

"Women are here, women are hungry": exploring articulations of empowerment and feminism in digital spaces

"As mulheres estão aqui, as mulheres estão com fome": explorando articulações de empoderamento e feminismo em espaços digitais

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the evolving landscape of digital media and its impact on the representation and self-presentation of female athletes. Focusing on the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games, it investigates how Olympians leverage social media to articulate feminism and empowerment, challenging traditional media paradigms in the context of Olympism. The study explores how sportswomen craft their identities, navigate gender discourses, and engage with postfeminist narratives. The findings reveal that social media offers a dual-edged sword: a platform for self-empowerment and identity construction, yet also a space where athletes confront market-driven pressures and gendered expectations. As a result, this study responds to the call for a feminist re-evaluation of sports media narratives, urging scholars to adopt broader methodological frameworks that transcend conventional media sources.

KEYWORDS: Olympics; Feminism; Empowerment; Social media.

RESUMO: Este artigo explora o panorama em evolução dos meios de comunicação e o impacto na representação e autorrepresentação de atletas femininas. Tendo como foco os Jogos Olímpicos de Inverno de 2022, em Beijing, foi analisada a forma como as atletas femininas usaram a comunicação social para articular o feminismo e o empoderamento, ao desafiar os paradigmas da tradicional Comunicação Social, em contexto de Olimpismo. O estudo explora como as atletas criam as suas identidades, através de discursos de géneros e ao envolverem-se com narrativas pós-feministas. Os resultados revelaram que os meios de comunicação oferecem uma dualidade de critérios: a plataforma para o autocapacitação e construção de identidade, mas também o espaço onde as atletas enfrentam as pressões do mercado e expectativas de género.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Jogos Olímpicos; Feminismo; Empoderamento; *Social media*.

INTRODUCTION

A fundamental principle of Olympism – the ideological and philosophical underpinning of the Olympic Movement – is “to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity”.¹ But for decades the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and its media partners have failed to recognize the part of this pledge to ‘man’ that involves female athletes.² In contrast, the rise of social media and its global popularity have transformed the traditional media landscape, which often diminished sportswomen.³ This shift has enabled female athletes to gain recognition on their own terms and enabled them to generate and distribute content to a worldwide audience, avoid the media gatekeepers, and create their own identities.⁴ In that sense, social media have been perceived as empowering tools.⁵

At the same time, it is essential to explore how these tools are used and how female athletes engage with feminist and postfeminist ideas (consciously and unconsciously) to “tell stories differently”.⁶ The authors urged scholars to move away from the well-established methodological frameworks that are restricted to a limited number of sources of data and do not reflect the contemporary consumption of media. According to Antunovic, it is important to analyse content shared across various platforms in order to reflect how audiences consume content and ideologies circulate. With this approach, it is possible to “capture the relationship between production, visibility, and consumption”.⁷ Also Cooky and Antunovic⁸ suggested that “one way to tell stories differently is to disrupt the well-established boundaries of what is considered sports media.” Therefore, to explore how sportswomen’s articulations of feminism and empowerment were disseminated through digital

¹ IOC. *Olympic charter*, p. 8.

² GRABMÜLLEROVÁ; NÆSS. Gender equality, sport media and the Olympics, 1984-2018: w.

³ FINK. Female athletes, women’s sport, and the sport media commercial complex.

⁴ PEGORARO. Look Who’s Talking.

⁵ SMITH; SANDERSON. I’m Going to Instagram It! An Analysis of Athlete Self-Presentation on Instagram.

⁶ ANTUNOVIC; WHITESIDE. Feminist Sports Media Studies: State of the Field.

⁷ ANTUNOVIC. Social Media, Digital Technology and Sport Media, p. 21.

⁸ COOKY; ANTUNOVIC. “This Isn’t Just About Us”, p. 707.

spheres, this article analyses “any media content”⁹ produced by athletes, journalists, social media accounts, and sport's governing bodies.

Postfeminism offers a lens through which we can understand how female athletes navigate these new media spaces. As a sensibility, postfeminism celebrates women's empowerment but often links it to traditional norms around physical appearance and consumerism.¹⁰ Female athletes can assert agency in their own representations, yet they also face pressures to align with societal expectations of beauty, body work, and commodification of their empowerment.¹¹ This dynamic is central to understanding the complexities of how social media are used by sportswomen to engage with feminist ideas, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes challenging, dominant gender norms.

More specifically it explores how female athletes navigate the culture of online spaces for sportswomen during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games. The IOC's gender policies and efforts set the stage for sports to be seen as a powerful tool for women's empowerment and an essential symbol of gender equality.¹² Understanding how Olympians present themselves in the media sheds light on how IOC's initiatives to boost women's empowerment is mirrored in female athletes' presentation. The analysis underscores the significant role of digital media in shaping modern feminist discourses in sports, offering a nuanced understanding of gender inequality and the potential for social change in the intersection between Olympism and female athleticism.

SPORTSWOMEN'S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: A LITERATURE OVERVIEW

For decades, female athletes' presentation to a wider audience was dependent on news media gatekeepers, their agendas, and framing.¹³ However, with the advent of social media, sportswomen gained the opportunity to create their own identities in

⁹ COOKY; ANTUNOVIC. “This Isn't Just About Us”, p. 697.

¹⁰ GILL. Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility.

¹¹ BANET-WEISER. Keynote Address.

¹² ANTUNOVIC; WHITESIDE. Feminist Sports Media Studies.

¹³ GRABMÜLLEROVÁ; NÆSS. Gender equality, sport media and the Olympics, 1984-2018.

ways that can contradict the dominant sports media discourse¹⁴ and share stories that the media neglect.¹⁵ In that sense, social media have the transformative potential to empower women to create alternative narratives and discourses, challenge the patriarchal sports environment, and advance feminist agendas.¹⁶

However, Thorpe et al.¹⁷ claimed that it is the opportunity to establish alternative discourses that is transformative rather than the content that female athletes share. For example, female athletes presented themselves in somewhat more suggestive poses on Instagram,¹⁸ and while previously it would have been perceived as blatant forms of sexualisation, hypersexual pictures are now recast as declarations of active and confident sexuality.¹⁹ As Toffoletti and Thorpe stress: “It is the text used alongside such images that enables sportswomen to ‘speak to’ the image, and in so doing, perform an empowered self and thus deflect charges of objectification and passivity”.²⁰ Sportswomen on social media have a propensity to present their bodies in a manner that portrays them as in control and capable rather than objectified and passive.²¹

At the same time, female athletes are astute observers and critics of the societal expectations that surround their many and usually contradictory roles and identities,²² and they have accepted that in order to be recognized, they must often perform the feminine role. For example, the analysis by Toffoletti and Thorpe²³ of five Instagram accounts of female athletes revealed that their social media interactions with fans are driven by gender norms and arrangements that demand and reward their articulations of empowerment, entrepreneurialism, and individualization. Banet-Weiser²⁴ argued that female athletic bodies that do not conform to the heterosexual, white norm and disrupt market demands remain invisible, while those who are less controversial,

¹⁴ HEINECKEN. ‘So Tight in the Thighs, So Loose in the Waist’.

¹⁵ BRUCE. New Rules for New Times.

¹⁶ TOFFOLETTI; THORPE. ‘Female athletes’ self-representation on social media; BRUCE; HARDIN. Reclaiming our voices.

¹⁷ THORPE ET AL. Sportswomen and Social Media.

¹⁸ SMITH; SANDERSON. I’m Going to Instagram It!.

¹⁹ GILL. Empowerment/sexism.

²⁰ TOFFOLETTI; THORPE. ‘Female athletes’ self-representation on social media, p. 26.

²¹ TOFFOLETTI; THORPE. ‘Female athletes’ self-representation on social media.

²² FINK ET AL. The freedom to choose.

²³ TOFFOLETTI; THORPE. The athletic labour of femininity.

²⁴ BANET-WEISER. Keynote Address.

apolitical, and do not explicitly challenge gender norms tend to have a larger social media following. Even though feminist objective are accessible and a variety of feminist ideologies exist, the ones that acquire traction are often those that do not aim to overturn existing social structures.²⁵

A POSTFEMINIST SENSIBILITY

In this paper, I regard postfeminism as a sensibility.²⁶ 'Postfeminist sensibility', as defined by Gill, encompasses a collection of interconnected topics: a shift from viewing women as sexual objects to recognizing their agency and active participation in sexually objectifying practices; the understanding that femininity is constructed through self-surveillance and body-related practices, with an emphasis on the importance of appearance for women's success and identity; the promotion of consumerism and appearance work as empowering and enjoyable experiences. This perspective acknowledges the widespread presence of intricate and frequently conflicting conceptions of femininity. Postfeminism as a sensibility is often characterized by its support for female empowerment but also includes traditional aspects of femininity.²⁷ Initially, postfeminist sensibility promoted the idea of women being liberated and powerful, capable of making choices. However, these themes also constrained women's options to a focus on physical appeal through consumerism.²⁸ This phenomenon manifests in many ways, for example, when women exhibit agentic femininity through body language, personal consumerist choices, and acts of authenticity that alter perceptions of women from sexual objects to free, active subjects.²⁹

According to Banet-Weiser,³⁰ under these conditions, women are expected not only to combat gender discrimination but also to visibly demonstrate their entrepreneurial skills, success, well-being, and personal fulfilment in alignment with prevailing market norms. In this context, girls and women are increasingly

²⁵ BANET-WEISER. Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny.

²⁶ GILL. Postfeminist media culture.

²⁷ GILL. Critical respect.

²⁸ GILL. Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility.

²⁹ GILL. Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility; Critical respect.

³⁰ BANET-WEISER. Keynote Address: Media, Markets, Gender.

pressured by the neoliberal economic imperative to be seen as actively investing in themselves in ways that meet the demands of a market eager for women who can showcase and commodify their empowerment, confidence, and self-worth. Therefore, this study's analytical approach is situated within the 'economy of visibility' – a media landscape focused on garnering views, clicks, and likes, where certain narratives are more visible than others.³¹

METHODOLOGY

More than 1300 female athletes competed at the 2022 Winter Olympics, yet the Winter Olympics remain understudied in gendered media research.³² Most scholarship on gender and sports media focuses on the Summer Olympics, leaving winter sports and their unique media dynamics underexplored. This article aims to address this gap by centring its analysis on the Winter Olympics.

During the Olympic Games, medal success and nationalism are what drive media attention.³³ Therefore, to narrow down the sample, the first step of the data collection involved determining which female Olympians won medals at the 2022 Olympics and had a social media presence. I generated a list of 87 individual female Olympic medallists. I conducted an online search for each athlete using the most popular social media networks to find evidence of user-generated activity. If the search was not successful, I resorted to a Google search. This approach proved to be successful as I was able to identify accounts of 77 athletes. The most popular network was Instagram, where 75 athletes were present. Other social media that were considered were Facebook, Twitter (now known as X), TikTok and Weibo.

In the process of selecting athletes for analysis, the accessibility of online profiles, level of activity and multi-platform presence were considered. A key aspect in selecting athletes was their prominent public image, signifying their status as top representatives of their country, and a significant presence in traditional media outlets such as news broadcasts, advertising campaigns, and lifestyle magazines.

³¹ BANET-WEISER. Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny.

³² GEURIN; NARAINÉ. 20 years of Olympic media research.

³³ GRABMÜLLEROVÁ; NÆSS. Gender equality, sport media and the Olympics, 1984-2018; MACARTHUR ET AL. The dwindling Winter Olympic divide between male and female athletes.

Additionally, I have analysed Google trends during the Olympic period. This search confirmed that medal success indeed determines attention as all but one of the most-searched athletes were Olympic medallists. The additional name on the list was Mikaela Shiffrin, the all-time best alpine skier, who was a contender for another Olympic medal at these games but failed to win one.

Content published in connection to the Winter Olympic Games held in China from 4th February to 20th February 2022 was analysed. I looked for athletes who explicitly articulated a sense of empowerment or touched upon identified feminist issues on their social media accounts. At first, I looked at the content on their social media, linked sources, reshared content and referrals to media outlets (blogs, interviews, articles etc.). If this first search brought up a hit, I looked for additional coverage of the athlete. This search included the most popular news such as *The New York Times*, *Yahoo* or *AP News* but also nationally popular media such as *RTL Nieuws*. In the same sense, I analysed content created by the Olympics looking for 1) coverage of the selected athletes and 2) articulations of feminism, gender equality and women's empowerment. The content was frequently intermingled – stories and statements provided to the media were frequently shared on social media, and vice versa – media built their stories around athletes' social media posts. Even though the athletes included in this research came from a variety of countries, most of the postings and articles were published in English. Additional sources in athletes' native languages were translated and analysed.

In the analysis that follows, I approach the online portrayal of female Olympians as a feminist object of analysis. I use thematic analysis to examine how feminist viewpoints shape the mediated personas of female athletes. The analysis presents how articulations of empowerment and feminism are adopted in digital spaces by different advocates and stakeholders and how they circulate inside and beyond those settings – which narratives and feminist articulations achieved attention in media coverage and how they were reproduced. In order to “tell stories differently”,³⁴ the aim is not to establish a quantitative prevalence, representative or exhaustive sample but rather to explore and demonstrate how articulations of

³⁴ COOKY; ANTUNOVIC. “This Isn’t Just About Us”; ANTUNOVIC; WHITESIDE. *Feminist Sports Media Studies*.

feminism and empowerment are articulated by (some) female athletes and circulate through networked media. For those purposes, the article explores how sports media interact with athletes and how these are mutually constitutive in order to provide a deeper understanding of female athletes' presentation and how empowerment initiatives and feminism shape it.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF ANALYSIS

Rather than presenting “results” in a traditional sense, this study identifies three key dimensions of female athletes' engagement, with empowerment and feminism on social media: 1) *Narratives of Self-Empowerment* – Examining how athletes present themselves as confident and in control while navigating commercial imperatives; 2) *Challenging Masculine Hegemony* – Analysing instances where female Olympians disrupt traditional gender norms in sport; 3) *Vulnerability and Online Violence Against Women* – Investigating how sportswomen use digital platforms to discuss discrimination and harassment while facing online abuse.

NARRATIVES OF SELF-EMPOWERMENT

Jutta Leerdam is an Olympic silver medallist and one of the most popular Winter Olympians on social media. As of the latest update (January 2024), the Dutch speed skater has up to date 4.3 million followers on Instagram. On her account, Leerdam gives her audience a glimpse into the life of a successful athlete and model. She shares pictures and videos of her food, her training, competitions, and personal life. These kinds of posts provide a sense of empowerment by guiding audiences on how to take charge of their athletic performance, from the foods they consume to the sport they choose, or the training they do.³⁵

Most of the content highlights Leerdam's long blonde hair and a thin white body, both of which are characteristics of the idealised young, white, western

³⁵ KERNS. *A Postfeminist Multimodal Discourse*.

woman.³⁶ In that sense, Leerdam does not reject stereotypical representation of women; in fact, she celebrates it. Heywood and Dworkin³⁷ argue that female athletes “know exactly what they are doing” as they accept media prominence as an integral part of their identities.³⁸ From this perspective, Leerdam is an example of an empowered sportswoman who has control over her portrayal and can be “pretty and powerful” at the same time.³⁹ Her Instagram feed is full of photographs that reflect an emphasis on reclaiming femininity as strong rather than demeaning.⁴⁰

However, critiques of neo-liberal feminism call attention to the conflicting narratives that epitomise athletes like Leerdam as “savvy and sexualized, carefree yet calculating”.⁴¹ To elaborate, Leerdam framed her social media success as a coincidence, saying to *RTL Nieuws*: “It’s kind of a crazy idea that so many people like what I do. I just enjoy doing it and that people appreciate it is a nice side effect”.⁴²

However, later in the interview, she acknowledged how economically beneficial her social media presence is: “Of course, it brings great commercial value and if I can bring new parties into skating with it, that is not only super good for the sport and in this case for our team but also for my own career”.⁴³

Also in an article for the Olympic website, not only did she acknowledge the intention behind her dapper appearance on the field of play (“That’s my signature”), but was also described as a graduate student in the field of advertising and therefore, obviously knowledgeable about social media practices: “Leerdam has built up a massive following online. The marketing and commercial economics graduate has given over two million people a glimpse of life behind the scenes on the speed skating tour, sharing thrilling snippets from her races and her workouts”.⁴⁴

Leerdam not only profits from her sporting and social media success, but she is also a model and owns a speed skating school. It might seem that her attractive and carefree image conflicts with the idea of a calculated and strategic approach, but in

³⁶ THORPE ET AL. Sportswomen and Social Media.

³⁷ HEYWOOD; DWORKIN. *Built to win: The female athlete as cultural icon*, p. 85

³⁸ COCCA. Negotiating the third wave of feminism in Wonder Woman.

³⁹ BRUCE. *New Rules for New Times*, p. 369.

⁴⁰ COCCA. Negotiating the third wave of feminism in Wonder Woman.

⁴¹ THORPE ET AL. Sportswomen and Social Media, p. 373.

⁴² SAMPLONIUS; VOORTMAN. Jutta Leerdam hot op Instagram.

⁴³ SAMPLONIUS; VOORTMAN. Jutta Leerdam hot op Instagram.

⁴⁴ IOC. Jutta Leerdam’s Olympic silver brings joy to huge social media following.

fact this is central to the neo-liberal perspective.⁴⁵ She builds her brand within the social expectations of an authentic woman rather than an economically motivated businesswoman who chases money and fame. In this way, she does not challenge men's economic and cultural power. Neo-liberal feminism concentrates on the market and explores how women are more driven to become entrepreneurs and economically independent in order to control their own future.⁴⁶ This narrative has also been employed by the IOC on several occasions. For example, the IOC shared several posts about athletes with a dual career such as Elsa Desmond who is a luge Olympian and doctor.⁴⁷ In a similar way, several posts shared on Instagram account Athlete365, the IOC's official community for Olympians, guided athletes on how to use sponsorship opportunities and build their own brand.⁴⁸ In this respect, the Olympic media encourage ideals like individuality, inventiveness, and personal responsibility.

CHALLENGING MASCULINE HEGEMONY

According to Banet-Weiser⁴⁹ and the concept of the economy of visibility, those who conform to the 'white norm', are apolitical, and less controversial tend to have a larger social media following. Despite this logic, Eileen Gu, one of the most prominent sportswomen of the Beijing Olympics, is neither white nor uncontroversial. The American-born skier who represents China has 6.6 million followers on the Chinese social media platform Weibo and 1.9 million on Instagram. Gu is not only a talented freestyle skier but also a model, a Stanford student, and an influencer. In 2019, she announced she would no longer represent Team USA and that she would be competing for China at the 2022 Beijing Olympics. While her decision was widely perceived as controversial due to the state of US-China relations, Gu was prominently featured in the organizing committee's promotions as well as in the communication channels of the IOC. Gu tried to distance herself from any political comments or questions about her citizenship. Instead, she

⁴⁵ THORPE ET AL. Sportswomen and Social Media.

⁴⁶ THORPE ET AL. Sportswomen and Social Media.

⁴⁷ IOC (@OLYMPICS). Not all heroes wear capes.

⁴⁸ ATHLETE365. @athlete365.

⁴⁹ BANET-WEISER. Keynote Address.

portrayed herself as an inspiration to others. In an interview with *The New York Times*, she stated: “I do corks in an icy, 22-foot, U-shaped snow structure. That’s not political. It’s pushing the human limit and it’s connecting people”.⁵⁰ But on her Weibo account, she wrote: “I hope that through my pursuit of the extreme sport, I could enhance interaction, understanding and friendship between the Chinese and American people”.⁵¹

For apnews.com, she justified her decision: “In the U.S., growing up I had so many amazing idols to look up to. In China, there are a lot fewer of those. I’d have a much greater impact in China than in the U.S., and that’s ultimately why I made that decision”.⁵²

Gu’s social media posts exhibit a fusion of her choice to present herself as an active subject and an inspiration to young women. In her posts, she presents herself simultaneously as a confident skier who is “in love with fear”⁵³ and a model offering her “olympic lookbook”.⁵⁴ Most commonly, however, she stressed her choice to be an inspiration to young women:

[...] I was resolute to achieve the two equally ambitious goals of 1) competing in the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and 2) spreading the (then-unheard of) sport of freeskiing in China. Having been introduced to the sport growing up in the US, I wanted to encourage Chinese skiers the same way my American role models inspired me [...].

[...] I’ve always said my goal is to globally spread the sport I love to kids, especially girls, and to shift sport culture toward one motivated by passion. Now, after hearing that over 300 MILLION Chinese people have started winter sports for fun, I’m blown away by how far we have come [...].⁵⁵

Gu is competing in freestyle skiing, one of the most dangerous sports in the Winter Olympics,⁵⁶ that is stereotypically perceived as more masculine. The narrative of challenging male hegemony is another manifestation of feminism in Gu’s self-presentation. During her Beijing 2022 press conference, Gu commented on how she perceives her participation such sport:

⁵⁰ BRANCH. Eileen Gu Is Trying to Soar Over the Geopolitical Divide.

⁵¹ EILEEN GU (@青蛙公主爱凌).

⁵² PELLIS. *Risk-taker Eileen Gu makes China an Olympic force on snow.*

⁵³ EILEEN GU (@eileen_gu_). “I got published in the @nytimes!!!”.

⁵⁴ EILEEN GU (@eileen_gu_). “Olympic lookbook thus far with special appreciation for my mom...”.

⁵⁵ EILEEN GU (@eileen_gu_). “I was ‘coaching’ a small Chinese trampoline summer camp in Beijing...”.

⁵⁶ SOLIGARD ET AL. Sports injury and illness incidence in the PyeongChang 2018 Olympic Winter Games.

Extreme sports, we all know, are heavily dominated by men and stereotypically it has not had the kind of representation and sporting equity that it should. So I think that as a young biracial woman, it is super important to be able to reach those milestones and to be able to push boundaries, not only my own boundaries but those of the sport and those of the record books because that's what paves the paths for the next generations of girls.⁵⁷

Previous studies have shown that challenging 'traditional male concepts of sport' can lead to athletes' empowerment, self-discovery and progress.⁵⁸ During the conference, Gu was repeatedly asked by media representatives about her citizenship, but Gu made her mission at the Olympics clear: "We are all out here together, pushing the sport together, especially women's skiing." She further recognised the power her public prominence gave her: "I am using my voice to create as much positive change as I can." Although Gu has addressed the gendered challenges in her sport, media inquiries have predominantly centred on her citizenship and, at best, her success. This mirrors the postfeminist media culture that neglects the underlying structural barriers and the broader systemic challenges faced by women in sports.⁵⁹

VULNERABILITY AND ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

To be successful online, female athletes are expected to market their glamorous sports lifestyle and conform to the expectations of what a female athlete should look like.⁶⁰ However, against this rationale, some athletes choose to portray a more realistic aspect of Olympic participation, highlighting instances of sexism and discrimination they encounter in their sport or the broader sports community, and using their platforms to amplify the voices of other women and demand change. Yet, these athletes still experience great popularity on social media.

Mikaela Shiffrin, three-times Olympic medallist in alpine skiing, was a favourite for another gold in Beijing. Before the 2022 Olympics, Shiffrin was portrayed as an athlete who is in control of her performance. The Olympics shared

⁵⁷ EILEEN GU (@eileen_gu_). "I was 'coaching' a small Chinese trampoline summer camp in Beijing...".

⁵⁸ CRONAN; SCOTT. Triathlon and Women's Narratives of Bodies and Sport.

⁵⁹ GILL. Post-postfeminism?: new feminist visibilities in postfeminist times.

⁶⁰ TOFFOLETTI; THORPE. The athletic labour of femininity.

Shiffrin's quote: "You need to find the mentality to perform at your best".⁶¹ However, Shiffrin failed to meet the medal expectations and did not finish her two main disciplines (slalom and giant slalom). Shiffrin was open about her "epic underperformance"⁶² and on her Instagram, she stated:

The girl who failed...could also fly. It's wonderful to train and compete alongside all of these courageous and incredible women, who have overcome so much in their life, just to get here. But being here can really hurt too. There's a lot of disappointment and heartbreak going around in the finish area, but there's also a lot of support. [...] It's a lot to digest in just one event...let alone the whole rollercoaster ride of an entire Olympics.⁶³

Not only must Shiffrin's Olympic experience have been difficult, but during the Games, she also became a target of virtual hate. On her social media, she shared messages she received calling her 'a disgrace', 'dumb bitch', or 'loser'.⁶⁴ Major events such as the Olympics are for most athletes a high-pressure and stressful experience. Social media often offer them an escape, relaxation and positive reinforcement.⁶⁵ However, social media can be both empowering and oppressive; they can provide a platform for aggression, harassment, and marginalization.⁶⁶ While social media have shown to be beneficial to athletes in many ways, it is also clear that with more interactivity comes the possibility of exploitation and abuse.⁶⁷ This is especially concerning since social media have become a place of falsely perceived proximity, freedom of expression, and stronger influence, which creates an 'ideal' environment for abuse. While online abuse is widespread across all sports and athletes as well as coaches, officials, and other stakeholders have all been the targets,⁶⁸ female athletes are the most vulnerable group.⁶⁹

Speaking up against violence and injustice against women, like Shiffrin did, is a fundamental feminist value that has historically led to societal and legislative

⁶¹ ATHLETE365 (@athlete365). It's the biggest sporting stage on earth.

⁶² OLYMPICS.COM. Mikaela Shiffrin wanted to 'melt off the face of the earth' at Beijing 2022.

⁶³ MIKAELA SHIFFRIN (@mikaelashiffrin). "The girl who failed...".

⁶⁴ MIKAELA SHIFFRIN (@mikaelashiffrin). Twitter.

⁶⁵ HAYES ET AL. An exploration of the distractions inherent to social media use among athletes.

⁶⁶ LITCHFIELD ET AL. Social media and the politics of gender, race and identity: The case of Serena Williams.

⁶⁷ KAVANAGH ET AL. Virtual technologies as tools of maltreatment.

⁶⁸ KAVANAGH ET AL. Towards typologies of virtual maltreatment.

⁶⁹ OSBORNE ET AL. Freedom for Expression or a Space of Oppression?.

changes as well as the empowerment of other survivors to speak up. Shiffrin's testimonial elicited a response from several other female athletes. For example, multiple Olympic medallist Simone Biles commented on Shiffrin's post: "I know this all too well. I'm sorry you're experiencing this! people suck..."⁷⁰ At the same time, the hostile environment that female athletes can experience online forced some to leave social media altogether. For example, the gold medallist in alpine skiing, Lara Gut-Behrami, decided to be completely absent from social media after being insulted on her Instagram. The increasing number of athletes speaking out about online and offline violence and the rise of a collective voice in response to the dangers of online spaces is alarming and necessitates further attention in academic literature.

DISRUPTION OF JOURNALISTIC PRACTICES

Despite some improvements, female athletes remain underrepresented, sexualized, and portrayed ambivalently in sports media coverage.⁷¹ However, the accessibility of the internet and the widespread use of social media provide a space for the disruption of such journalistic practices. The ubiquitous narrative of sportswomen's empowerment is demonstrated in a quote from Austrian Snowboarder and twice Olympic Gold medallist, Anna Gasser: "Women are here, women are hungry, and they are not holding back anymore".⁷² Not only are they *here*, but they are not afraid to be themselves and call out journalists who do not portray them respectfully. Swedish journalist Tomas Petterson expressed suspicion that Russian cross-country skier Veronika Stepanova cheated on her way to a bronze medal in Beijing.⁷³ It didn't take long before Stepanova responded on her Instagram with a provocative picture of herself leaning towards the camera suggesting that Petterson "check in her undies": "I have a suggestion, Tomas why don't you demand to do a check in my undies [...]. That headline surely would sell better, don't you think?!".⁷⁴

⁷⁰ MIKAELA SHIFFRIN (@mikaelashiffrin). Twitter.

⁷¹ FINK. Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex; GRABMÜLLEROVÁ; NÆSS. Gender equality, sport media and the Olympics, 1984-2018.

⁷² BUSBEE. The story of the 2022 Beijing Olympics.

⁷³ PETTERSON. Varför känns det som vi kan ha blivit lurade?.

⁷⁴ VERONIKA STEPANOVA (@stepanova_nika01). Комментарию шведской.

She was not the only one who expressed dissatisfaction about her portrayal in the news. Fellow cross-country skier, American gold medallist Jessie Diggins, called out *New York Times* journalist Matthew Futterman who wrote: “In a sport that has so many women with massive shoulders and thighs, Diggins looks like a sprite in her racing suit, and it’s not clear exactly where she gets her power”.⁷⁵

Diggins, who previously suffered from an eating disorder,⁷⁶ objected to the article on her Instagram:

[...] I was only able to get to those start lines because I am healthy, happy and have a loving and supportive team around me. [...] The New York Times article that compared my body to the incredible women around me was harmful in many ways. So I want to be clear on this: as coaches, parents, teammates and friends, please, please do not comment on someone else’s body, shape and size. Let’s keep the focus on the things that really matter – being a great teammate, mental strength, competing clean, training with purpose and racing with guts.⁷⁷

Sexism in sports media has evolved, now implying that female athletes must independently ensure they receive fair and accurate coverage.⁷⁸ Instances of sexist portrayal, ambivalence, or a lack of coverage are often framed as issues for female athletes to address themselves. Some athletes, like Stepanova and Diggins, have actively challenged what they perceive as unfair or improper coverage. Their opposition to such portrayals has itself become newsworthy, garnering attention in the news media.⁷⁹

REFLECTION ON THE DATA

Traditionally, female Olympians have used social media to share their sporting achievements, personal lives, and emotions,⁸⁰ while often not highlighting the hard work and struggles that accompany them.⁸¹ The current landscape has shifted, with

⁷⁵ FUTTERMAN. Jessie Diggins wins bronze in the individual sprint, her second Olympic medal.

⁷⁶ DIGGINS; SMITH. *Brave Enough*.

⁷⁷ JESSIE DIGGINS (@jessiediggins). “Working on a blog post about the Games [...]”

⁷⁸ TOFFOLETTI. Analyzing Media Representations of Sportswomen.

⁷⁹ FOSSEN. Stepanova holder; PERKINS. New York Times ignites backlash from female athletes.

⁸⁰ E.g. LEBEL; DANYLCHUK. How Tweet It Is; PEGORARO. Look Who’s Talking; GEURIN. Elite Female Athletes’ Perceptions of New Media Use Relating to Their Careers; THORPE; TOFFOLETTI; BRUCE. Sportswomen and Social Media.

⁸¹ TOFFOLETTI; THORPE. ‘Female athletes’ self-representation on social media.

sportswomen in this study candidly sharing both the triumphs and tribulations of their Olympic journeys. They provide a holistic view of their experiences, from showcasing their fashionable outfits to addressing online abuse. While scholars have advised caution in what athletes share online to protect their professional image⁸² and emphasized the need for PR knowledge and professional conduct,⁸³ these recommendations seem to underestimate the deliberate and independent actions of athletes on social media.⁸⁴ As exemplified by Jutta Leerdam, there are indeed conscious decisions and strategies behind their social media personas. Leerdam herself has acknowledged crafting her online image with intentionality, as revealed in her interview with *RTL Nieuws*: “I don't always show real life on Insta, why should I?” This indicates that the authenticity audiences feel when following their favourite athletes is often the result of a strategic and self-aware approach.

The digital era, especially social media, has emerged as a double-edged sword: it empowers (sports)women to dictate their narratives, yet it also burdens them with the management of their public persona. The obligation to maintain an active social media presence can be a distraction,⁸⁵ as well as a source of stress and significant time investment.⁸⁶ Therefore, it can be inferred that athletes who amass significant followings do so with targeted intent. After long being side-lined by mainstream media, social media have offered them a means to 'own' their media representation and reap economic benefits. Moreover, the portrayal of strong, independent, and inspiring women has been echoed in news media, reflecting a postfeminist media trend that celebrates individual achievement but may neglect the structural obstacles faced by women in sports.

The attention sportswomen receive during the Olympics not only helps them to build a social media audience but also empowers them to challenge traditional media narratives and share their perspectives on specific issues.⁸⁷ Lebel and Danylchuk suggest that this shift “acts as strong evidence of the power collapse

⁸² GEURIN-EAGLEMAN; BURCH. Communicating via photographs.

⁸³ LEBEL; DANYLCHUK. How Tweet It Is.

⁸⁴ GEURIN. How Tweet It Is.

⁸⁵ HAYES ET AL. An exploration of the distractions inherent to social media use among athletes.

⁸⁶ POCOCK; SKEY. “You feel a need to inspire and be active on these sites otherwise”.

⁸⁷ KANE ET AL. Exploring Elite Female Athletes' Interpretations of Sport Media Images.

occurring in a once-omnipotent institution” and illustrates “the influence the online platform holds to affect social change”.⁸⁸ Athletes like Shiffrin, Diggins, and Gu have used the visibility provided by the Olympics to amplify their (feminist) voices and address pressing social concerns, contributing to the cause of social change. By sharing their personal stories, they serve as an empowering source of inspiration and motivation for others facing similar challenges. This resurgence in feminist activism is a beacon of hope, yet it unfolds in a context characterized by heightened misogyny and the co-optation of feminist ideals by neoliberal forces, underscoring the persistent importance and flexibility of feminist thought in today's society.

CONCLUSION

This article has contributed to the field by offering a conceptual framework for understanding how stories about female athletes can be told differently. By linking a core principle of Olympism with feminist theorization, alongside empirical data drawn from female athletes' self-presentation across various media platforms, this study challenges traditional sports media studies that often focus on a single source of data.⁸⁹ By examining athletes' portrayals across multiple media, it becomes evident that a holistic analysis is necessary to fully grasp the complexity of women's representation in sport. As demonstrated in this study, the cross-examination of diverse sources provides a more nuanced understanding and challenges the “almost obligatory recitation” of discrimination in sports media.⁹⁰

However, this research also reveals the tension between empowerment and the continuing societal expectations placed on women in sport, particularly concerning their physical appearance, body work, and commodification of their identities. The rise of social media has indeed allowed female athletes to present themselves on their own terms, but this autonomy is often tempered by postfeminist expectations that align empowerment with consumerism and body image. In this way, the digital spaces that promise freedom and empowerment also operate within the

⁸⁸ LEBEL; DANYLCHUK. *How Tweet It Is*, p. 477.

⁸⁹ ANTUNOVIC; WHITESIDE. *Feminist Sports Media Studies*.

⁹⁰ BRUCE. *New Rules for New Times*, p. 367.

neoliberal framework that pressures women to conform to market-driven ideals. These contradictions reveal the complex nature of feminist thinking in sport, where empowerment is not a straightforward path but one that involves negotiating various, sometimes conflicting, demands.

The limitations of this study, particularly its focus on the Winter Olympics and athletes from the northern hemisphere, suggest the need for further research that takes a more global and cross-cultural approach to the representation of female athletes. Future studies could explore the diverse experiences of athletes from different regions, offering a broader understanding of how gender and cultural contexts intersect in the media representation of women in sport. Additionally, engaging directly with athletes through interviews would provide a deeper insight into their experiences of using social media to craft their identities, allowing for a richer understanding of both the benefits and challenges they face in these digital spaces.

Ultimately, this article highlights the need for a critical perspective on the role of women in sport, not only in terms of their visibility and representation but also in examining the societal forces that continue to shape those representations. The intersection of Olympism, feminism, and media presents a powerful space for contesting and reshaping narratives around gender, performance, and power in sport. The ongoing exploration of these dynamics will be essential for creating more inclusive, diverse, and empowering representations of women in sports media.

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