pointed toward a tendency for BF7s athletes to post about and share photos surrounding these factors which invoke happiness. The overwhelmingly positive posts

which populate Instagram mean negative anomalies can stand out, and potentially even create changes and initiate important discussions. Instances where athletes speak out against current culture, treatment, or policies are highlighted, and it has had significant impact in the world of women's rugby in Aotearoa. Players were able to pinpoint specific moments of vulnerability published by senior players which subsequently made them gain confidence towards increasing vulnerability in their digital self-representations. These moments can be described as Tiana* explained them, who used the example of Portia Woodman's interview following New Zealand's loss at the Rio 2016 Olympics (see appendix A) as:

“a pinnacle moment where that vulnerability came through [and was] accepted”

Following this anomaly, which exposed flaws in the Black Ferns 7s programme, the management and coaching group was shuffled, and a refined focus was placed on team culture and tikanga. This deviation from overwhelming positivity had significant impact.

In another example, players and group interview participants alike mentioned Te Kura Ngata-Aerengamate's post (see appendix B) regarding the severe decline in her mental health in and because of the Black Ferns (15s) environment (which is deeply connected to the 7s community) as extremely impactful in both validating their feelings around internal struggles. It was also seen as a pinnacle moment, triggering an entire review of the Black Ferns (15s) and ultimately transforming NZ Rugby into an environment more respectful of players' hauora:

[Te Kura's post] just highlighted that it's ok to speak up around issues like that [...] not just on social media but to people, just in conversation, or even just a text. And that it happens to the best of us, professional athletes too. We're also just a normal person – Anonymous*

Hence, by nature of being an anomaly in the Insta-sphere, posts regarding mental health can be particularly impactful.

Importantly, as this section's whakatauki clarifies, mental health has particular significance in Māori culture. It argues that words have impact, and that mental health is part of hauora.

Subsequently, as a team guided by tikanga and mātauranga Māori, mental health is part of personal hauora in the Black Ferns 7s team culture. Through its significance in the team, mental health and wellbeing are able to shine through as an important theme in the Instagram accounts of predominantly senior players who have developed a level of comfort with vulnerability in their digital self-presentations. Therefore, as noted by Ferguson et al. (2019), it is important to understand how Indigenous people and athletes within the sporting world define wellbeing, as it has been documented to incorporate more than simply “performing well in [one’s] sport” (Ferguson et al., 2019). In Ruru’s (2017) study of Māori women’s perspectives of leadership and wellbeing, definitions of *waiora* (wellbeing, like hauora) included conceptions of *hūmarie* (humility), collectivism, being connected to others, and work-life balance (i.e. “life outside rugby”). Specifically in the world of women’s rugby in Aotearoa, wellbeing and happiness have been noted as imperatives in the ability to succeed and perform well. This was noted by Black Ferns coach Wayne Smith in an interview following their World Cup victory:

“The All Blacks, the men, need to play well to be able to be happy and enjoy life. The Black Ferns, the women, need to be happy and enjoying life to be able to play well.” – Wayne Smith (Julian, 2022, para.14)

This does a tremendous job of advocating not only for a hauora approach to women’s rugby, but for an entirely unique approach to women’s rugby in comparison to men’s rugby overall. It highlights the value of hauora in team sport in Aotearoa, and points toward a holistic inherently local definition of wellbeing in sport. Such definitions are integrated into BF7s team culture, and subsequently the content they choose to share online.

During the group discussions, mental health stood out as an appreciated topic discussed by Black Ferns players online in its ability to validate community members’ feelings and experiences. It instilled a sense of comfort in those experiencing their own struggles, and provided ways in which community members could connect more deeply with BF7s players they followed online, beyond

solely rugby, and involving elements of the mind, body, and spirit as well. Mental health-related content was also perceived as atypical in the Instagram space. Some community members found professional sportswomen's revelations of mental or physical struggles as motivating:

[knowing] that training's not always easy and they have setbacks in life, and that it's not all just wake up, go get through the day real easy. Like they face a lot of challenges that are mentally hard and physically hard for them to face. And like there will be times where they feel like they just can't do it [...] And then they let everyone know that as well so that we don't think it's unnormal for us to feel like we're real tired and can't get through anything – Anonymous

The above quote also clarifies that sharing the hardships associated with being a professional athlete validates the struggles felt by players at the grassroots and club-levels of rugby, who are aspiring to further pursue their sport.

This reveals the ability for vulnerability on Instagram to facilitate overcoming feelings of perceived abnormality or loneliness, as was explored by Wenig and Janetzke (2022) in their study of eating disorder recovery accounts on Instagram. The quote utilized in the title of their study, "That you just know you're not alone and other people have gone through it too" (Wenig & Janetzke, 2022), articulates this ability very clearly and echoes the statement from Anonymous above. Group interview participants felt supported through the publicization of these difficult experiences, as it validated their own struggles, and decreased feelings of isolation and abnormality in those experiences:

"[it] makes you feel normal too. It's real life, it's reality, it's just what everyone's like. It's not like you get to a certain level then everything gets easy" – Anonymous

As hinted above, vulnerability as it pertains to mental health or other struggles also serves to depict these players as "normal people", distancing BF7s players from their celebrity status, and grounding them in a relatable ("real life") environment. This relatability is particularly important for developing an authentic online image, as existing literature suggests. Reade (2021) considered how Australian women on Instagram used features like raw and unedited visuals (like those mentioned in Chapter

5.4) and “real talk” regarding mental health were able to cultivate digital intimacies between Instagram users. Likewise, Atiq et al. (2022) found that relatability was a significant determinant in an audience’s engagement with content and other Instagram users. This summarizes the (unvoiced) strategies utilized by BF7s players and discussed in this and the previous section, namely the posting of unedited story-like videos and mental health-related content for relatability and subsequently heightened engagement.

In the discussions of mental health in the group and individual interviews, Ruby Tui was named as a positive force in opening up conversations around mental struggles:

Ruby Tui[‘s] posts around mental health, I think her posts are really important. [...] for them [BF7s players] sharing their struggles is a lot of vulnerability, but it also shows that they’re people as well – Candy Floss*

This again draws attention to the relatability generated by vulnerable mental health-related content, and simultaneously highlights the vulnerability players must be comfortable with in order to share these struggles in order to utilize vulnerability for its connective potential, recognized by Schwartz (2022). The range of “culture & vulnerability” posts shared by players (between 5% and 33% of all posts), demonstrates that this (dis)comfort with being vulnerable ranges significantly between individuals.

The reality for BF7s players is that their success accrues them increased visibility in public and online, and this increased visibility is often accompanied by heightened degrees of vulnerability (Toffoletti, Thorpe, et al., 2021). Duffy and Hund (2019) refer to this inextricable relationship between visibility and vulnerability as the “authenticity bind”, which both they and Pocock and Skey (2022) describe as mitigatable through establishing appropriate distance from followers and walking the line between visibility and vulnerability, reminiscent of the “filtering strategies” described by athletes in Toffoletti et al.’s (2021) study. In the context of Aotearoa, this refers to being vulnerable enough to remain relatable and authentic, but still maintaining a degree of safety through adhering to the strategies and regulations described thus far in the external layer of factors which influence

posting habits. As will be further revealed in this chapter, this layer does not just include organization-level regulations, but cultural expectations as well.

With specific regard to rugby, vulnerability presents two particular forms of contrast. It can be seen as a form of feminist resistance (Schwartz, 2022) to the hypermasculinity associated with rugby, and by extension, (women) rugby players, and as contradictory within the “happy” platform Instagram is seen to be (Freitas, 2017; Toffoletti, Thorpe, et al., 2021). Exercising vulnerability, like highlighting femininity, has been positioned as stereotypically “weak” in many societies (Schwartz, 2022), in stark contrast to the stereotypical strength and power associated with playing rugby. Similarly, being vulnerable to a large extent and exposing the negative aspects associated with being a professional sportswoman exists in stark contrast to the prestige associated with membership to the Black Ferns 7s team, or any national sports team. The values associated with being a member of the Black Ferns squad, which in itself is understood as an honour, impact and restrict social media usage. This perception, which echoes sentiments of gratitude, is eloquently summarized by Tiana*:

It’s important to represent your country, the values, the value base, the principles, why do you participate, you know friendship, social, whānau, love for the game, health [...] [that] positive healthy perspective has to be at the forefront of what social media perceives it (the team) to be

The perceived honour associated with membership to this particular team impacts digital self-representations of players.

Consequently, depictions of players’ lives as members of the team are often intentionally skewed toward the positive aspects of their participation and the benefits they receive by nature of this membership. Audiences perceived much of their content this way:

“The stuff they post is all real positive and goes towards improving the sport and supporting people to play” – Anonymous

This presents questions regarding the ramifications of these intentionally-positive depictions on members of the wider community and future generations of women's rugby players, who may therefore be exposed to a glamourized version of professional sportswomanhood in Aotearoa:

“[youngsters] come into the environment with an idea, and then they are challenged with the actual emotion of it. [...] so they're coping mechanism is challenged” – Tiana*

Therefore, we cannot underestimate the value of vulnerable posts which contradict this intentional-positivity, in accordance with the “happy” platform Instagram is anticipated to be, and work toward establishing realistic understandings of life as a professional women's rugby player in Aotearoa. Sharing vulnerable content regarding the struggles of professional sportswomanhood works to combat potential false perceptions:

for a youngster [...] you learn artificially what that [being a Black Fern] would feel like as opposed to experiencing it physically or spiritually. So what social media and tech has done is take away the emotional intelligence; connections become artificial or idealistic. – Tiana*

Many players may be conditioned to depict their sporting lives in a manner intentionally skewed toward positivity, whether that is from a place of gratitude, humility, or by nature of being a new player in an environment regulated by *kaumātuatanga*. However, the “pinnacle moments” of extreme vulnerability regarding mental health and *hauora* work to improve the state of women's rugby in Aotearoa. This positively impacts perceptions of loneliness, heightens a sense of validation for community members facing struggles, and increases perceptions of BF7s athletes as authentic.

- The impact of *hauora* in generating impactful anomalies (“pinnacle moments”) on Instagram

This builds a culturally appropriate and appreciated digital persona, which is clearly impacted by the role of *tikanga* in the BF7s team dynamics in the themes they post on Instagram. As such, a player does not need to be Indigenous in order to be impacted by these practices, by nature of their involvement in a team guided by *mātauranga Māori*.

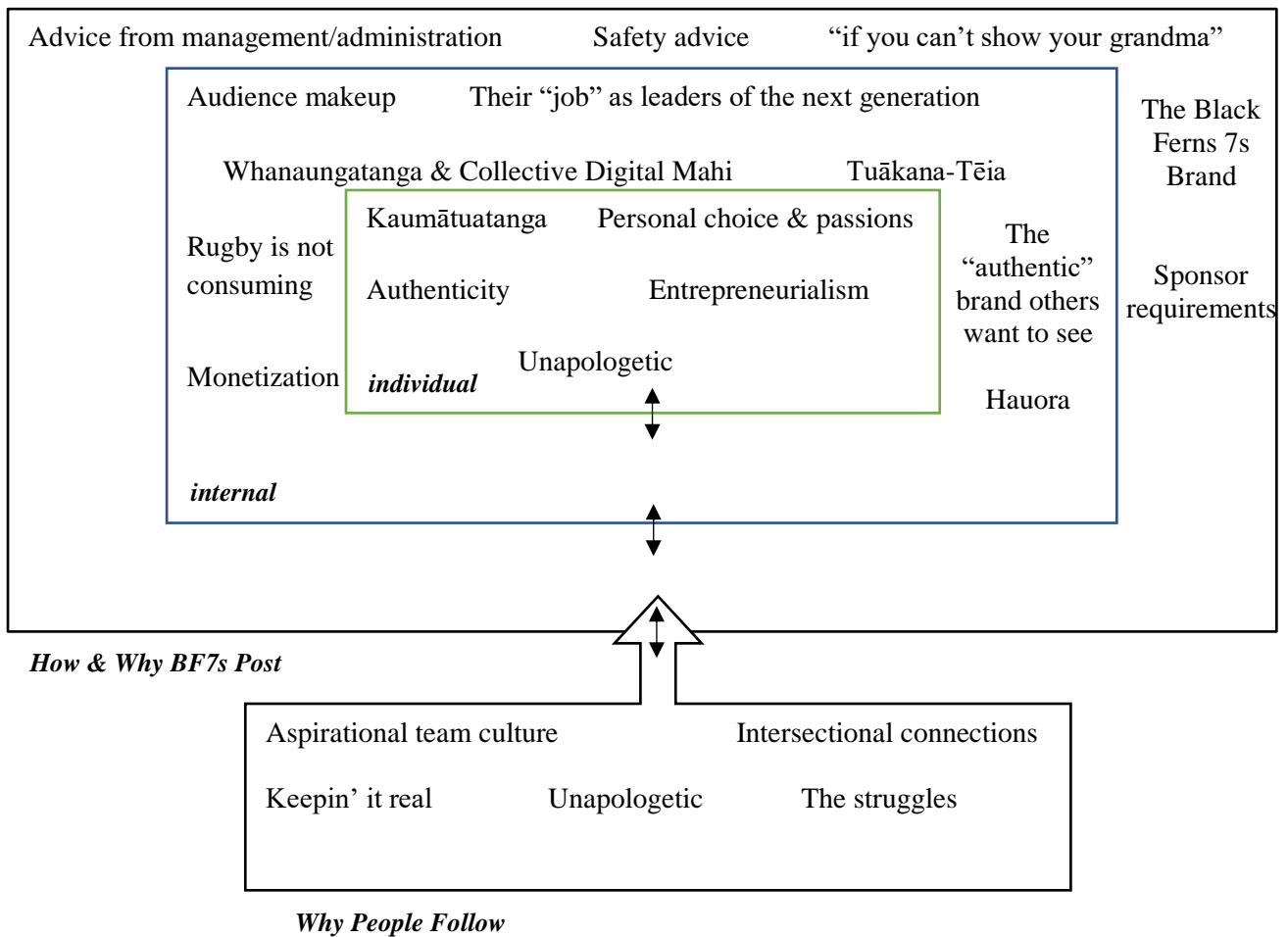


Figure 27: Layers of impacts on Instagram usage within all Chapter 5, 6.1, and 6.2 themes

3. *Kāore te kūmara e kōrero mō tōna reka*

The kūmara (sweet potato) does not speak of its sweetness: Humility, Tall Poppy Syndrome, & the Need to Achieve

This well-known and widely-used whakatauki is indicative of the humility and modesty ingrained into Māori culture, holding these virtues up as cultural expectations in Aotearoa (Palmer & Masters, 2010). This need to be humble shapes how BF7s athletes self-represent. This section begins with contextualizing the development of vulnerability over time in the public posts and statements of BF7s athletes. It then explores how newer and younger BF7s athletes feel a “need to achieve” within

their team, incorporating understandings of both kaumātuaanga and humility, and demonstrating the role of the collective as a mitigating factor in being a Tall Poppy target.

Although humility has been demonstrated to be unique to collectivist cultures like Māori and Pasifika cultures (Meissel & Rubie-Davies, 2016), humility has become more widely embedded into New Zealand-wide culture and expectations. Specifically, New Zealand culture has developed to hold repercussions for deviations from such expectations, referred to as Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS), the act of “cutting down” successful people. Pierce et al. (2017) studied this phenomenon in the context of Aotearoa, and how it was perceived by 20 professional NZ athletes. The athletes interviewed felt TPS was infused into NZ society and impacted how the public viewed and celebrated success. Indeed, discussions regarding seemingly carefree approaches to Instagram usage and not taking oneself too seriously online in order to embody an authentic image already points toward how TPS and humility shape self-presentation of BF7s athletes on Instagram. Furthermore, for one of the winningest sevens teams in the world, it is of the utmost importance that these athletes therefore present those successes, achievements, and victories in particularly humble fashions.

In the early days of women’s rugby in Aotearoa, humility, as well as gratitude, meant players dealt with what they were handed (G. Paul, personal communication, July 14 2022) from society, from NZ Rugby, and from the IRB (now World Rugby), amongst other sources. Tiana* explains how this humility shaped public self-presentations of athletes in the dawn of the BF7s programme:

I think at that time too we were [...] not vulnerable enough to go out on a limb and talk politically about things that were affecting [us] or that we had direct impact on. We just [were] grateful to be in the position we were in and didn’t want to do anything around severing anything in our profile. You [...] just jumped into it, you said “yes sir” and just got on with it.

This sentiment has been found in women who play contact sports. Pavlidis (2020) found that women who played in the Australian Football League (AFLW) were extremely grateful to play contact sport specifically in a paid professional capacity, and echoed similar statements of simply being happy to

be able to play. Furthermore, like in Pavlidis's (2020) study, interview participants frequently reiterated feelings of gratitude and humility throughout my engagement with the research process, once again reinforcing the existence of such emotions amongst the women interviewed. This gratitude, however, limited players in their capacity to speak out in that it worked to silence critiques of their structures and systems in the AFLW (Pavlidis, 2020). Similar dynamics are evidently at work in Tiana's above quote.

Within this context, it is clear that the aforementioned "pinnacle moments" which contributed to transforming the women's rugby landscape in Aotearoa not only stand out due to their stark contrast with the overly-positive characterization of Instagram: they also stand out because they are a hard departure from the humility and gratitude expected of women athletes and of New Zealand society. With the exception of a select few who have developed the confidence to advocate for these changes on behalf of the women's rugby community in Aotearoa, the vast majority of players do not and will not voice their concerns, undoubtedly for a number of factors, but with humility and gratitude certainly being two of them.

Whilst pinnacle moments and departures from the typically-humble and grateful discourse NZ women's rugby players engage with have helped refine and grow the team culture and environment over time, individual growth was also demonstrated to have a connection with humility and knowing oneself. This was directly linked to confidence in posting vulnerable content online:

I'm still trying to figure out who I am, my values, my core values, what I am – what my purpose is I guess. And I think I'm trying to figure that out and be more confident I guess to push my message out. - Anonymous*

This individual growth, which takes place as a player spends more time with the squad, contributes to their digital authenticity. It also contributes to the confidence required to be vulnerable in public digital spaces, another intra-team difference between players based on seniority and experience with the team. Quantitatively, younger players demonstrated apprehension with regard to posting non-

rugby related content, cultural content, and vulnerable content, but this changed as time with the team increased. This was confirmed in the interviews:

I will go on there eventually, but I'm so [focused on] myself, cause social media can make you quite vulnerable as a person, and then you're always thinking and always care what people think of you when you post something? And that's another thing. When you get to that point when you don't care what people think, that's, you know [gesture for "sweet", "good"] – Candy Floss*

This acknowledges that comfort with vulnerability comes with time and experience (“when you get to that point”) that this particular player does not feel like they possess yet. Furthermore, by nature of being a younger and newer player, they are less likely to have garnered the same level of visibility as senior members of the squad have, consequently granting them an exemption, at least temporarily, from the “authenticity bind” (Duffy & Hund, 2019). This excuses younger players from needing to navigate appropriate distance between visibility and vulnerability (Pocock & Skey, 2022; Toffoletti, Thorpe, et al., 2021) prior to developing confidence, experience, and a clear digital voice.

In feeling the need to prove themselves, younger players are also humble regarding their skills and status. In growing her confidence to portray herself more authentically online, Anonymous* explained her motivations behind delivering more culturally authentic content, following time she spent getting to know her own culture better:

Cause I [didn't] really realize how much of an impact you can – a Polynesian girl can have – on all these Poly kids. All - Poly, Maori, I don't know - kids coming through [...] I don't realize how much of an impact I can have on kids – or people.

Once again, the role of the imagined audience demonstrates an important motivator in the production of culturally authentic content for the “next generation” “coming through”. It was clear throughout the interviews, however, that this motivation driven by their imagined audiences was required,

amongst other factors, to overcome Tall Poppy Syndrome and generate self-confidence in younger and newer players seeking to establish themselves as a member of the BF7s squad.

Incorporating both quantitative tests and qualitative clarification regarding the hierarchical dynamics of the Black Ferns 7s squad helps explain the ways in which younger and newer players navigate the perceived need to earn certain rights and statuses in the team. Younger and newer players demonstrate a respect for senior players which encourages humility:

those girls [the senior players] are the first girls to be professional [...] they learned everything along the way, whereas like we've kinda hit it when it's professional [...] they had to do all those extra trainings, they didn't get paid for it [...] they had to pay their own petrol and everything [...]. the girls that have set the platform before us. – Candy Floss*

This summarizes the feelings which came across in the interview process, and provides further clarity on the causal aspect of this relationship between thematic content on Instagram and seniority that the qualitative tests could not determine. That is, there exists a perceived need to earn their place both in the team and in digital environments. This is in part out of respect for the senior players who had to complete a significant amount of work in the earlier stages of women's rugby professionalization in Aotearoa, including various “pinnacle moments”, and in part due to the sense of humility and near-guilt this places upon upcoming players entering a professionalized version of the game from the beginning, avoiding the additional labour senior players have undergone. In many ways, this is reflective of a sense of imposter syndrome amongst newcomers to the Black Ferns 7s environment, which has been found to impact gifted and talented young girls who achieve success, but do not attribute that success to external factors as opposed to their ability or skill (Gaerlan-Price et al., 2021):

I'm very low-key, I think just because I do a lot of things behind closed doors, because I feel like I haven't quite cracked it. But once you actually like, crack it, that's when I'll start showcasing all that hard work. – Candy Floss*

Here, we can see that despite achieving a place on the best women's 7s team in the world, this player has yet to feel like they have earned that place on the team ("haven't quite cracked it").

With regard to social media, this further includes the perceived right to post about certain themes. Quantitative results indicated that newer players in the Black Ferns 7s squad post at a statistically significant lower rate about "achievement" and "culture & vulnerability" than their more experienced counterparts. It was possible to therefore conclude that intra-team differences in social media usage can be partially attributed to the impact of internal team dynamics based on seniority. However, this hierarchical dynamic acknowledged by squad members is linked to culture via an Indigenous understanding of humility: younger and newer players posting less about achievement are doing so in accordance with expectations surrounding humility. This works to potentially shield themselves from becoming a Tall Poppy target prior to earning their perceived right or status as a BF7s player. One player articulated this cultural need to be humble very well:

I used to not enjoy sharing my rugby stuff, but I think that's just a culture thing [...] Just sort of... I don't know... It's not gloating or, kinda being... [gesture for showing off]. –

Anonymous*

This can be understood through Pierce et al.'s (2017) explanation: flaunting success or achievements consequently attracts online harassment and "envious notice", as not being a "show off" has been found to be well embedded in New Zealand culture, and other former colonies, since the nineteenth century (Phillips, 1996).

This same perception was evident in the discussions with Candy Floss*, who posted in a manner which avoided attracting attention to her individual skills and achievements:

Ah I'm not really a player to talk about myself, I can't talk about myself [...] it just doesn't feel right. Because you know you're doing really well but you don't need to kinda tell people you're doing well.

This again alludes to a strong sense of humility in younger players, who feel like they have yet to earn their place and the subsequent right to share their achievements and (ongoing) success, alongside a tangible discomfort with online representations to be about self, particularly in a team-sport environment. Meissel and Rubie-Davies (2016) found similar discomfort amongst Māori and Pasifika students in Aotearoa. They detailed that, within collectivist cultures, perceptions of boasting were considered shameful whilst humility was valued. Although humility may be unique to Māori and Pasifika (collectivist) cultures in Aotearoa, it is still valued across New Zealand, but in a manner that is more reminiscent of Tall Poppy Syndrome (Meissel & Rubie-Davies, 2016; Pierce et al., 2017). That is to say, where humility is a cultural expectation and tenet of Māori and Pasifika culture(s), Tall Poppy Syndrome underscores the societal backlash and consequences of not exercising that humility across Aotearoa.

This begs the question: if posting about achievement potentially begets significant amounts of digital backlash, then why do it? As has already been made clear, even if posting about the self online can generate feelings of discomfort amongst players, there exist benefits such as inspiring the next generation of possibilities for financial gain. Furthermore, Ferguson et al. (2019) considered this in her study of what Indigenous sportswomen require to flourish in sport, and named “humble recognition” as a facilitating component: “being recognized or acknowledged in sport supports or reaffirms that one is flourishing” (Ferguson et al., 2019., p.11). This recognition, which proves to both others and to oneself an individual’s place in sport is what “achievement” posts allow room for. Social media allows for this exchange to take place. It generates opportunities for external validation and recognition which may prove to an athlete, and particularly younger, less experienced players, that they have earned their place in their squad and are indeed flourishing in their sport. Like the examples discussed above, Ferguson et al. (2019) reiterates that Indigenous athletes are reserved about their accolades and recognition, and go about acknowledging that attention in a very humble

manner. In the BF7s environment, this included mitigation strategies which became evident through the interview process.

The analyses were able to pinpoint two strategies in particular used by BF7s athletes acknowledging their accolades on Instagram by sharing “achievement” posts. The first strategy points to the collective identity of BF7s players (“I can’t talk about myself”), and by Māori and Pasifika cultures in general (Meissel & Rubie-Davies, 2016). Players do not post about their achievements often (19.6% of the sample, the smallest thematic group), and when they do, it is predominantly done in the context of *collective* achievement, including posting team images or images referring to the nation (i.e. holding a flag). This could be considered in Dayter (2014) and Matley’s (2018) terms as focus shifting: in shifting the focus of the post from the (success of) the individual to that of an entire group, the portrayal of success or achievement is less “face threatening”, and protects the user from backlash. A clear example of this strategy at work was posted by Stacey Fluhler upon winning Try of the Year, visible in figure 28, whereby she gave credit to her teammates for her award, additionally posting the video to her story with the caption “Team effort always” (Stacey Fluhler, 2022). This clarifies the use of humility, focus shifting, team culture, and collectivist Māori culture as mitigating factors in sharing “achievement” content to avoid being a TPS target.



Figure 28: Stacey Fluhler thanking her team for her Try of the Year award (available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C17clPPPUjC/>)

Likewise, posts regarding achievement were most often accompanied by gratitude, sarcasm, and/or self-deprecating humour in their captions. The quantitative analysis revealed that all 22 “achievement” posts expressed either gratitude or surprise toward their achievement, with phrases such as “I never thought/expected” in the caption. Evidence of these traits are also present in visual content, including the use of a humorous image such as Figure 29, or utilizing comical videos or TikToks, which appeal to perceptions of authenticity. 22.7% of “achievement” posts were indeed videos. This humorous self-denigration has been established as a mitigation strategy for posts considered as self-praise (like “achievement” posts can be), in order to help avoid digital backlash (Dayter, 2014).

We can therefore understand these two strategies, celebrating the achievements of a collective (focus shifting) and accompanying achievement-related content with humour, sarcasm, and self-deprecating humour (self-denigration), as two ways in which BF7s players mitigate the possibility of becoming a “Tall Poppy target” (Pierce et al., 2017) and facing online backlash. These strategies facilitate players to continue to appear humble despite their achievements. This humility, therefore, is vital to establishing “authenticity” that resonates with audiences in the context of Aotearoa, and in the context of Tall Poppy Syndrome, can be understood as an external-layer cultural factor which influences and frames players’ posts.



Figure 29: Sarah Hirini's post of her broken nose following their silver medal at the Vancouver 7s (available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CdDV_NGrcYW/?hl=en)

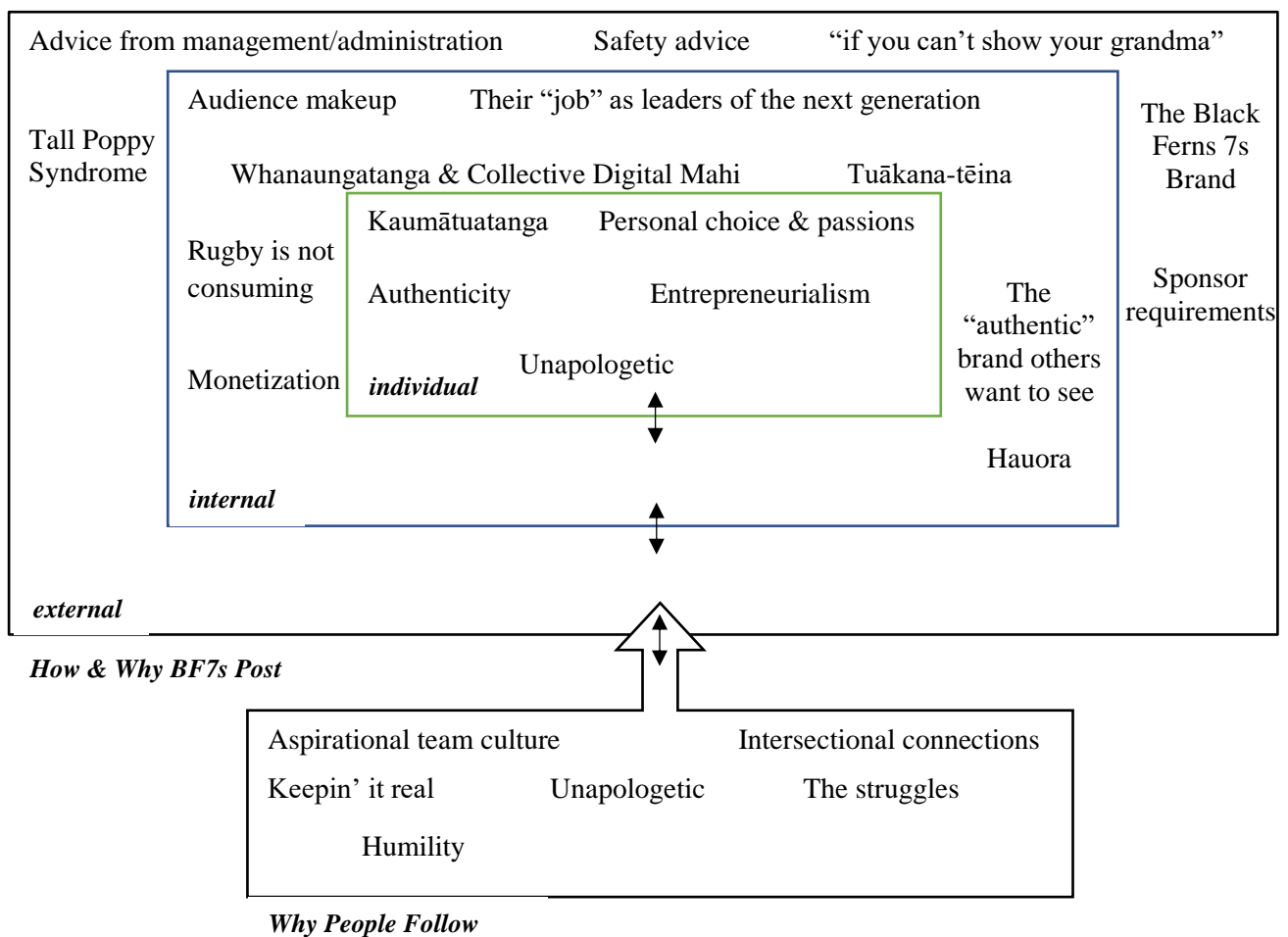


Figure 30: Layers of impacts on Instagram usage within in all Chapter 5, 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3 themes

4. Mā mua ka kite a muri, mā muri ka ora a mua

Those who lead give sight to those who follow, those who follow give life to those who lead: the importance of role models

These sections have allowed us to understand multiple aspects which constitute who these players are online, what shapes those depictions, and what audiences like to see in the context of Aotearoa. It is through discussions surrounding these three factors that we are able to understand how these athletes turn into role models, and how or why, if at all, community members select these role models for themselves. Understanding who a player is through what they choose to share on Instagram with their audiences about their team dynamics, their lives outside of rugby, their economic ventures, their mental health, and their ability to remain grounded despite their success, develop a player's image beyond just a rugby player, and into a potential role model to be selected by "the next generation" of players in Aotearoa.

Sporting role models (SRMs) set examples through demonstrations of attitudes and behaviours which inspire others, and are one factor which influences participation rates in sport (Stronach et al., 2022). Although previous research critiques evidence of the inspirational impact of role models as overwhelmingly anecdotal, this mana wāhine study seeks to highlight and acknowledge the value in these anecdotes as experiential knowledge. The value of high-profile SRMs has been acknowledged as important by many researchers in the context of sportswomen and Indigenous women in particular (Meier, 2015; Midgley et al., 2021; Stronach et al., 2016, 2019, 2022). Specifically, SRMs have been found to be unlikely to encourage individuals to take up a new sport, but rather are most valuable in retaining athletes and encouraging further pursuance of their sport at higher levels (De Croock et al., 2012). This was reinforced by the findings in this study, whereby participants did not see SRMs as part of why they began to play their sport, but rather used them as motivations to continue playing, improve their skills, and build their confidence.

The literature review highlighted the value of same-gender and same-race SRMs for athletes, but the process of role model selection for athletes in specifically Aotearoa was highlighted in the group interviews. In this cultural context, role model selection required establishing multidimensional connections, through the mind, body, and spirit, particularly in Indigenous contexts. Tayla, a Māori-Samoan club rugby player, explained how promoting mental health awareness through digital content contributed to pathways through which people could generate spiritual and mental connections with one another and with their potential role models. This increased the depth at which interpersonal connections and relations could be established, which is of particular importance in Indigenous contexts and cultures:

[BF7s players are] influential, all big on mental health awareness [which is] definitely [important], cause like in my culture – Māori-Samoan – it’s huge in the culture to be in touch with everyone spiritually, physically, mentally.

Another player echoed these sentiments, clarifying that establishing deep interpersonal connections is vital for team sports, and as such, an integral part of the BF7s team environment and culture. As Instagram is a platform through which these players generate interpersonal connections with friends and fans, and connections with others and the “next generation” are “really important”, we can understand this as a factor which ultimately impacts their posting habits:

it’s not just rugby, it’s about the connections you make. Cause like, to be an amazing rugby player, you gotta be a really good person off the field, because you will never make it if you’re [not]. So, connections with people is really important. – Candy Floss*

In this sense, social media is arguably insufficient in generating the depth of interpersonal connections required to select a powerful role model, at least not when used independently. For instance, in discussing the initial formation of the Black Ferns 7s, Tiana* explained:

“Facebook had a sort of influence, but it wasn’t the ‘be-all-end-all’. It was tournaments. It was attending club tournaments, regional tournaments, you were face-to-face value at trainings.”

As such, we can see social media as necessary but not sufficient in the process of role model selection in Aotearoa, particularly for Indigenous athletes.

Simply being good at rugby was also often independently insufficient in selecting a role model, as was similarly found by Ferguson et al. (2019). Their study, which argues “It’s more than just performing well in your sport. It’s also about being healthy physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually” in its title, clarifies that skill is only part of the equation. It further reiterates that, in an Indigenous context, revelations of intersectional identities and connections via the mind, body, and spirit are required in the pursuit of hauora, and, in turn, the ability to be a good role model. However, there were some occasions when a sportswoman was followed online for reasons pertaining solely to sport, and then selected as an SRM on the basis of a deeper connection established thereafter:

I follow Valerie Adams. Not just because she’s the Valerie Adams, but because I actually do shot put and stuff as well, so I look up to her not just cause she’s good at it, but she’s like balancing a lot of stuff, and I feel like we also kind of start balancing a lot of stuff? So I kind of related with her because of shot put, but then seeing stuff on Instagram, seeing like “oh she’s going through other stuff as well, she’s just human as well. – Carlin

Some selected an SRM based on the specific position they played on the field, and their connection was thereafter deepened through personal interaction:

[I follow] Tyla Nathan Wong, because I look up to her a lot. Cause when I first started, for the Bay, she pulled me aside and did one on one trainings with me. And, like, taught me everything I know about halfback, cause that was one of my [positions]. – Anonymous

This was not the only example whereby SRMs were selected following an in-person interaction which strengthened their interpersonal connection. In one example, Hannah Montana followed certain players:

“because they played for the club [she played for, temporarily] as well, so we had that connection”

These interactions were often characterized by positivity and support, and served to kickstart a connection that subsequently developed into a role modelling situation:

I follow Michaela Blyde and Sarah Hirini cause I've played with them before and they're just real supportive, like they were there to help me if I need. And just the stuff they post is all real positive, and goes towards improving the sport and supporting people to play. – Anonymous

Anonymous*, a current player, described how one interaction with a now-BF7s teammate prior to her selection turned Anonymous* into a role model for that player:

One of the new girls in our team [...] sent me this really nice message on my birthday and she was like “[...] I just wanna thank you for inspiring me to be a rugby player”. [...] And I remember seeing [her] when she was like 15 at a tournament. And I was like “aw do you remember I came to your tournament?”. And she was like “yeah you gave me one of your rugby jerseys”.

These examples demonstrate how BF7s players provide a source of inspiration to younger players and community members, often after establishing an initial connection based on a plethora of reasons, and thereafter deepening that connection through the content shared on Instagram.

The inspirational potential of BF7s athletes can also exist on social media in the absence of in-person interaction, as voiced by a community member who grew up outside of Aotearoa:

“if I didn't see their [BF7s] posts I wouldn't have had anything to strive [for] or try and work for.” – Carlin

This player grew up in another country where women's rugby was not a popular sport, and as such, had virtually no professional women rugby players in her immediate surroundings, providing no sport-specific gender-specific role models for her. Professional women's rugby was not a visible livelihood. This clarifies that the content shared on Instagram, depicting the

lives and achievements of BF7s players both on and off the field, serve as aspirational and motivational for young female athletes, reinforcing the common conception that “you can’t be it if you can’t see it” (Anstiss, 2020; De Croock et al., 2012; Stronach et al., 2022).

This example also brings to light the importance of gender-specific SRMs. Both the individual and group interviews acknowledged that having women rugby role models was important for women rugby players:

“for us as girls, it’s important to be inspired by someone” – Candy Floss*

There was an understanding that being a female rugby player, and particularly one that is aspiring to be a professional, is unique to being a male one, and that the experiences are inherently different. When asked about this specific difference, demonstrations of sport as a job for women were particularly prominent:

[it’s important to see professional female players] cause this can be your job one day! And we haven’t had that opportunity before because that’s all been given to the boys, but [...] rugby can be your job. – Candy Floss*

I think it’s important that sportswomen post on social media so other girls and women have an example as well. [...] it’s good for the younger generation [...] to have a good example for what your future can be and what your job can be as well. So just to see that as a little girl can be really inspiring. It’s good to have examples like that on social media, not only to have men examples, but also women. – Lisa

Being cognizant of this gender-based difference clarifies why community members were predominantly selecting women SRMs in rugby as opposed to male ones. When coaching female players, Tiana* summarized the feelings present in the group interviews, that:

“If you don’t know how to emotionally grab them [female players], you’re not gonna get any sort of momentum”

Likewise, community members reinforced that:

“for us we wanna understand like, why” – Hannah Montana

These sentiments remain true in explaining what young female audiences follow online and who they choose as role models: audiences are able to make deeper connections with SRMs who make their lives and careers visible online and who “emotionally grab” audiences through inclusions and depictions of their “whys” (i.e. their motivations and behind the scenes work). Whilst players did not initially build their Instagram profiles intentionally as role models, the aforementioned acute awareness of their (imagined) audience transformed their perspective and self-identification to include a role model status, through “knowing” that young girls and the “next generation” are watching their content.

In being humble, players voiced that they were initially reluctant to recognize and embrace their role model status, which may be due to the reality that being a role model is not easy. In their study of sportswomen and social media, Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce (2017) uncovered narratives which highlighted the pressures associated with acting as a role-model in a digital space as a woman athlete, as articulated by Alana Blanchard. My interviews with BF7s players uncovered a similar narrative:

Cause you can portray yourself as a person, but at the same time you’re a Black Fern, [...]

You’re a professional athlete where people look up to you, and they watch everything you do, and all these young girls coming through... Like, say I go out to town and I post it on my Instagram. Then it makes it sort of ok for girls to be like “oh she does this, so I should be able to do it. – Anonymous*

This further clarifies how a player’s role model status precludes the sharing of some types of personal content and limits their digital portrayals.

This perspective also signals that players' role model status is embedded in their collective identity as a Black Fern, acknowledging that the team brand leverages the power to turn individuals into role models. This was clarified by another player, who felt that:

“no one will really look up to it if you haven't quite made it yet” – Candy Floss*

This is indicative of a perception that success is required in order to establish oneself as a role model, which sheds further light upon another reason why newer and younger are reluctant to recognize and embrace their role model status, beyond solely the difficulty associated with the role. If the sharing of “achievement” posts is dependent on time with the squad, and achievement is required in order to present oneself as a role model, then newer and younger players will generally struggle to portray themselves as role models.

Players who do feel comfortable acknowledging and exercising their role-model status described the role as gratifying and fulfilling:

[when a younger player said I inspired her to play] I honestly just had a wave of emotion flow through me cause I was like ‘this is why you play and this is why you do it’. [...] its why I love doing this. And [...] winning is a bonus to that kind of stuff now, because you're helping the next generation come through. – Anonymous*

This again clarifies an intention by BF7s players to guide and inspire young aspiring rugby talent in Aotearoa. This is carried through their digital self-presentations on Instagram, whereby this fulfilling status shapes their online portrayals significantly and motivates the maintenance of their digital image, even when the digital labour takes considerable time, energy, consideration, and risk.

Acknowledging their role model status for this particular demographic shapes BF7s players' posting habits, filtering processes, and digital conduct so as to ensure they feel as though they are providing the “next generation” with appropriate guidance, motivation, and inspiration from within their own culture.

This repeated idea of the “next generation” continues to shape the self-presentation of BF7s athletes online, and whilst the discussion of gender-specific SRMs is important, and group interview participants notably only mentioned women SRMs in our discussions, culturally-specific SRMs are also particularly important with regard to this theme. Like Carlin, current player Niall Williams expressed her admiration for Valerie Adams on a primarily-cultural basis in her Instagram story, writing:

You don't know the impact you've had on my life, on and off field @valerieadams84. Being a strong Polynesian woman who has been at the top of your game for so many years and doing it so gracefully yet so powerfully at the same time has been inspiring. [...] Thank you for everything you have done for our people and all us mum/athletes out here.

Williams is highlighting the importance of visibility when it comes to Indigenous and Pasifika SRMs, whilst being named by participants in this study as a role model herself, and reiterating findings which Stronach et al. (2022) uncovered in their study of Indigenous sportswomen as powerful role models.

Stronach et al. (2022), and the narratives highlighted by Aboriginal athlete Lydia Williams emphasized the cross-generational power of Indigenous female SRMs and the impact of their visibility for young Indigenous sportswomen. It is particularly in this relationship between young women Indigenous athletes and Indigenous women SRMs that the “next generation” is of heightened importance, and this was further engaged with in the group interviews:

to see women, Maori, mana wāhine, really proud of themselves and showing a good example for our kids that wanna come up [through rugby], cause that's what Maori culture's all about, it's all about the next generation for us. – Hannah Montana

Hence, it is clear that the value placed on the “next generation” by BF7s players in their conduct, actions, and Instagram self-presentations is engrained in a Pan-Pacific Indigenous

cultural practice which highlights the importance of *whakapapa* (genealogy), *whānau*, and *rangatahi* (youth).

Both Niall Williams and Lydia Williams reference the ground-breaking and trailblazing attributes of their Indigenous women SRMs. This can also apply to BF7s players, whose role model statuses involve breaking barriers and blazing trails, leading the charge for the women and girls who are following them. This takes place not only in Aotearoa's women's rugby space, but importantly online as well. When asked about certain themes her and her teammates share about on Instagram, Anonymous* emphasized, amongst other topics:

“I think for everyone in our team [it's] like, women breaking barriers.”

This was reiterated by Tiana when asked about her favourite image that she has posted on her Instagram profile. She pointed out one of her refereeing a National Provincial Championship match, the second-highest domestic men's rugby competition in Aotearoa. When asked why it was her favourite, Tiana* responded:

“Just for the fact that it's a female at that level”

Displaying this trailblazing achievement on Instagram for purposes of visibility was important to her. It represented the “real inequality of respect of a female referee at that level” Tiana felt in that environment, but despite being met with resistance, was still pinpointed as a pivotal moment in her professional career, and the chance to show and share a female at that level for others to see.

Like Te Kura Ngata-Aerengamate's post, Ruby Tui's posts, Portia Woodman's interview, and a plethora of other examples, these trailblazing acts, which require vulnerability, are found by players and community members to be inspiring:

what they [senior players] all have in common is [that they] at one point have had to have had courage, to just speak up [...] Which inspires me. When I see things like that still now, being X

years in, they still inspire me to be courageous, on and off the field, on social media too. –

Anonymous*

This further demonstrates that the BF7s internal team dynamics include acts of role modelling between and from one another, and moments of vulnerability from senior players inspire similar actions from younger players in the long run. In other words, role models need role models too.

This relationship between SRMs and those who select them is reciprocal: SRMs provide inspiration to those who follow them, and those who follow them provide SRMs with motivation to act and post in accordance with certain expectations and realities, including culturally-specific ones. Thus, at the internal level, we can identify role model status as an important factor which influences posting habits.

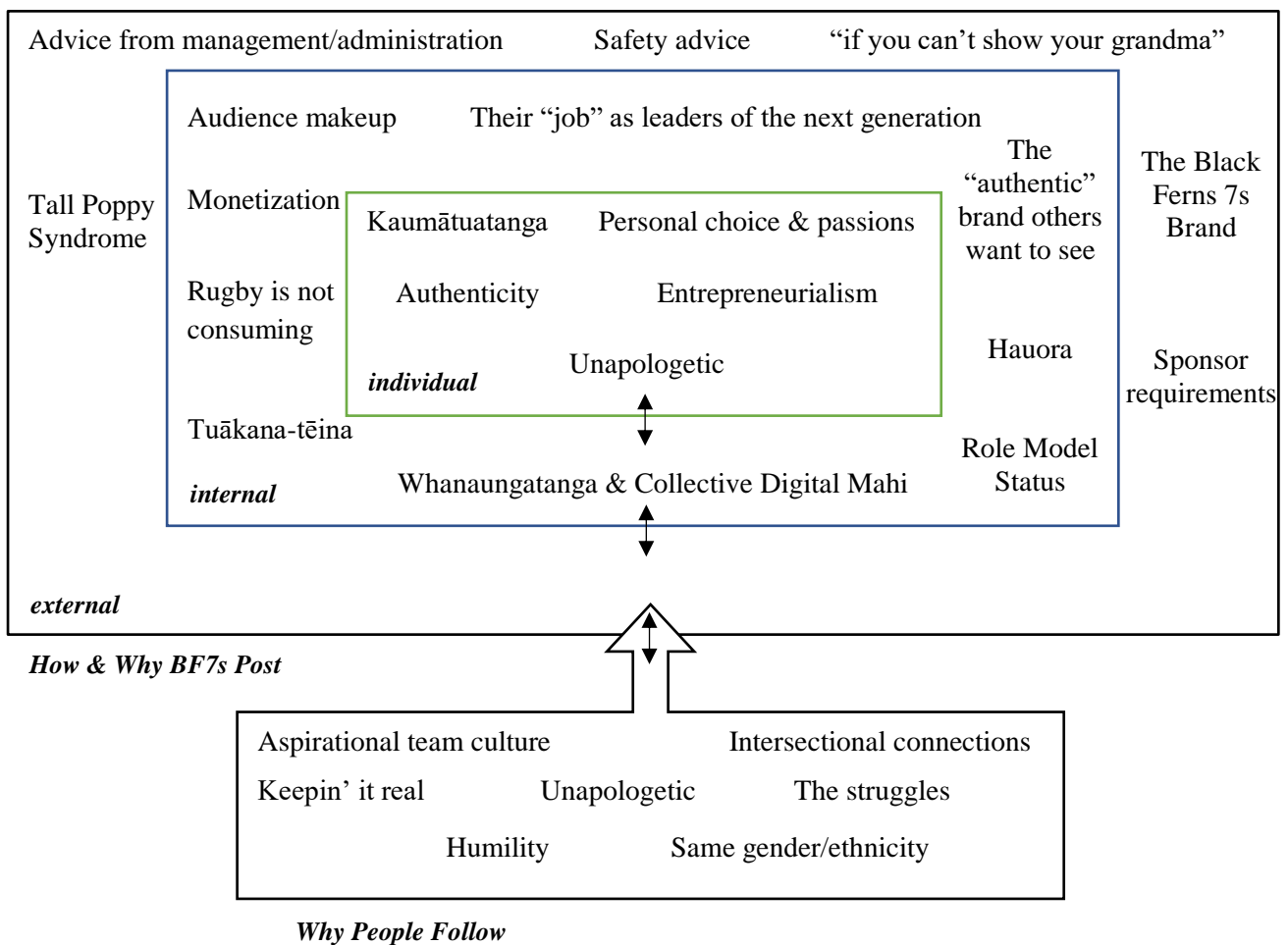


Figure 31: Layers of impacts on Instagram usage within all Chapter 5 and 6 themes

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored four powerful themes that emerged from the discussions, which influence why members of the wider women's rugby community follow BF7s players online and how those players digitally self-represent. Namely, the cultural and interpersonal importance of mental health and hauora, Tall Poppy Syndrome and humility, and the reciprocal relationship of women SRMs with their followers are features arguably unique to Aotearoa. These elements guide and shape BF7s athletes' Instagram practices, engagement from their audience, and the relationship between players and their followers. Inherently Indigenous and Māori values were observed across the players' accounts and the group interview discussions, despite the multiethnic demographics of the participants in the data. This illustrates the significance of Te Ao Māori in both the Black Ferns 7s team culture and in the wider women's rugby community in the Bay of Plenty, which subsequently shapes their online practices and the values upheld by community members. Further to this, the significance of culturally specific female Indigenous SRMs was highlighted by community members and existing Black Ferns 7s players: it served to motivate role model selection, and also worked to shape culturally appropriate role models online.

Sharing mental health struggles was found to validate the struggles felt by younger aspiring athletes, and served as motivation for others in the women's rugby community. Highlighting mental health is likely a product of the tikanga which guides the BF7s team, and the role of mental health in overall wellbeing or hauora for players in this team. These vulnerable posts, which stood out due to their contrast to the "happy" content on Instagram, worked to transform women's rugby in Aotearoa, and provoke strong emotional responses from audience members, who regarded these athletes as more authentic and relatable by nature of their vulnerability.

Although humility is specific to Māori and Pasifika culture, Tall Poppy Syndrome is a nationwide cultural factor which substantially shapes both digital self-presentation and public reactions to content posted by celebrity athletes in Aotearoa. It has made it so any celebrations of achievement or

success require mitigation in the form of humour, gratitude, or sarcasm in order to be publicly palatable, and in order to protect athletes from becoming Tall Poppy targets.

In establishing themselves as humble, thankful, and culturally proud sportswomen, these athletes become SRMs for members of the wider community (and beyond), who are inspired by their actions, and, in turn, provide BF7s players with motivation and shape their posting habits. These are the powerful cultural aspects which influence posting habits and audience engagement which are largely unspoken, but guide player and community practices nonetheless.

Chapter 7: He Kōrero Whakakapi

This chapter will conclude this study by firstly contextualizing the applications of its findings. This serves to establish the timeliness of this research and highlight its ability to impact the new wave of support for women's rugby in Aotearoa following a period of significantly increased investment. It will then summarize the key findings in relation to the aims of the thesis, as well as the value and contribution to international literature. It will then review the limitations of the study, and subsequently propose opportunities to build upon these findings for further research at the intersection of experiences of women in rugby, sportswomen on social media, and Indigenous experiences with and influences upon social media usage.

Reflexivity & Research Potential

Reflexivity and reflection balanced my “insider” status as the researcher in this study. The critical feminist methods and methodologies which sought to emphasize the voices and lived experiences of the participants impacted decisions such as utilizing the participants' own language in describing factors which influenced their digital practices (e.g. “keeping it real” and “next generation”). Many of the findings encouraged me to identify and challenge some of my own assumptions and reflections, not only of the data collected, but of my own identity, and how that has been impacted so silently yet so profoundly by the cultural contexts which have surrounded me during my international upbringing. Prior to this study, I had lived and studied around the world, and most of my past research experience was in positivistic and quantitative approaches. This study thus forced me to unpack my prior apprehension toward qualitative research, and allow my identity as a woman to be salient in my research, namely by educating myself on feminist research. It was already clear to me, through my nomadic childhood, that lived experiences are not universal, but rather contextually specific; conducting feminist Indigenous research meant I learned to embrace the existence of this dissonance in datasets not as a flaw of my research design, but as an important reminder of the diversity of experiential knowledge as rich, insightful qualitative data. In this sense,

unpacking and analyzing this data was a challenge for me, but one that has truly transformed my academic identity.

There have been significant developments coupled with exponential growth in women's rugby throughout the last decade, in Aotearoa and globally. The players analyzed in this study are trailblazers providing representations of professional sportswomenhood (specifically in rugby) with an unprecedented amount of visibility, through the amplification that social media generates for its users. These players' success, pride, and intersectional identities transcend cultural boundaries, inspiring diverse groups of people across the Bay of Plenty women's rugby community and further afield, to places where girls like me (and participant Carlin) grew up chasing what was locally invisible. Social media is the avenue through which the "next generation" are afforded this visibility, which has been demonstrated to have motivational, comforting, and empowering impacts. Women's inclusion in sport, and the increased visibility of that inclusion enabled by social media, challenges and shifts the sporting world (Pavlidis, 2020). In the absence of social media, all that audiences have access to are 14 high-speed onscreen minutes during tournaments and limited mass media coverage, voiced by commentators and visually controlled by cameramen (and women), or narrated by journalists, not by the athletes on the field. This study has demonstrated this is insufficient in selecting or connecting with an SRM in the case of young and particularly Indigenous girls in Aotearoa. Focus groups indicated that audiences desire more information directly from the athlete, regarding aspects of their everyday lives, as well as vulnerable topics portrayed in an "authentic" and culturally appropriate manner, in order to select a sporting role model. In other words, audience members want to know more, and players have more to share, than 14-minute matches or journalists can enable: social media is the bridge for this gap.

This thesis has demonstrated the agentic roles BF7s players have had in the growth and development of women's rugby in the Bay of Plenty – and by extension, in Aotearoa – by providing aspirational team dynamics, inspirational content, motivational posts, and emotional validation.

Through in-person interactions, and strengthened through online following and engagement, these players have become role models and leaders in women's rugby nationally. The success of the Black Ferns 15s team in the Rugby World Cup (played in 2022) took place after the data gathering phase of this project. However, it was fascinating and heartening to see many of the themes of this project being amplified during and after the World Cup win. Interestingly, many of the athletes included in this study saw significant increases in their social media followings as a result of their World Cup success. For example, Ruby Tui's Instagram following has almost tripled (from 67,513 to 118,875) as a result of her stunning sporting and cultural performances during the tournament, coupled with the success of her autobiography. The themes identified in this thesis were magnified during this World Cup, with a much broader audience (nationally and internationally) coming to value the personalities and team culture of the Black Ferns players.

Women's rugby correspondent Alice Soper emphasized the value of the leadership status of professional women's rugby players in Aotearoa following the Black Ferns (15s) recent World Cup win:

[it's time for NZR to be] embracing the leaders that we have. For a long time, we seem to have been scared of the strong women who have grown this game and we need to now be recognizing the knowledge and skillset that's in those heads and pulling them up. And that's in every space, that's coaching, refereeing, the administrators, that's governance – everything. We've got so much more to offer, and we can be a part of this next bit. They [NZR] don't have the expertise internally, let's be honest, to know how to deliver for us [wāhine], cause it's not a copy and paste job [from the men's game]. There's a whole other skillset and understanding that's required to get the most out of our wāhine. So let's bring our women in to lead that.

Such comments highlight the timeliness of this research. Findings therefore have the potential to contribute toward and help shape the ways in which systems can capitalize on this surge in support and investment for women's rugby in Aotearoa through the digital channels used most by both our sportswomen and our rangatahi (i.e. “next generation”). This includes clarification surrounding the

themes and content types engaged with most strongly by NZ audiences, and how digital content should be shaped in order to come across as both appealing and culturally appropriate in Aotearoa. This research has reiterated the ability for social media to forge and maintain connections with women (Toffoletti et al., 2022), players, the “next generation” and others within the women’s rugby community, “fostering collective sporting identity in digital spaces” (Toffoletti et al., 2022, p.34). These players participate in the construction of these communities, and help build interest in and around women’s rugby, both in person and through social media: this potential needs to be grasped moving forward. The digital labour and the skills developed by the Black Ferns players in creating authentic and highly appealing sporting personalities and brands (for themselves and as a team), and their skills in building their sporting community and fan base, deserve to be widely recognized.

Key Research Findings

This study aimed to understand the ways in which BF7s players navigate Instagram. This included the themes most commonly posted, as well as the motivations behind why that was the case, and the influences upon their broader posting habits in general. On the other side of the screen, this study sought to understand how this content is perceived and understood by these players’ Instagram followers, namely those within the wider women’s rugby community in the Bay of Plenty. This thesis highlighted the ways these sportswomen regain power of their own self-representations in manners which allow for the salience of what they see as most important to shine through their digital content. This mana motuhake over their own images, information, and self-presentation has enabled the visibility of the importance of team culture and the influence of Indigenous culture in this team to be seen. Further research into Aotearoa’s sport teams would do well to understand the complex impacts of Indigenous culture in these diverse groups.

Quantitatively, this study found that BF7s players posted images relating to four main themes: “team & rugby”, “life outside rugby”, “achievement”, and “culture & vulnerability”. The majority of images in the analysis were related to “team & rugby” themes, creating an athlete-first

identity online, grounded in their team and team culture (whanaungatanga), and reflective of a collectivist identity and culture, as clarified by the group and individual interviews. This was reinforced by existing studies which found that self-presentation as an athlete first, prioritizing depictions of strength, athletic competence, was typical of various sportswomen across of a variety of age groups (Coche, 2017a; Fink et al., 2014; Kane et al., 2013a; Krane et al., 2010; Pegoraro et al., 2018). This simultaneously challenged findings which established that sportswomen predominantly post about their personal life and lifestyle (Burch & Zimmerman, 2019; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b), however, these were found in the context of individual athletes, not team sport athletes. Still, this contributes to the diversification of global understandings of what it means to be a sportswoman on Instagram, and the different forms and dynamics that can shape this.

The quantitative analysis further sought to quantify engagement with these four themes, and found that “achievement” posts were consistently engaged with most strongly. This was surprising, given the risky nature of posting success-related content which could be perceived as “bragging” or self-praise (Dayter, 2014; Matley, 2018; Na et al., 2020), particularly in the context of Aotearoa and Tall Poppy Syndrome (Holmes et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2017), and Indigenous cultural values surrounding humility (Palmer & Masters, 2010). However, the importance of external validation and recognition in the ability for Indigenous sportswomen to feel that they are flourishing in their sport clarifies that posting these types of images is, on the one hand, motivating for athletes, and, on the other hand, positively engaged with by audiences when mitigation strategies are used to heighten authenticity in depictions of “achievement”. Namely, grounding success in the collective and focus shifting, and utilising humour, sarcasm, and self-denigration are two of the predominant strategies used to mitigate the risk of becoming a Tall Poppy target in Aotearoa, and to maintain a culturally appropriate humble and (consequently) authentic image. This is a particularly interesting finding, deserving of further research into different athletes’ self-presentations and relationships with success in Aotearoa.

A statistically significant relationship between thematic frequency and squad seniority was quantitatively established, and considerably expanded upon during the interviews. This highlights one of the elements which sets this literature apart from what currently exists in research regarding sportswomen on social media: the role of team sport culture in sportswomen's digital self-presentations. Internal team dynamics (kaumātuatanga) established a hierarchy whereby players felt the need to "earn" their place and the subsequent right to post about more than just "surface level" content. Team ako, structured around the tēina and tuākana relationship and image that the Sevens Sisters are known to portray, helped players grow toward that increased vulnerability. So much of the existing literature focuses on the individual and individual athletes. Here, BF7s team culture has shaped not only how they work as a collective behind the screen, but also their digital practices, mitigation strategies, and self-presentations. The importance of the team and team culture in the ways in which BF7s athletes navigate Instagram and the ways in which audiences perceive digital content is a significant finding, and sheds further light upon the potential influence of team culture and dynamics on team-sport athletes' social media practices in general.

The mana wāhine approach adopted by this study further contributes to existing literature by taking on an alternative perspective in the research design and method of analysis. The theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this research allowed for deeper insight into the role of Indigenous culture in shaping role model selection, digital self-presentation, thematic frequency of posts, and the team culture which guides the BF7s. In this sense, not only is this study able to highlight the role of team sport culture in sportswomen's digital self-presentations, it was also able to draw attention to the role of collectivism in that team culture, in the self-presentations of Indigenous sportswomen, and in audiences' perceptions of those posts and themes. The ability to more deeply engage with culturally specific factors in this research generated an understanding of the uniqueness of local digital self-presentations and what it means to be "authentic" amongst sportswomen and sporting communities in Aotearoa. Importantly, Māori and Pasifika cultures and participants have

not been “othered” in the process of this research, as Scraton et al. (2005) warned; however, simultaneously, nor have the pākehā perspectives and participants present in the research. In doing so, this thesis demonstrates the cross-cutting impact of Māoritanga in (women’s) rugby in Aotearoa for those within the wider rugby community. When teams perform a haka after a match or a waiata before an after-match meal, the pākehā or Pasifika teammates do not stand aside. When players chose to travel in lavalavas to tournaments, pākehā and Māori teammates did not choose to wear pants instead. Rather, everyone participates equally in these important cultural practices, regardless of cultural or ethnic background. This demonstrates how these cultural concepts of humility, respect, kaumātuatanga, and whanaungatanga have the ability to impact every member of teams and communities (Bruce & Hippolite, 2013).

Another feature which sets this study apart from existing research on sportswomen’s use of social media is that it did not merely list the ways in which sportswomen’s digital identities are shaped; it layered them, and demonstrated the ways in which they weave and intersect with one another to dynamically and distinctly impact players with different cultural identities, personal interests, and of different seniority levels. Most significantly, players’ (imagined) audiences, internal team culture and dynamics, administration and sponsor regulations, and (economic) pursuits outside of rugby, shaped the posting habits of players. Importantly, authenticity, as it is shaped by unapologetic portrayals, with a focus on hauora, humility, humour, camaraderie, and role modeling for the “next generation”, significantly impacted digital self-presentation of BF7s players in a manner unique to women’s rugby players in Aotearoa. Audiences were most significantly drawn to the aspirational team culture shared by players, the intersectional connections they were able to make, authenticity, unapologetic portrayals, revelations of vulnerable struggles, and humility. The way in which the above themes were impacted by cultural context and cultural appropriateness reaffirmed the importance of selecting same gender and ethnicity SRMs for these audience members.

Limitations & Implications for Future Research

This study provided a multifaceted understanding of the social, cultural, and personal factors that impact BF7s digital practices, public perception of those practices, and the relationship between audiences and continued Instagram usage. However, it is essential to recognize the limitations of this thesis. The 112 posts in the social media analysis were published from eight Instagram accounts, which suggests the possibility that certain practices and tendencies were absent from the dataset. The inclusion of a greater number of accounts, from a greater variety of players based on age, ethnicity, and time in the squad, could have produced more insightful data. Future research might also consider further exploration of the impacts of squad seniority by analyzing the digital practices of athletes within different sports teams, and/or the accounts of players who range in years of experience.

For the individual interviews, the sample size was three, with one additional informative interview. There is a particular likelihood, therefore, that voices were absent from the research. This was largely due to access and time constraints. Ultimately, the convergence of the inaugural Super Rugby Aupiki competition, the World Rugby Sevens Series, and the Rugby World Cup all taking place during the course of this thesis made it a particularly difficult year for the athletes to find free time. Future research should attempt to take into account the experiences of more players, as more investigation is required to understand the intra-team differences in social media usage revealed here.

Whilst increasing the number of focus group participants could similarly have contributed to deeper insight and understanding from a greater variety of voices and perspectives, the scope of the participant pool itself could be widened for future research into the impact of sportswomen in different sporting codes on wider portions of the public, as opposed to solely those partaking in that sport. The pool consisted of only those within the rugby community, and thus, findings do not reflect the perspectives and practices of all BF7s followers and audience members, but rather a very sport-specific and nationally-specific portion of that audience. Not following BF7s players on Instagram naturally excluded certain individuals from participating due to their inability to reflect upon their

relationship with BF7s players online, however, during this study, massive growth in interest and excitement for women's rugby has taken place following the Black Fern's Rugby World Cup win at home. Arguably, the women's rugby community has therefore grown. However, the voices and experiences of those who do not participate in women's rugby, but may still follow players online, are notably absent from this study. Future research should consider any and all followers of players, regardless of their involvement in women's rugby beyond who they choose to follow on Instagram.

Future research would also do well to explore the intersections of gender, culture and ethnicity in sportswomen's social media practices, and to consider the strengths and limitations of mixed methods approaches. I came to this project from a quantitative background, and thus for me, it made sense and felt imperative to quantify the online practices of the athletes, but also to create space for the players voices to explain and elaborate upon that data. It also allowed for an ability to hear how the broader rugby community engages with this digital mahi. Furthermore, future research is needed that explores the intersecting forms of cultural and gendered digital labor of Indigenous athletes who feel the responsibility to 'inspire the next generation'. Much of this labor is unpaid or invisible to sports organizations (Chahardovali & McLeod, 2022), but it can take an emotional toll on the athletes who feel the responsibility to connect, support and inspire the next generation. Whilst it is a role the athletes voiced in a positive light as part of their job as professional rugby players, it highlights a series of expectations, appearances, and promotions – most of which are unpaid – that are asked predominantly of sportswomen. This critical perspective of the additional (mostly unpaid) digital labour the Black Ferns have done and continue to do to build their game is a reflection of the expectations placed upon sportswomen in multiple sports across a variety of countries, as demonstrated by Chahardovali and McLeod (2022).

Final Whistle

This research sheds light upon the relationship between professional women rugby players in Aotearoa and their audiences, as curated through the platform Instagram. This is a reciprocal

relationship of mahi tahi, represented in Figure 32. Players are motivated by their followers and the “next generation” to be a role model and leader in building a strong women’s rugby community in Aotearoa. At the same time, followers are encouraged by the role models they meet and see online, perceiving their content as aspirational and motivational both within and beyond simply rugby.

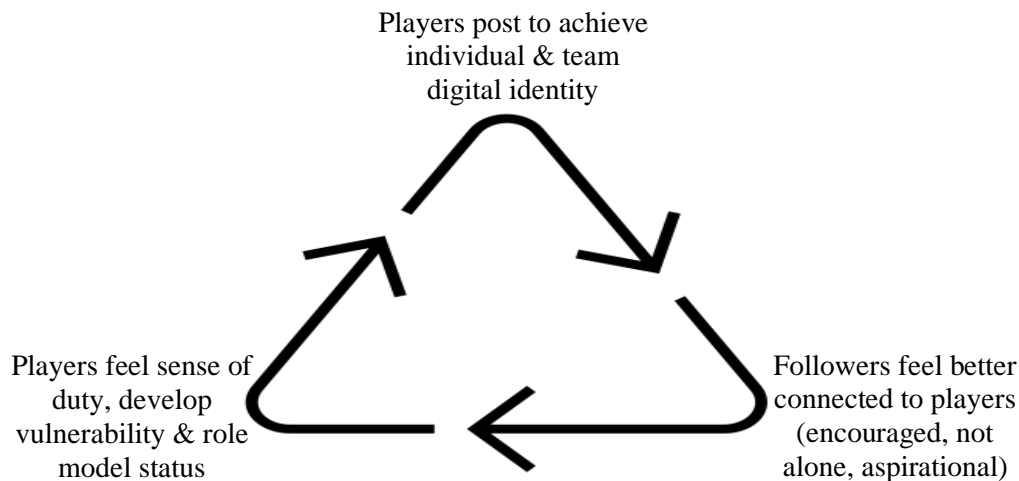


Figure 32: players & followers working as one

This cyclical relationship drives both players and followers to continue to use Instagram as a platform of self-expression, connection, and empowerment, in very calculated and crafted ways. This study aimed to draw attention to BF7s players’ digital practices when it comes to Instagram, and the perception of their digital mahi by their audiences. Findings indicate that players are impacted by Indigenous, collectivist, and culturally-specific factors, as well as their (imagined) audience and organizational-level requirements, at external, internal, and individual levels. Further results indicate that these layers are also impacted by the perceptions and expectations on behalf of audience members discussed in chapters 5 and 6, who help shape what it means to be authentic in Aotearoa, and encourage players to embody culturally proud and appropriate role models. While this thesis prioritizes the agentic roles of the players themselves, future research is needed to critically consider the roles and responsibilities of sports organizations in this complex relationship between sportswomen, digital labour, and building current and future fan-bases for women’s sport.

Many of the culturally specific findings discussed in this thesis challenged existing research, but this does not discredit the results of either. Rather, this thesis serves to contribute further toward the diversification of our understandings of what it means to be a sportswoman in the public eye on Instagram, and the multiple societal, cultural, and gendered factors which can shape how this looks in various contexts. This allows for greater opportunities to capitalize upon culturally specific marketing, sport policies, and sport development in Aotearoa via digital platforms, amongst other things. It may also present ways in which social media usage can be better targeted toward support for and visibility of Indigenous athletes for Indigenous populations across a variety of sports, such as the upcoming FIFA Women's World Cup to be co-hosted in New Zealand. Understanding what sportswomen online feel and navigate, alongside what audiences engage with and value, can help guide future social media campaigns surrounding women in sport in Aotearoa, in a culturally responsive, appropriate, and mindful ways that celebrate the knowledge and skills of the athletes themselves.

**Kia tau ngā manaakitanga a te mea ngaro
ki runga ki tēnā, ki tēnā o tātou
Kia mahea te hua mākihikihi
kia toi te kupu, toi te mana, toi te aroha, toi te Reo Māori
kia tūturu, ka whakamaui kia tīna! Tīna!
Haumi e, Hui e, Tāiki e!**

*Let the strength and life force of our ancestors
Be with each and every one of us
Freeing our path from obstruction
So that our words, spiritual power, love, and language are upheld;
Permanently fixed, established and understood!
Forward together!*

And so, this is where I choose to leave you, with the knowledge shared here established and understood, and a call to guide us in our digital mahi behind women's sport and visibility in Aotearoa: forward, together, so that no young girl aspiring to play rugby will ever be laughed at again.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Portia Woodman's Interview

Rugby superstar Portia Woodman on healing a Black Ferns rift, Jonah Lomu and more



By [Chris Rattue](#)

7 Jul, 2018 05:00 AM ⌚ 7 mins to read

Portia Woodman has declared the Black Ferns sevens are back on track off the field, as they set their sights on winning the 2020 Olympic gold medal in Tokyo.

The Black Ferns head to the World Cup in San Francisco in two weeks on the back of scintillating form.

They won the last three of the five World Series tournaments, although that was not enough to overhaul Australia for the 2017-18 title.

There have been hints that all was not well at the 2016 Olympics in Rio, where impressive top seeds Australia won the inaugural final over New Zealand.

And Woodman confirmed to the *Weekend Herald* there was internal team strife during an interview in which she talked about the influences in her life, the rise of women's rugby and her hopes for the game's future.

Woodman, once a rising netball star, was reminded of the Rio situation while watching the Silver Ferns struggle at this year's Commonwealth Games. She said the Black Ferns had been split over then-coach Sean Horan's management.

"I feel sorry for netball - I don't know anything about it but from the outside, it looks as though something similar is going on," Woodman says.

"Leading into Rio, we had some dramas, like every team does. And it can be hard to fix things on the field if you are going through hard times off it. There was some conflict between our coach and players.

"I think the coach's expectation of players didn't match to reality - he had this stock-standard image of what each player should be. It did cause a lot of conflict ... [the feeling] that he's not really caring about us. It caused a big split in our team."

Horan was happy with Woodman, which was part of the problem.

Woodman claims: "He used the words [to other players] 'I want you to be like Portia Woodman' ... to be like me, to play like me. I didn't know what he was saying until later on.

"No one blamed me for it but it put pressure on me. There were a lot of discussions but it was hard to nut out how we were going to fix things.

"We were divided between the players on the different problems and solutions."

Under new coach Allan Bunting, Horan's assistant, there have been re-evaluations.

"A few of our coaching staff were in that environment for Rio and understand culture is such a big part of performing well," Woodman said.

"They encourage the girls to meet together, to make sure we are gelling right. They are on track and very supportive when we are fatigued, about things like getting quality time with our families."

Our interview takes place at the national sevens headquarters next to Blake Park in Mt Maunganui.

Fourteen of the 20 full-time sevens players already live nearby and the rest will arrive by October. The 28 15-a-side Black Ferns - who include Woodman's partner Renee Wickliffe - are semi-professional on new contracts worth up to \$20,000 a year.

Women's rugby has come a long way in a short time and Woodman, who made her Black Ferns debut in 2013, has been at the forefront from the momentous day she signed an initial \$20,000 sevens contract at her parents' North Shore home.

The Woodman name is part of rugby royalty for Northlanders. Portia's father Kawhena and uncle Fred were dashing, try-scoring All Black wings reflecting the adventurous rugby spirit of the region.

But for a Kaikohe girl, or any girl, dreams of playing professional rugby were an outrageous fantasy until recently, whatever their pedigree.

She wasn't a Kaikohe girl for long.

Her teacher parents moved the family to Auckland when she was seven, much to her despair. It meant leaving behind an environment rich in whanau.

"I was distraught - I remember packing the moving van late at night and I was bawling my eyes out," says Portia, whose parents named her after the heroine from their favourite play, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

Woodman recalls her four-year-old self beating six-year-old girls in sprint races on family marae days and her exceptional speed was not lost in the Auckland move.

"I was playing rugby with the boys, running around them. I don't remember playing against other girls and I was the only girl at the Glenfield club.

"They were cool about it and the coach was my friend's dad. He said 'You're fast - you can play rugby'.

"It was fun on the field. Opponents would say 'I'll get her' and I'd run around them. I'd chase them down and they'd go 'What the heck?' I just had natural speed."

She revelled in the contest, the confrontations and extra attention from opponents in rugby and netball. Her mother Kathryn is a netball fanatic, whose dream of playing for the Silver Ferns would go no further after becoming pregnant at 16. Kathryn encouraged her daughter to pursue netball.

Meanwhile, Kawhena would run the roads with Portia, trained her in track and field, and encouraged any sporting endeavour.

"I guess when I started, I just loved training with my dad," says Woodman, who turns 27 next week.

Two events helped lead her to quit netball for rugby when Horan enthusiastically outlined his vision for the women's game: the sport's admission to the Olympics and the sight of All Blacks megastar Jonah Lomu running over England at the 1995 World Cup.

"I had said to dad 'I want to be the female version of Jonah Lomu'," she says, before laughing at the memory of this childhood audacity.

"He was like 'Oh, that's nice, bubs'. I don't think he ever thought I would be playing rugby like this."

Early days in the sevens squad were tough. Woodman was still working as a primary school teacher aide and at a day care centre, getting up at 5.30am to train and training

again after work.

When the Black Ferns leadership group made it clear the players were struggling, New Zealand Rugby started the professional ball rolling.

Woodman recalls a fledgling sevens circuit, of players washing their own clothes in hotel rooms, struggling to get them dry.

At the first tournament in China, they lived on canned chicken and tuna, rice and breakfast cereal brought from New Zealand.

"Now we stay in hotels where [rapper] 50 Cent stays, where F1 people go to party," she says.

Opportunities are opening up. Japanese clubs are offering sevens contracts and she has been approached by clubs in the new four-team NRL women's league competition, which starts in September. While those offers are not huge for now, commercial and advertising opportunities are growing.

She is adamant New Zealand can emulate Australia with a professional domestic competition and says NZR is keen on an international tournament involving Australia, Samoa and possibly South Africa.

"Maybe the women's game needs to separate more from the men, because we are quite different," Woodman says. "If we can get on TV more and change people's minds ... so people realise these women are playing amazing rugby."

She believes her public comments, questioning why the Hamilton sevens was men-only played a part in NZR organising a women's tournament next year.

Who knows where this will end? But the Black Ferns' successes, including another World Cup win last year, are vital to progress, along with the profile of stars such as Woodman.

She will bypass the 15s until after the 2020 Olympics and women's rugby is at an interesting crossroads on such issues, as the professional game develops. If there are new dilemmas, they are good ones.

"I'll always remember when we signed those first rugby contracts. It was history - we totally felt the significance. We were in disbelief - it was a breakthrough moment.

"Our team has a motto of leaving mana in our wake. We are creating this legacy, this history, of women who are going to make massive strides. These are exciting times.

"If we can inspire young girls and boys to play rugby, or just follow their dreams, that's all we wish for."

Available at: <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/sport/rugby-superstar-portia-woodman-on-healing-a-black-ferns-rift-jonah-lomu-and-more/ABSMTYDV5WQ65BR3RWFKIVQAQY/>

Appendix B: Te Kura Ngata-Aerengamate's Post



teekay713 Behind the Smile

One week post tour and the emotions are real. The should I speak up or should I stay quiet runs through my mind a thousand times. Never would I have ever thought that I would become mentally ill in a sport that I loved so much.

I didn't perform the way I wanted to this tour. And the way I have been playing the last few years hasn't been my best.

Over the past 8 years that I have been in the Black Ferns, I have struggled mentally and finally let it all out on the most recent tour.

Yes, I had a mental breakdown in front of everyone.

Throughout the years these were some comments made by head coach

- That I had been selected but didn't deserve to be in the team
- That he was embarrassed for me
- I was told that he couldn't tell my worth in the Blackferns
- I was told what would my students think of me?
- I was sworn at for wearing my jacket around my hips, I was yelled at running to rucks, how I ran the ball, anything I did I felt I was doing wrong.
- a recent comment that I was picked only to play the guitar

From these comments I ended up going crazy. I had to do anger management counselling, I had discovered anxiety & hyperventilating for the first time in my life, I could hear these comments in my mind as I threw the ball. My confidence and self esteem was so low that it made me play like I was walking on egg shells and was constantly too scared to express myself. I invited self doubt and insecurities; some being unbearable to look myself in the mirror.

The reality is that I had been defeated and it was so dark that I could no longer see my WHY. I had forgotten about the 5year old girl who started playing rugby with her cousins 25 years ago.

I let the words over the years get to me, the words became the flesh.

Lesson is, never let anyone dim your light. Be proud of who you are. If you are treated unfairly, hit them up unapologetically because at the end of the day it's your mana on the line.

I know I'm not everyone's cup of tea, but I'm still a person
and at the very least deserve to be treated with respect.

Now I'm on a journey of healing 🏳️‍🌈

Stand up
Speak up
Know your worth

Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXIRwQXIWaS/>