

In the Game: Female Athletes Battle With Sexism

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Abstract

Sports often reflect the cultural meanings and values of society. Females in sports over the course of 2015 have been recognized for many new accomplishments, which may suggest that progress is being made towards gender equity in both sports and society. However, in a time of relative success, the media coverage of such accomplishments are still minimized in comparison to those of male athletes, which serves to maintain male dominance in sports. Furthermore, even when female athletes receive media coverage, they are often subject to sexist and heterosexist commentary. With female athletes only receiving a fraction of sports media coverage, it is instructive to understand how the social media content from a prominent female sports team, the United States Women's National Soccer Team, works to construct new cultural understandings of women in sports. This study extends our understanding of the complexities of sexism and heterosexism directed toward female athletes through an investigation of social media during the summer of 2015. Specifically, a content analysis of the Instagram accounts of U.S. Women's National Team soccer players, alongside the ESPN SportsCenter account, reveals the relative lack of attention paid to even highly successful female athletes, the often vitriolic sexist responses to public celebration of female athletes, and also multiple forms of resistance and disruption on the part of female athletes.

Keywords: hegemony, sports, gender discrimination

1. Introduction

Sport is sometimes written off as a separate realm from the real world. However, sport permeates much of society's activities. Sports can be found in everyday conversation, in newspapers and magazines, on television and in children's as well as in adult's recreation.¹ To trivialize sport's role in society would be a significant oversight when attempting to understand the cultural values and social behaviors of a society. "Sport is a microcosm of society... and a phenomenon for social change, sport has a profound influence on the social life of large numbers of people of all ages."² Sport has the ability to encapsulate in the miniature the characteristics and qualities of society at large. The purpose of this research is to highlight media content that reflects both the sexist rhetoric used to define female athletes in sports media today, alongside empowering, disruptive and self-defined representations of female athletes to these hegemonic ideological interests.

2. The Gendered History of the Institution of Sport

Sport is an institution with enormous symbolic significance that perpetuates male dominance in society.³ Sports became increasingly popular after the end of World War II. Several years after the United States had proven itself with warfare, America's perception by the rest of the world was being threatened by the thought of America "losing

masculine” traits.⁴ This caused organizations like the Boy Scouts, the YMCA, and athletic clubs to promote devotion to manly ideals that toughen boys for life’s challenges when war was no longer occurring.⁵ Eitzen describes the “cult of manliness and sport” as a sanctuary to counteract the feminization of North American civilization.⁶ This began the process of defining American sports as a male-only sphere of society. Sport has historically been and remains a “dynamic construction site of gender” today.⁷ Sport as an institution works to maintain social order by being a reflection of the cultural values in North American society. Characteristics such as aggressiveness, leadership, and hard work are just a few examples of culturally valuable initiatives that are reinforced by sport. These characteristics are also requirements for adhering to standards of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is “understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue.”⁸ Sports are seen as a “rite of passage for males into manhood,” so when women enter into the sports world they are met with outrage and backlash.⁹

Backlash resulted after the passing of Title IX, the law that gave women access to play sports in the early seventies. Title IX is a civil rights law passed in 1972 that states “no person on the basis of sex shall be excluded from, denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination in any educational program or activity receiving federal assistance” The law does not explicitly mention sports or athletics in its language.¹⁰ Title IX was not intentionally meant to provide women opportunities to play sports, but because sports are considered an educational benefit provided by schools and universities, the language used in the law gave leverage to female athletes to have a space created for them in the historically male-only sports world.¹¹ However, having access to play sports did not directly translate into acceptance and respect for women in sports. Cultural backlash in the form of stereotyping has resulted in the persistence of sexism in sports at both a structural and individual level.¹²

2.1. Gendered Sports Processes

The pervasiveness of male dominance in sport can be attributed to four minimizing processes of female athletics, according to Eitzen.¹³ The first of these processes is defining sport as a male activity. As Eitzen explains, “Gender role expectations have encouraged girls and women to be passive, gentle, delicate, and submissive. These cultural expectations clash with those traits often associated with sport: assertiveness, competitiveness, physical endurance, ruggedness, and dominance.”¹⁴ These distinctions limit the access to sport for females because social approval weighs heavily on one’s competency in their gender performance. According to Lorber, “sports illustrate the ways bodies are gendered through social practices. The female body is socially constructed to be inferior. It is assumed that all men are of the same size and stature, and always larger than women. The separation of women and men in athletics is based off of assumptions about physiology and athletic capability. The real categorization of women and men in athletics is an economic, political, and ideological issue that has less to do with physical capabilities than with cultural and social meaning.”¹⁵ The second process that maintains male dominance in sport is by men directly controlling sport at a structural level. Men control sport, even women’s sports, by making up the majority of coaches and other managerial positions in sport. The third process is directly ignoring women in sports. One way this occurs is by giving most attention to male sports in the media. Messner’s and Cooky’s longitudinal study, *Gender in Televised Sports: News and Highlights Shows*, concludes that men’s sports receive 96.3% of the airtime, women’s sports receive 1.6%, and 2.1% is dedicated to gender neutral coverage. SportsCenter, a nationally televised program, devotes only 1.4% of airtime to women’s sports.¹⁶ Structurally, the institution of sport is gendered in such a way that it minimizes and trivializes female athletics to make them seem irrelevant or worse, non-existent. Fourthly, male dominance in sport is maintained by trivializing women’s athletic accomplishments and sexualizing female athletes’ bodies in mass media. The promotion of the heterosexuality image in mass media not only reinforces the ideology that women exist to provide pleasure to men, but this specific imagery also hides the athleticism of female athletes by emphasizing their femininity.¹⁷

2.2 Heterosexism in Women’s Sports

Heterosexism is a weapon of sexism that is used when trying to keep women from playing sports out of “fear of losing social approval.” This approval is lost due to the female athlete’s sexual identity and/or gender identity or even the perception of those identities.¹⁸ There are six manifestations of heterosexism discussed in Pat Griffin’s study *Changing The Game*. However, this research focuses on the silencing of queer female athletes through portraying queer women as locker room disruptions, and the promotion of the heterosexuality image. Queer female athletes are

encouraged not to come out because if they do, they will inevitably cause a lack of solidarity between teammates because their sexuality will more often be the topic of discussion in the media rather than their team's performances.¹⁹ Griffin more specifically addresses the underlying beliefs that keep women in sport from challenging heterosexist ideologies. One of these implicit beliefs is the idea that a woman's sexuality is private and should not be publicly discussed, especially outside the context of married, monogamous heterosexuality. In women's sports there is a double standard where heterosexual athletes are encouraged to talk about their relationships with men, but acknowledgement of queer women is "perceived as an inappropriate flaunting of personal life".²⁰ The heterosex image is one that is utilized by media outlets to attract the male gaze by emphasizing femininity, which in turn distances female athlete's bodies from athleticism.²¹

2.3 Gendered Sports Media

Mass media as an institution has the power to create and maintain perceptions of athletes through discourse and imagery. Sport Sociologist Susan Birrell famously noted that there is a "construction of women as unnatural athletes and of female athletes as unnatural women."²² One of the most effective ways to accomplish this is to use language that creates distinctions between identity categories such as gender and sexuality. As Henley notes, "Language reflects the prejudices of the society in which it evolved and is one way stereotypes are communicated and reproduced."²³ Language creates distinctions and places "social value" on different groups of individuals. The linguistic nuances that belittle female athletic performance and simultaneously bolster male athletes' sense of superiority is a reflection of the system of difference and inequality created through gendered language. Sports media "continues to play a largely reproductive-- rather than critical or disruptive-- role in the politics of sport and problems grounded in social inequalities."²⁴ Sports media uses both descriptive and visual imagery to trivialize the existence of female athletes by emphasizing their femininity rather than their athleticism, most notably through the promotion of the heterosex image.²⁵ This serves to maintain the conceptualization of female athletic performance as inferior because their accomplishments are not linked to hegemonic masculinity in the way that male athletic performance is. This type of representation is motivated by sexist stereotyping in order to uphold the ideological interests of male hegemony.

3. Research Question and Methods

The origins of the research come from the researcher finding discrepancies while observing how sports media outlets portrayed female athletes. Particularly, the sports media covering The United States Women's National Soccer Team (USWNT) during the World Cup in the summer of 2015. The USWNT won their third World Cup Title in exciting fashion scoring five goals. The championship game was the most viewed soccer game in US history.²⁶ Despite their games being broadcasted on channels such as Fox Sports 1 that are less accessible to the public than channels such as ESPN and ABC, which the men's World Cup was broadcasted on in 2014. However, after further investigation the researcher discovered that the USWNT seemed to be using social media in order to engage with fans, but most importantly to USWNT were discussing topics around gender inequality in sports on their social media. This led to the research question: What themes emerge from the Instagram accounts of prominent USWNT players that disrupt the ideological interests of male hegemony in sport and how do those accounts correspond with the mainstream presentation of female athletes on SportsCenter's Instagram account?

3.1 The USWNT Player's Instagram Accounts

This research chose to look at a social media platform because social media is a primary way knowledge is spread and received today.²⁷ This study draws on a content analysis of data from the social media network Instagram, which allows users to post both pictures and captions. Pictures and language have symbolic meanings attached to them so it was instructive to look at each type of information posted. Instagram accounts of athletes allow fans to engage with their favorite players in ways they never could a decade ago. It also provides an outlet for players to present their experiences when they have largely been overlooked and ignored by mainstream sports media.

This study focused on the most prominent women's sports team during the summer of 2015, the United States Women's Soccer Team (USWNT). They took part in the largest women's sporting event of the summer, The Women's World Cup. Choosing a team sport provided space for discussion on the topic of solidarity between teammates that would not have been possible if the study focused on individual sports. The player choice was based on demographics

such as sexuality, gender expression, games played for the USWNT, and playing time allotted at the World Cup in 2015. This study wanted variation in the above categories in order to achieve representation from recognizable players with diverse sexualities and gender expressions.

The USWNT participated in and won the Women's World Cup during the summer of 2015. The study examined the posts that were featured during that time of peak visibility which began on June 1st and ended on November 4th, 2015. This twenty-week period allowed for the data to include the week prior to the start of the World Cup, all the way through the victory tour following the World Cup, and ending with the public team appearance and celebration at the White House. The researcher documented the number of times particular themes emerged, as well as the percentage of posts that featured disruptive themes in them. Posts were coded as "disruptive" if they resisted or discredited sexist and heterosexist ideological stereotyping of female athletes. One post could have multiple themes of disruption in it. For instance, one post could have a theme that recognized queerness and also showed a player in uniform training which emphasizes the player's identity as athlete. Since both of those themes disrupt specific manifestations of sexist ideology in sport each of them will be documented. The reason for counting the number of times themes emerged can best be summed up in an example: Hope Solo at any moment could post a picture with three themes of disruption and reach the 553,000 people who follow her. The fans who follow her would then be exposed to multiple disruptions at once.

3.2 SportsCenter's Instagram

It was instructive to analyze both the Instagrams of prominent women's team players and juxtapose their representation of female athletes with that of a mainstream sports media outlet, SportsCenter. The content analysis sought to quantify the posts that were dedicated to women in sports, while also examining the discourse of the followers of SportsCenter's Instagram account in regards to the female athletes presented and their accomplishments. This aspect of the study examined the same twenty week period (June 1, 2015 November 4, 2015). SportsCenter differs from other sports media outlets as it is a nationally televised sports highlight show that airs up to twelve times a day with almost hourly updates. SportsCenter is ESPN's (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network) most recognizable show. SportsCenter reviews and provides analysis of major sporting events, commentary and predictions on upcoming sporting events from around the world. Compared to sports media outlets such as ESPN or ESPNW (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network for Women) SportsCenter is not framed in a gender specific way. ESPN and ESPNW have created gender distinctions by having to add the "W" onto the end of one account to distinguish it from the original. SportsCenter's Instagram account is a reflection of the televised show which suggests the posts featured on their account will be the top stories in sports from all across the world. For instance, if someone did not have the time to watch an entire hour's worth of SportsCenter highlight reels on TV, that person could then look at SportsCenter's Instagram and have the same information regarding scores and highlights at their fingertips via social media.

When examining SportsCenter's Instagram account, the content analysis documented the number of total posts made in the twenty-week period. The study then broke down the posts that exclusively depicted men, those that exclusively featured women, and those with gender neutral content and totaled those categories together. Then the analysis found the percentage of posts that featured exclusively women from the grand total and followed the same procedure for the posts with men and the gender neutral content. In order to measure for an influx of posts featuring women, after every 500 posts the gendered percentages of posts were documented. In addition to totaling the percentages by gender, the content analysis also sought to examine how SportsCenter's Instagram account presented the accomplishments of female athletes and if disruptions to sexism were evident on their presentation or not. The study also provided a content analysis on the ten most recent comments that had been left by Instagram users on the posts that featured exclusively women. The study chose to only sample the most recent ten comments because the total number of comments varied dramatically by post. The comments were coded in categories "feminist/positive," "neutral" and "sexist/negative." The comments that were delegated to the category "feminist/positive" were the comments that either congratulated the accomplishments of women and/or their team in sports, or promoted the women as athletes. The comments that were deemed "neutral" were ones that could not be contextualized and therefore could not be categorized as positive or negative. The category of comments "sexist/negative" were comments that trivialized the accomplishments of women in sports, used heterosexist discourse when describing the female athletes or sexualized the bodies of the female athletes depicted.

4. Analysis

Four major categories of disruption emerged through the course of this research. Each category addresses specific facets of sexism in sport. Those categories are: 1) Themes of feminism not directly related to a teammate, or sexuality on Instagram; 2) Themes of queerness on Instagram; 3) Themes of solidarity with a teammate (not related to queerness) on Instagram; and 4) Themes that emphasized athleticism and their identity as a soccer player on Instagram. These four categories also address the interconnected minimizing processes of women that serve to maintain male dominance in sports.

The total number of instances disruptive themes emerged throughout the twenty week period on the USWNT players' accounts was 571 times. The graph below breaks the themes down by category totals to provide perspective.

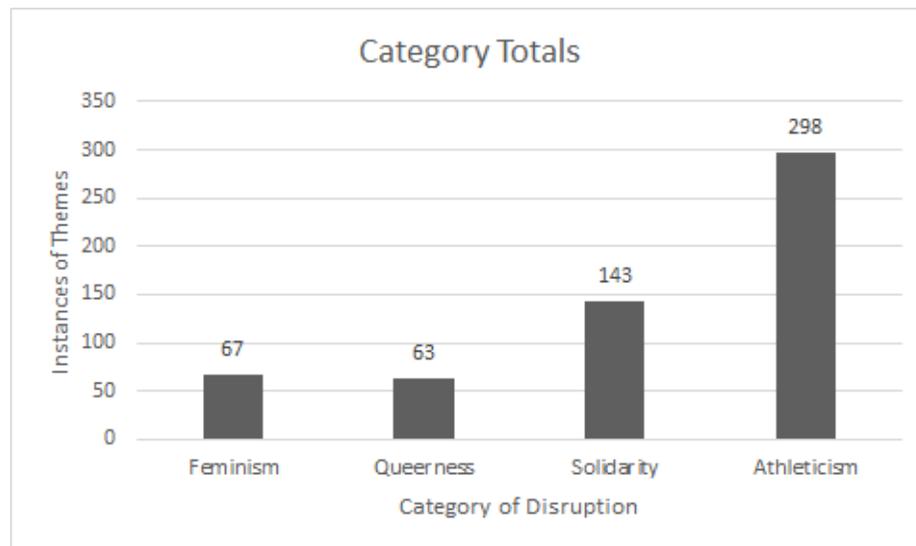


Figure 1: Category Totals by Theme

4.1 Themes of feminism not directly related to a teammate, or sexuality

This category of disruptive themes accounted for 12% of the total instances of disruption. This category had multiple types of themes emerge: references to FIFA 16 (the first edition of the video game to have female soccer players in it), references to pay equity, and the uplifting of female athletes that are not on their team.

Examples of Instagram posts that fell under this category of disruption include posts such as: a selfie of Alex Morgan at a Serena Williams' tennis match with a caption that says, "Here to watch the amazing Serena Williams." Because Alex Morgan is seen here uplifting and recognizing another female athlete for her accomplishments this post had a theme of feminism that is not in direct relation to a teammate. This post is significant because Alex Morgan and Serena Williams are both Nike athletes. This means that they are both fighting for the same minimal sponsorship given to female athletes, yet Alex Morgan is making a point to recognize and uplift Williams' accomplishments on her own social media. Another example is a post with an image of Megan Rapinoe giving a thumbs up and showing solidarity to Malala, who has been at the frontline fighting for women's education despite putting herself in tremendous danger. This post is significant because it depicts a player using her platform to acknowledge a global feminist issue which reaches an audience that may otherwise not be exposed to the accomplishments of Malala. Another example came from Ali Krieger's Instagram. The picture captures USWNT teammates Kelly O'hara, Ali Krieger, and Sydney Leroux at the FIFA 16 release party. This post had a theme of feminism emerge through the recognition of women in soccer being "in the game" of FIFA for the first time. After this release party a hashtag 'in the game' began to trend on social media in reference to this popular game featuring female athletes for the first time.²⁸ This image is significant because it promoted the inclusion of women into a subculture of soccer that previously had been completely dedicated to male athletes. This post draws attention to the fact women are being included into places that previously barred them.

4.2 Themes of Queerness

Themes of queerness accounted for 11% of the instances of themes that occurred. This category had multiple types of themes occur within it as well. However, when interpreting the Instagram posts, endorsement of queerness had to be measured in different ways depending upon the sexuality of the player whose Instagram was being analyzed. For instance, queer athletes could post photos with/about their partner and that be considered a theme of queerness. However, straight athletes had to post photos of queer people (teammates/friends) in order for it to be considered queer. Other examples of themes within this category were instances when symbols of queerness (such as the gay pride flag, or positive language in reference to the LGBT community) were present on the athletes' Instagram accounts.

Examples of posts that celebrated queerness are posts such as a photo of Megan Rapinoe (an openly queer player) and her partner Sera Cahoone announcing their engagement on Instagram just a few weeks after the World Cup win. This fell under the disruption of queerness because it is a visual reminder of queerness made by a queer woman. In a time where you can lose your job at any point for being queer, it is remarkable to see a professional athlete be unconcerned by heterosexism in relation to the media when queer visibility could cost her job and/or sponsorships. Another example of disruptive themes that celebrate queerness can be seen in a picture from Sydney Leroux's Instagram. Leroux is in her wedding dress with "out" teammate Abby Wambach as her maid of honor. The post's caption reads "this is what best friends are for." This post shows that Sydney Leroux not only has a relationship with Wambach outside of their jobs, but that they are so close that Sydney asked her to be her maid of honor. This solidarity shown by Leroux was backed up with other posts featured on her account such as one that had two queer themes of disruption emerge from it. The first theme to emerge in the image is the fact that Sydney is wearing clothing with the symbolic rainbow. The other theme is found on her shirt, which has language that both celebrates and brings visibility to the LGBTQ community. This language is present in both her picture and the caption of the picture. The next example from this category is a post from Ali Krieger's Instagram with an image of the ESPN the Magazine cover. The significance of this image comes from the fact a gay male athlete is featured on the cover. Krieger is celebrating while also making this image visible to her thousands of followers on her social media account.

4.3 Themes of Solidarity with a Teammate Unrelated to Queerness

Themes of solidarity accounted for 25% of the total number of instances disruptive themes occurred. This category had the following types of themes emerge: use of empowering language when referring to a teammate, congratulations on retirement of a teammate, congratulations on a personal achievement of a teammate outside of soccer, and a team picture (must include two or more teammates). Because female athletes are not given a hefty amount of sponsorship, they must fight for every dollar they earn. One way by which male dominance is maintained is when women are pitted against one another, which detracts from the real problem of heteropatriarchy.

Examples in this category of disruptive themes can be found in a picture from Hope Solo's Instagram account of her and the other two goalkeepers on the USWNT. The caption reads, "the best goalkeeping crew in the world." She is the starting goalkeeper on the USWNT roster and is currently ranked number one goalkeeper in world. This image and caption acknowledges and empowers the other two goalkeepers who are often left out of the conversation. Her words insist that there is a united front between the three goalkeepers, as she recognizes their talent alongside of her own. In another example, a post from Carli Lloyd's Instagram has an image of her handing the captain's armband back to Abby Wambach. This gesture is a reflection of the utmost respect being given to a teammate from the player who is giving the armband to them. This post was made after Abby Wambach announced her retirement. Carli Lloyd captioned the photo "Legend." Lloyd is acknowledging the legacy of Wambach and what she has meant for women's soccer and sports in general with this post.

4.4 Themes that Emphasize Athleticism and Their Identity as Soccer Player

The fourth category included the following types of themes: game day posts, pictures of their self or teammates in uniform, fan appreciation/ World Cup celebration, Sports Illustrated cover, and posts showing them training. Sports media only gives 1.6% of their airings to female athletes, and of what they do air, much of it trivializes women and their accomplishments in sport.²⁹

Examples from the category of disruption that emphasized athleticism are posts such as an image of the USWNT players celebrating after a crucial goal by Carli Lloyd in the World Cup. Many of the themes that emerged in this disruption category came in the form of game day promotion photos, action shots or training videos. However, some themes took the form of World Cup celebrations like one that can be seen on Alex Morgan’s Instagram. The image is of her, Kelly O’Hara, and Tobin Heath with the World Cup Trophy in hand. The themes that emerged under this category of disruption emphasized athleticism and also brought significant attention to the historic accomplishments of this team throughout the summer of 2015. These posts recognized and reiterated the USWNT’s success, as well as their persistent work ethic towards future tournaments. These themes of athleticism were consistently echoed throughout each of the seven player’s Instagram accounts analyzed, as they accounted for 52% of the instances disruptive themes occurred.

To put this even more into perspective, the figure below shows the total number of posts that each player made during the twenty-week period alongside the number of posts that featured disruptive themes, and provides percentages of those numbers.

Table 1: Player’s Posts and Percentages

Player Name	Total Number of Posts	Number of Posts that Featured Disruptive Themes	Percentage of Posts that Featured Disruptive Themes
Ali Krieger	77	66	86%
Abby Wambach	67	44	66%
Megan Rapinoe	80	64	80%
Sydney Leroux	152	75	50%
Alex Morgan	85	70	83%
Carli Lloyd	114	94	83%
Hope Solo	140	121	87%
Averages	102	76	77%

On average amongst these seven players, 77% of their posts featured disruptions to the ideological interests of male hegemony in sport. Each player posted multiple times throughout each week during the course of the twenty week period of hyper-visibility, exposing their thousands of followers to these disruptions which in turn helps to redefine the perceptions of these players in opposition to the sexist ideology that plagues the sports world.

4.5 SportsCenter’s Posts

The number of posts made on SportsCenter’s Instagram account totaled 1,547 during the summer of 2015. Out of those 1,547 posts only 80 exclusively depicted female athletes, which is 5.2% of the total number of posts. Gender neutral posts only accounted for seven posts which is not even a full percentage (.5%) of the total number of posts. There were 1,460 posts that exclusively featured male athletes which makes up 94.3% of total posts.

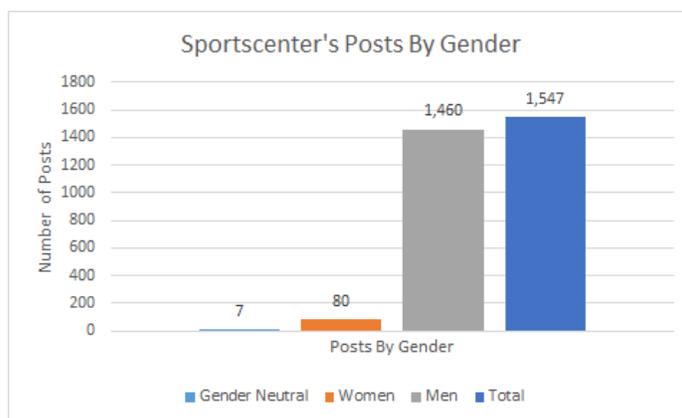


Figure 2: SportsCenter’s Posts by Gender

These numbers represent the minimizing process of ignoring women in sport that takes place in order to maintain male dominance in sport.³⁰ Men continue to largely be the only athletes seen playing sports, while women continue to be seen as outsiders to the world of sports. Of the 80 posts made by Sportscenter that explicitly featured women in sports, 74 of them featured at least one of the disruptive themes explored earlier in the study. However, six (7.6%) of the 80 posts did not feature disruptive themes. These posts actually reinforced sexist ideology through the sexualization of women’s bodies along with images that emphasized their femininity over their athleticism. Of the 74 posts that featured disruptions to sexism on SportsCenter’s Instagram, 59% of them depicted women winning championships, breaking records previously held by men, or entering an all-male sport such as the first female referee in the NFL. This may seem on the surface to be progression towards gender equality. However, this statistic implies that in order for women’s accomplishments in sport to be relevant they must surpass the bar that has already been set by men, which upholds the notion that men are still the standard in sport.

The comments present on Sportscenter’s Instagram supported the argument in previous research by Eitzen that suggests female athletes and their accomplishments are belittled, while their bodies are objectified and scrutinized.³¹ Neutral comments made up 69% of the eight hundred total comments. Negative/sexist comments made up 21%, which more than doubled the percentage of positive/ feminist comments at 10% left on the posts that featured female athletes.

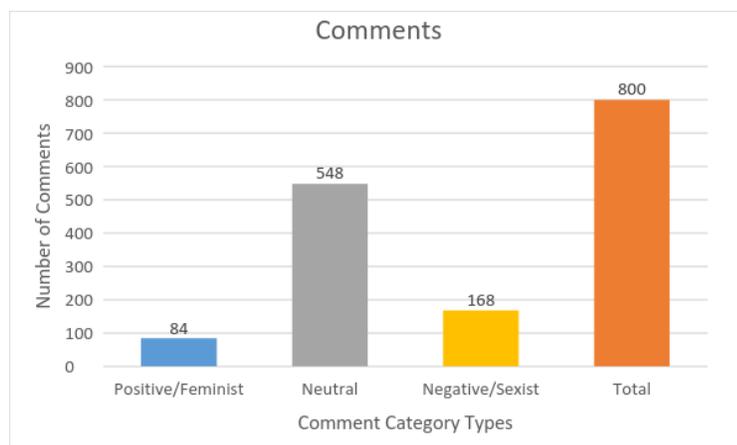


Figure 3: SportsCenter Comments

Examples of each category of comments put these percentages into further perspective. The first example is neutral comments such as one Instagram user simply tagging another user with no other commentary and therefore could not be contextualized. Similarly, neutral comments also consisted of emojis and commentary that could not be contextualized with the picture and caption given by SportsCenter’s account. Neutral comments made up the highest percentage of comments while failing to provide valuable data for understanding discourse around gender in sports. Examples of positive/feminist comments, however, reflected the relative progress made towards the inclusion of women in sports.

Table 2: Examples of Positive/ Feminist Comments

<p>“She is so good” “G.O.A.T.” “atta girl” “She’s my role model.” “She is so badass.” “This is a great league pay more attention to it.” “Really proud of the ladies for winning.”</p>
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These examples reflect discourse from fans that acknowledge and congratulate the accomplishments of women in sports. The comments “G.O.A.T.” (greatest of all time) and “She’s my role model” are implying that the athletic careers of these female athletes are something to aspire towards. The positive/feminist comments even acknowledge that more attention needs to be given to women’s sports leagues. The comment “this is a great league pay more attention to it” in particular implies that a broader audience should want to become consumers of that league because of the talent level within it. Unfortunately however, the terminology such as “girl” and “ladies” present in these comments can still have adverse effects to equality. The term “girl” can imply immaturity in both age, and knowledge of one’s sport. The term “lady” can be seen as a reflection of elegance and emphasized femininity, which are in direct opposition to aggression and hegemonic masculinity that are seen as defining attributes of athletes.³²

The comments that were delegated to the negative/ sexist comment category that highlight the cultural backlash that persists for women in sport can be seen in the following table:

Table 3: Examples of Negative/Sexist Comments

<p>“who cares” “Tits” “who gives a fuck about women’s soccer?” “since when did Sports Center add a kitchen?” “I would fuck most of this team. They are sexy.” “She is so butch. She needs to go take some more hgh.” “women will never be as good as men.” “Women and football. Two things that should never mix. Unless I’m watching football and a woman is making me a turkey sandwich.”</p>

These comments portray the belittlement of women in sport by questioning why anyone would want to pay attention to female athletes. There is also an insistence that traditional gender roles stay in place which would continue to bar entry for women into the sports world. There is an example of the overt sexualization and objectification of the bodies of female athletes suggesting that their bodies are simply there to be consumed rather than their athletic prowess being recognized and respected. The comment “She is so butch. She needs to go take some more hgh” was left under a photo of Ronda Rousey a UFC fighter celebrating a victory in her sport. This comment both condemns a female athlete’s body as being too big due to steroid use which suggests a body like hers was not possible without illegal supplements

- suggesting that bodies like hers are unnatural for women. This comment also implies that if a woman's body is athletic then her body is read as both unnatural and butch, suggesting that being butch is a bad thing for women to be because it is inherently unnatural. This comment represents the heterosexist tactics used to keep women out of sports by threatening their social approval due to their gender expression and sexuality.³³

5. Conclusions

What does it mean when the Women's World Cup Title game was the most viewed soccer game in US history but the USWNT who won the tournament were only paid a quarter of the amount that the United States Men's Soccer Team received for losing in the first round of the men's World Cup?³⁴ Or when a caption on SportsCenter's Instagram states that "It was a pretty good summer for women in sports" but then that same account only allocates 5.2% of their Instagram posts throughout that summer to female athletes? It implies that even in times of relative progress such as the summer of 2015 where the first female coach debuted in the NBA, as well as the first female referee in the NFL, that female athletes are still being underrepresented by sports social media outlets. A third World Cup title and record breaking viewer ratings are certainly victories for the USWNT. However, their jobs were not completed solely on the field but through the use of their social media accounts. The seven female athletes in this study disrupted sexism and heterosexism 571 times. These athletes advocated on the behalf of women during the midst of the most prestigious tournament in their sport. Investigation of sports social media illuminated the complexities of sexism and heterosexism that is directed towards female athletes. Future research should include multiple women's teams with variation in sport, different social media sites and also the addition of the variable of race. These intersections would help to further understanding of the current climate for women in sports.

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