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#SheBelieves: the use of Instagram to frame the US Women's Soccer Team during #FIFAWWC

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine of the representation of women athletes during the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. More specifically, we examined how individuals used various event-related hashtags (ie #SheBelieves and #FIFAWWC) on Instagram during the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup to frame identity, and challenge or reinforce gender stereotypes from the bottom-up. A content analysis of athlete photos containing #FIFAWWC ($n = 706$) and athlete photos containing #SheBelieves ($n = 629$) revealed that users primarily portrayed women athletes as athletically competent. Specifically, nearly 90% of Instagram posts containing either #FIFAWWC or #SheBelieves portrayed athletes in either athletic action or preparing for athletic action. These findings demonstrate that social media provide an opportunity to challenge gender stereotypes in women's sports and thereby illustrate that social media users are willing to create their own frames around women athletes.

Women have made significant gains in the field of sport with more sporting opportunities than ever before. However, the quantity of media coverage for women's sports on television news remains disproportionately low when compared to men's sports (Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015). When they do receive coverage by traditional media outlets, the portrayal of women athletes continues to be gendered (e.g. focusing on femininity or one's role as a mother). This supports the work of Meân and Kassing (2008) who argued that 'gender remains the primary categorization of women athletes, re/producing female athletes as women who play sport rather than as athletes first and foremost' (127). While Cooky, Messner, and Musto (2015) suggested that sexualized coverage of women athletes is dissipating, they also noted that media outlets often cover women's sports in a manner that conforms to conventional gender norms.

To date, there is a large body of research that has found that women athletes are often portrayed through visuals in a manner that emphasize their femininity and heterosexuality more than their athletic competence (eg Jones 2006; Daniels and Wartena 2011; Weber

and Barker-Ruchti 2012). These portrayals often reaffirm traditional notions of femininity and heterosexuality (LaVoi and Kane 2011). Kane and Maxwell (2011) expressed how this practice of focusing on sexuality perpetuates the notion that sexualizing women athletes is the only way to sell women's sports and thereby generate fan interest. All in all, these media practices provide reassurance that women can be fully engaged in competitive sports but not in ways that are deemed too threatening to conventional gender norms (Boyle, Millington, and Vertinsky 2006).

While numerous scholars have analyzed the role traditional media plays in reinforcing gender stereotypes, few researchers have examined the portrayal of women athletes by individual users via social media platforms. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by focusing on posts from the general users (eg individuals who utilized a hashtag) of a social media platform. Previous research on gender and social media has centred primarily on more text-based mediums such as blogs (eg Clavio and Eagleman 2011) and Twitter (eg Lebel and Danylchuk 2014). Recently, visual-based platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat have increased in popularity with both users (Duggan et al. 2015) and researchers (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch 2015; Smith and Sanderson 2015). Duggan et al. (2015) indicated that roughly half (53%) of internet-using young adults aged 18–29 use Instagram and 26% of all adults online use the platform. In addition, half of all Instagram users (49%) use the site daily (Duggan et al. 2015). Given the inherently visual nature of Instagram, and its rising popularity, it was selected as the platform for this study.

The World Cup is one of the most watched sporting events in the world (Molinaro 2014), which makes it a worthy avenue of investigation. Attendance at the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup surpassed 1.2 million, setting a record for the Women's World Cup (Harwell 2015). Additionally, US television ratings for the Women's World Cup topped the NBA Finals and The Stanley Cup Final (Harwell 2015). Finally, this event received a significant amount of attention on social media (Chittal and Harjai 2015), with the final match between the US and Japan receiving over 2.5 million Tweets alone, compared to just 430,000 for the final match of the 2011 Women's World Cup (Lewis 2015). This social media attention was also evident on Instagram, with individuals utilizing hashtags and images to create their own self-constructed narrative that contextualized accomplishments and identity on behalf of the women athletes involved in the event.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the visual representation of women athletes during the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup through various event related hashtags (ie #SheBelieves and #FIFAWWC) on the social media platform Instagram. More specifically, we examined the visual images that individual users posted to identify how these users frame identity, and challenge or reinforce gender stereotypes from the bottom-up (Nisbet 2010). While sport-specific research has begun to explore the utilization of Instagram, the analyses have focused primarily on the self-presentation tactics of athletes (ie Geurin-Eagleman and Burch 2015; Smith and Sanderson 2015) rather than framing conducted by the general user population. Therefore, this study is significant as it assists in developing an understanding of the bottom-up framing of women athletes conducted by individual users on a visual-centric social media platform.

Literature review

Gender, sport and media

In a recent iteration of their research focusing on gender coverage in televised sports, Cooky, Messner, and Musto (2015) summarized over 25 years of scholarly work dedicated to this topic, including studies of live televised sports, and various forms of news media (print, social, online and televised). They found that with a few exceptions (ie the Olympics and some collegiate-based media outlets), that the vast majority of media coverage centres on men's sport. Cooky, Messner, and Musto (2015) suggested that coverage of women athletes has changed over time from overt sexualizing to viewing these women in their role as mothers. While the portrayal of women athletes has changed, there still remains a dearth of coverage of women's sports. Additionally, when women's sports do receive coverage, it is often delivered in a matter-of-fact, dull manner as opposed to the amplified delivery of men's sports.

There is a significant body of research that has examined differences in traditional media coverage for men and women athletes. This research found that women athletes are often depicted in feminine ways, including frequent mentions of their families or personal lives, while men athletes are often portrayed as more powerful and dominant (eg Knight and Giuliano 2002, 2003). Much of this research has also focused on how mass media visually portrays women athletes in both broadcast media and photographs (eg Fink and Kensicki 2002; Hardin, Lynn, and Walsdorf 2005; Jones 2006; Billings and Angelini 2007; Angelini, MacArthur, and Billings 2012).

The investigation of the portrayal of women athletes in new online media is in the nascent stages. In the online realm, Jones (2013) investigated photographic coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games and found that men athletes were 1.6 times more likely to be the subject of photographs on digital sites. Recently, scholars have turned their attention to investigating the topic of gender portrayals and gender performance within the realm of social media. Examining the 10 most popular sports blogs in the United States, Clavio and Eagleman (2011) found that men received significantly more photographic coverage than did women. Additionally, the authors discovered that photos of sportswomen were 'far more likely to be sexually suggestive in nature' (295). In their analysis of self-presentation among women and men tennis players on Twitter, Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) found that both men and women utilized backstage (ie candid) performances more often than front-stage (ie calculated) performances. Overall, they discovered that men utilized the role of super fan most often, while women utilized the brand manager role more often than men, indicating a persistence of hegemonic values.

To date, limited sport-specific research has examined Instagram use as it pertains to gender. This research has focused primarily on self-presentation tactics of athletes. Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2015) found that women were more likely to share personal photos from private settings, while men posted a variety of photos, which encouraged more engagement among followers. Smith and Sanderson (2015) analyzed the Instagram feeds of both men and women professional athletes. They found that women athletes utilized more active photos than men athletes. This finding ran counter to past research which indicated that women are more likely to be shown in a more passive role (ie on the sidelines) thereby demonstrating that women athletes are using social media platforms to counteract traditional media narratives.

The work of Smith and Sanderson (2015) aligns with the research of Toni Bruce. Specifically, Bruce (2016) found that the utilization of social media has led to the emergence of two new rules for sportswomen. She refers to these rules as *our voices* and *pretty and powerful*. With regard to *our voices*, social media has allowed sportswomen to gain control of communicating their 'sporting truths' (369) to the masses. In terms of *pretty and powerful*, Bruce claims that social media platforms allow for discourse to appear that stresses the notion that femininity is empowering, which is in 'stark contrast to sexualization' (369) that prevailed traditional media coverage of women athletes for decades. The emergence of these new rules related to communication via social media makes it particularly interesting to examine how individual users frame women athletes via Instagram.

Framing

According to Entman (1993), the framing process selects various aspects of reality, making them more salient through the selection, emphasis and exclusion of information. It is through these functions that news frames help establish meaning regarding issues within society (Zaharopoulos 2007). In addition to establishing meaning regarding issues, the framing process has been said to reflect the dominant norms and values within a society (Endres 2004).

Sport-specific research concerned with the framing of gender has focused primarily on two events, the NCAA Basketball Tournament and the Olympic Games. Research dedicated to the Men's and Women's Basketball Tournaments has found differences in terms of how the athletes are framed in coverage. For example, Billings, Halone, and Denham (2002) discovered that men were discussed more in terms of their physicality, while commentary on women athletes was dedicated more to the athlete's personality and appearance. In their analysis of print media coverage of the 2006 Men's and Women's Basketball tournaments, Kian, Vincent, and Mondello (2008) found that women athletes' successes were framed in constant competition to men athletes.

With regard to the Olympic Games, previous research has revealed that women athletes were framed in ways to highlight their femininity (Billings and Eastman 2002; Hardin et al. 2002). In terms of framing the successes and failures of Olympic athletes, differences exist between men and women. Within media coverage, men athletes' successes were attributed to factors such as composure, intelligence and determination, while their failures were attributed to a lack of dedication (Angelini, MacArthur, and Billings 2012). Women athletes' successes were credited to concentration, experience and perceived courage, while their failures were a result of an overall lack of strength (Billings et al. 2008; Angelini and Billings 2010). Additionally, Jones (2006) found that women athletes were more likely to be presented in passive shots, while Bissell and Duke (2007) discovered that camera angles and photos focused primarily on the physical appearance of women athletes.

While various studies have examined framing practices on traditional media platforms, the emergence of social media (eg Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) has provided an opportunity for scholars to extend framing research into the online realm. Social media platforms help to expand the potential reach of news and information through the rapid dissemination of information (Sanderson and Hambrick 2012), while also providing users

with the ability to advance certain frames or reframe issues (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013). Specifically, the examination of social media platforms has allowed scholars to look beyond traditional media producers and examine framing from individuals who are consistent content contributors and actively engaged in the dissemination of online information. This phenomenon is referred to as bottom-up framing (see Nisbet 2010). Scholars have applied bottom-up framing in a sport context to an examine user framing of the Vancouver Riots (which occurred after Vancouver lost Game 7 of the NHL Stanley Cup Finals in 2011) on Twitter (Burch, Frederick, and Pegoraro 2015). Most recently, bottom-up and networked framing were employed to analyze the differences and similarities between content in newspaper articles dedicated to the Sochi Olympics and content within Tweets utilizing #SochiProblems (Frederick, Pegoraro, and Burch 2016). The authors found both a convergence and divergence of content, with some content being organically conceived on Twitter.

Both of the previously mentioned bottom-up framing studies focused on analyzing framing via text presented on Twitter. To date, limited sport-specific research has focused on visual framing through social media. Visual framing can be defined as 'the selection of one view, scene, or angle when making the image, cropping, editing or selecting it' (Coleman 2010, 237). Previous visual research has indicated that the unique features of pictures allow them to be more readily available in memory and perceptions than text (Coleman 2010). As Jones (2006) stated, 'Photographs tell stories. They are 'so much a part of our daily lives we rarely think about how they influence us and what that influence is' (108).

The study of gender through visuals is critical as visual images are processed without much conscious thought, and the information contained in these visuals are processed through an individual's preexisting schemas (Coleman 2010). The brain initially processes visual images in an automatic, unconscious way and viewers are less likely to notice any implicit meaning thereby allowing visual frames to convey meaning that would be protested as inappropriate if it were conveyed in words (Messaris and Abraham 2001; Coleman 2010). In this way, visual framing can render gender stereotyping less obvious than verbal framing (Messaris and Abraham 2001). Previous visual analysis research in political science has demonstrated that women politicians receive significantly more coverage of their gender, marital status and children (Witt, Paget, and Matthews 1994; Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart 2001), and more attention is given to their personal lives, personalities and appearances than their men colleagues (Devitt 1999).

While sport-specific social media research has begun to apply bottom-up framing to understand the narratives being created by everyday content contributors, limited consideration has been paid to whether social media users reinforce traditional or progressive gender norms during major sporting events using networked framing. In addition, little to no attention has been paid to the visuals that social media users select and circulate related to gender. Therefore, based on existing literature and identified gaps, the following research questions were selected to guide this study:

RQ1: How are individuals using Instagram to frame women athletes during the FIFA Women's World Cup?

RQ2: How did the framing of athletes change over the time period of the FIFA Women's World Cup?

Table 1. Code book for athlete pictures.

Category	Definition	Literature
Athletic Action	Athlete is actively engaged in a sport and dressed in athletic apparel. On-court, in action	Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2015) and Kane, LaVoi, and Fink (2013)
Dressed but posed	Image with emphasis on athleticism Athlete is dressed in athletic apparel but posed for the photograph. Athlete is not engaged in athletic activity at the time of the photo	Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2015)
Mixed message	Off-court, posed image with athletic marker but emphasis on femininity vs. athleticism	Kane, LaVoi, and Fink (2013)
Non-sport setting	Athlete dressed in nonathletic apparel and photographed in an on athletic setting, such as at home with his/her family	Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2015)
Enhanced femininity	Off-court, posed image with no athletic marker, in fashionable attire	Kane, LaVoi, and Fink (2013)
Sexually suggestive	Athlete dressed provocatively or photographed in such a way as to focus solely on sexual attributes. Off-court, posed image that emphasizes sexual objectification (eg seminude/nude)	Geurin-Eagleman and Burch 2015 Kane, LaVoi, and Fink (2013)
Combination	Photo collage or multiple images of an athlete appear in the Instagram photo and these fit more than one category above	Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2015)

Methodology

To answer RQ1, data were collected using Hashtracking software (Pegoraro et al. 2015) from two hashtags on Instagram during the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup, one created by US Soccer in support of the Women's team (#SheBelieves), arguably the most recognized team in the event, and the official hashtag of the event (#FIFAWWC). A purposeful sample of images from throughout the duration of the month long event was drawn from each hashtag. Photos were selected for all games the United States played for both hashtags. This produced a data-set of photos from the preliminary round games (8, 12, 16 June); second stage games (22, 26, 30 June); and the final game (5 July). The next step was to construct a time period for sampling, which was set at one hour before the game through to one hour after the game had ended. Once this time frame was set, every fifth picture in the resulting sample was selected for analysis. The data collection software provided sufficient information on the users who posted to identify an individual user account versus a corporate, media, team, league or athlete account. For the purposes of the study, only posts from individual users were retained. This resulted in a sample size of $n = 2,109$ photos for #FIFAWWC and $n = 1,478$ photos for #SheBelieves.

Since the intent of this study was to analyse only photos containing athletes, it was necessary to isolate these images in the sample. Therefore, the photos were first coded as either Athlete photos (eg photos of athletes involved in the FIFA Women's World Cup) or Fan photos (eg photos that fans took of themselves and posted to the hashtag). This resulted in $n = 706$ Athlete Photos from #FIFAWWC and $n = 629$ Athlete Photos from #SheBelieves. Content analysis methodology was then employed using a coding framework based on Geurin-Eagleman and Burch (2015) and Kane, LaVoi, and Fink (2013) which included the following categories: *Athletic Action*, *Dressed but Posed*, *Mixed Message*, *Non-Sport Setting*,

Enhanced Femininity, Sexually Suggestive and Combo. Table 1 provides the complete definitions for these coding categories.

Coders and Reliability

The study employed two coders, each with previous experience in content analysis. A coder training session was undertaken as was a pilot coding session to establish reliability. Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2005) indicated there are three criteria to consider when selecting a sample for a reliability test: total number of units to be coded, the desired degree of confidence in the reliability assessment and the degree of precision desired in the assessment. For this study ($n = 1,335$), the desired level of confidence was set at 90% and the acceptable level of agreement was set at 85%. This led to a required sample size of 100 photos that were then randomly selected from dates not included in the study and coded independently (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 2005). Inter-coder reliability scores for the pilot were calculated using Cohen's Kappa to test for chance agreement (Wimmer and Dominick 2006) with scores ranging from a low of 0.85 (*Athletic Action*) to a high of 0.99 (*Non-Sport Setting*). All scores were above the minimal acceptable range of .70 (Wimmer and Dominick 2006) meeting the degree of precision (.85) set for the study. Following the inter-coder reliability testing the total sample of 1,335 photos was divided evenly and coded independently.

Results

With regard to RQ1, the analysis of the photographs shared on #FIFAWWC and #SheBelieves revealed that overall social media users chose to frame the women athletes as just that – athletes (see Tables 2 and 3 for coding results). For both hashtags, the majority of photos shared were coded as *Athletic Action*, with 74.08% of all photos on #FIFAWWC and 57.23% of all photos from #SheBelieves falling into this coding category. For both hashtags, the second most prominent category was *Dressed but Posed* (15.30% for #FIFAWWC and 32.75% for #SheBelieves) indicating that users were also sharing photos of the athletes in their uniforms, but off the field of play. Together these two categories which focus on framing the athletes as just that – athletes, comprised the vast majority of photos shared by social media users on Instagram, with 89.38% of photos on #FIFAWWC and 89.98% of photos on #SheBelieves falling into these two categories.

The results also showed that there were no photos in the sample from either hashtag that were coded as *Enhanced Femininity* or *Sexually Suggestive*. Also, the #SheBelieves sample did not contain any *Mixed Message* photos, while there were only 3 photos (0.42%) in the #FIFAWWC sample that displayed a *Mixed Message*. Photos of athletes in *Non-Sports Setting* were also a minority in the data with only 2.41% of the photos on #FIFAWWC and 0.32% of the photos on #SheBelieves falling into this category. Lastly, the *Combination* category accounted for 7.79% and 9.70% of the samples for #FIFAWWC and #SheBelieves, respectively.

The changes in categories over the time span of the FIFA Women's World Cup were examined in order to determine how framing may have changed over time (RQ2). For this RQ, only the top two categories of *Athletic Action* and *Dressed but Posed* were included for analysis given that almost 90% of photos for both hashtags fell into these two categories. The results for #FIFAWWC did not yield any discernable trends, with percentages in the top category of *Athletic Action* starting at 72.55% on 8 June and then ranging from a low

Table 2. Results #FIFAWWC.

Game date	Athletic action	%	Dressed, but posed	%	Mixed message	%	Non-sport setting	%	Enhanced femininity	%	Sexually suggestive	%	Combo	%	Total	%
08-June	74	72.55	20	19.61	0	0	1	0.98	0	0	0	0	7	6.86	102	14.45
12-June	55	74.32	15	20.27	2	2.70	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2.70	74	10.48
16-June	52	65.00	19	23.75	0	0	1	1.25	0	0	0	0	8	10.00	80	11.33
22-June	54	75.00	11	15.28	0	0	3	4.17	0	0	0	0	4	5.56	72	10.20
26-June	47	71.21	10	15.15	1	2	5	8	0	0	0	0	3	4.55	66	9.35
30-June	77	75.49	10	9.80	0	0	5	4.90	0	0	0	0	10	9.80	102	14.45
05-July	164	78.10	23	10.95	0	0	2	0.95	0	0	0	0	21	10.00	210	29.75
Total	523	74.08	108	15.30	3	0.42	17	2.41	0	0	0	0	55	7.79	706	100.00

Table 3. Results #SheBelieves.

Game date	Athletic action	%	Dressed, but posed	%	Mixed message	%	Non-sport setting	%	Enhanced femininity	%	Sexually suggestive	%	Combo	%	Total	%
08-June	41	38.68	63	59.43	0	0	1	0.94	0	0	0	0	1	0.94	106	16.85
12-June	24	55.81	19	44.19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00	43	6.84
16-June	23	46.94	23	46.94	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	6.12	49	7.79
22-June	31	44.29	29	41.43	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	14.29	70	11.13
26-June	39	60.00	18	27.69	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	12.31	65	10.33
30-June	128	77.11	26	15.66	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	7.23	166	26.39
05-July	74	56.92	28	21.54	0	0	1	0.77	0	0	0	0	27	20.77	130	20.67
Totals	360	57.23	206	32.75	0	0	2	0.32	0	0	0	0	61	9.70	629	100

of 65% of photos shared on 16 June, to a high of 78.10% on 5 July with the average over the event being 74.08% as noted above. The category of *Dressed but Posed* exhibited a similar trend, starting at 19.61% of the sample, with a low of 9.80% on 30 June and a high of 23.75% on 16 June. For those same categories within images containing #SheBelieves, we see a different result, with the category of *Athletic Action* trending upwards throughout the event, starting as 38.68% of the sample on 8 June, reaching a high of 77.11% on 30 June, with an overall average of 57.23% as noted above. The trend for *Dressed but Posed* was a decreasing one, starting on a high of 59.43% on 8 June, with a low of 15.66% on 30 June, with an overall average of 32.75%.

Discussion

The results of the content analysis help demonstrate the evolution of the portrayal of women athletes by users of new media. As noted, research has shown that women athletes are often under-represented in the media (Hardin et al. 2002; Clavio and Eagleman 2011) and when they are included, the media coverage often sexualizes or trivializes the women athlete or women's sports (Hardin et al. 2002; Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015). The first question in this study investigated how users framed women athletes during the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup through photographs shared on the social media platform Instagram. The results indicated overwhelmingly that users were framing them as athletically competent as the majority of photos shared on the two hashtags portrayed the athletes in action or dressed for action. This finding is in line with previous research that found that fans of women's sport – the core demographic for women's sports – react negatively to hypersexualized images of sportswomen (Kane and Maxwell 2011; Antil, Burton, and Robinson 2012). Also, this finding runs counter to previous research, which found that women athletes are often presented in passive shots (Jones 2006). In fact the majority of athlete photos showed the athletes engaged in athletic action, which was in line with Smith and Sanderson (2015). This finding lends support to the dissipation of sexualized coverage of women athletes (see Cooky, Messner, and Musto [2015]), as photos that were being shared on Instagram primarily strayed away from reinforcing traditional gender norms (ie heterosexuality and femininity) in favour of more progressive ideal (ie women as athletes first). In addition, the photographs shared on Instagram were congruent with what previous researchers found – that women athletes wanted to be portrayed as athletically competent (Krane et al. 2010; Kane, LaVoi, and Fink 2013).

There were subtle differences between the percentages of photos in the *Athletic Action* for the two hashtags, with #FIFAWWC (74.08%) providing a higher percentage than #SheBelieves (57.23%) for this category. Since the #FIFAWWC was a the global hashtag for the event, perhaps this indicates a greater acceptance of women as athletes from users who used this hashtag. While the location of the posts is not known, users did post a higher percentage of *Athletic Action* photos on the official hashtag of the event than on a team-created hashtag, so that their photos would be part of the larger online discussion around the event.

In addition, the #SheBelieves hashtag was part of marketing campaign run by US Soccer with the goal of empower young women to accomplish their goals (U.S. Soccer 2015). It was accompanied by a series of community events before the Women's World Cup where the US players interacted with young girls and visuals were created and circulated for the campaign (U.S. Soccer 2015). Therefore, it is possible that this pre World Cup campaign

provided a framing of the women as athletes first that was taken up by social media users who internalized it and then used the same frame when constructing their Instagram posts during the event.

Overall, the results of the study indicate that the notion of portraying women athletes as athletically competent may have indeed penetrated our mass consciousness, perhaps through the power of marketing messages. This is contrary to previous research that indicated that the message had not yet reached the individuals who consume women's sport (Kane, LaVoi, and Fink 2013). Of course there is still the need for the message to get to "those [individuals] who promote women's sports and continue to rely on the age-old formula of 'sex sells'" (Kane, LaVoi, and Fink 2013, 292).

The second research question sought to identify if there were any changes in how users framed the athletes throughout the duration of the event. Results indicated that for one of the hashtags (#FIFAWWC) the framing remained fairly consistent throughout the event, while for the other (#SheBelieves) there was change over time. Specifically, there was an increase in the percentage of pictures shared that framed the athletes in action as the event wore on. There was a corresponding decrease in the *Dressed but Posed* framing. While both of these categories could be considered as athletic competence frames, the move showed that users were more interested in sharing pictures of the women in action, thereby directly illustrating their competence. According to Meraz and Papacharissi (2013), social media can be seen as weakening the agenda setting power of traditional media, but to truly capitalize on its ability to increase awareness of issues and influence opinions of individuals, users need to overcome the short half-life of social media data by increasing the 'stickiness or traction' (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013, 144) of hashtags and related content to bring a particular perspective to the forefront. The results here illustrate that users of #SheBelieves and #FIFAWWC were able to overcome the transient nature of social media content and share content that framed women athletes as athletically competent, thereby using the hashtag as a cue to enable the public to understand the preferred thematic frames related to gender as the event dynamically unfolded (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013). This networked framing shows the influence that can evolve within the content shared or created by users of social media, allowing for dominant themes to rise to prominence.

Limitations and future research

As with all research studies, there are some limitations that should be noted. First, researchers only analysed social media content produced on Instagram. An additional limitation is that while the software used to collect the Instagram data is reliable, the data-set utilized in the study is not to be considered complete and any posts outside of the data-set captured could not be included in the samples and therefore, any missed data could have potentially provided different coding results. The study only collected content that included two hashtags #FIFAWWC and #SheBelieves and did not investigate any posts created by individuals using alternative hashtags or no hashtags at all. The fact that the United States won the FIFA Women's World Cup should be considered in the light of the results as this may have had an effect on the attention given to the #SheBelieves hashtag and content. Lastly, only the visual data were coded in this study and not the textual data that accompanied the visuals.

In terms of future research, visuals shared on multiple social media platforms could be compared and the coding could include both the visuals and any accompanying textual data on these platforms. In addition, future research could consider expanding the study to incorporate other mega events, including those that are not women-centric (ie Olympic Games). Additionally, capturing data at the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2019 for longitudinal analysis would be a worthy avenue of investigation. Also including hashtags that support teams from various parts of the world would help to provide a more global assessment of the framing of gender through visuals on social media. Lastly, future research studies could incorporate hashtags from teams with varying levels of success in the event to assess what effect, if any, success has on the framing of women athletes.

Conclusion

The results of this study examining the framing of women athletes from the bottom-up (Nisbet 2010) provides insight into the role of social media in challenging gender stereotypes in women's sports and illustrates that social media users are willing to create their own frames around women athletes. Instead of the traditional woman first, athlete second mentality, users conveyed a more progressive message, celebrating these athletes as just that – athletes. There was no question of athletic competence; there were no hints of overt sexualizing to be found. Perhaps the gendered nature of coverage truly has changed. However, issues of quality of delivery and quantity of coverage still linger on. The FIFA Women's World Cup is one exception to both of these troubling trends. Only time and additional scholarly inquiry will tell if social media platforms lead to a complete bypass of traditional media, with everyday users usurping the traditional juggernauts (ie television and radio) when it comes to covering women's sports on the same scale allotted by said juggernauts to their men counterparts. For now, we can at least begin to lend additional credence to the notion that gendered coverage appears to be dissipating with time as the collective mentality shifts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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