ESPN's Bodyissue on Instagram: The Self-Presentation of Women Athletes and Feedback from their Audience of Women

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This study used Instagram to explore the 2016 *ESPN: The Magazine*'s Body Issue (Body Issue), with a particular focus on the women athletes featured. A two-prong content analysis was utilized for this study. Photo analysis of "ESPN's Body Issue photos" (i.e., released on ESPN's website; $N = 141$) and "ESPN's Body Issue photos posted on athlete's Instagram" (i.e., ESPN photos posted on the athletes' Instagram account; $N = 16$) was conducted. Most of "ESPN's Body Issue photos" were "getting pretty" shots, whereas, the majority of "ESPN's Body Issue photos posted on athlete's Instagram" were "athletic action" or "active in sport." Audience reactions from women to Body Issue photos posted on the women athletes' Instagram accounts were explored through examining ~3,000 comments, and results suggest that women athletes can and do play a role in how other women socially construct themselves. Overall, findings contribute to understanding women athletes in the media.

Key words: self-presentation; gender differences; Instagram; Body Issue 2016; Goffman; Social Comparison Theory

Web-based social media has enhanced the communication between athletes and sports fans. Social media are platforms that allow athletes the ability to positively present themselves to the public through an awareness of socially acceptable norms/trends (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). Athletes can use social media to connect directly with fans and offer intimate access to their personal (i.e., as a unique person in terms of their individual differences) and social (i.e., as a person in terms of their shared similarities with members of certain social categories) lives. This modern medium provides a more personalized, self-filtered method of communication not often found in mainstream media (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). As such, social media may be of particular interest for women athletes, as they are often not only underrepresented and provided less coverage in mainstream media (in comparison their counterparts who are men) but also portrayed in a way that emphasizes their femininity, sexuality, and heterosexuality far more than their athletic competence (Clavio & Eagleman, 2011; Cranmer, Brann, & Bowman, 2014; Daniels & Wartena, 2011; Kian, Vincent, Mondello, 2008; Lisec & McDonald, 2012; Weber & Barker-Ruchti, 2012). Specific to visual texts, women athletes are frequently stereotyped by the media and commonly positioned in sexualized, non-aggressive, and/or non-competitive stationary poses. Men athletes, conversely, are often depicted in active poses that demonstrate muscularity and physical strength (Cranmer et al., 2014; Hull, Smith, & Schmittel, 2015; Kane, LaVoi, Fink, 2013). However, social media provide women athletes the opportunity to engage in an expression of self (Marshall, 2010).

Furthermore, Instagram is one of the fastest growing social media platforms (Greenwood, Perrin, Duggan, 2016) and has become a way for athletes to self-present (i.e., "the opportunity to carefully construct and manage the image they communicate to others through profile authoring, photograph selection, and asynchronous interactions;" Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006, p. 158) in a manner of their choosing. Instagram's advantage is an engagement rate (i.e., frequency of likes/comments usually measured as a percentage of followers) of 0.84% of all audiences, compared to Twitter (0.04%), and Facebook (0.53%; Ahmed, 2016) and is more effective at branding objectives for both athletes and athletic departments

than other social networking sites (Lunden, 2014; Watkins & Lee, 2016). Additionally, Lebel and Danylchuk (2014) have noted the importance of athletes' visual self-presentation strategies (i.e., game/sports-related posts versus non-sports-related/personal life posts) and they encouraged scholars to engage in Instagram-focused research where posting photos is a primary method of communication. Despite Instagram's popularity and effectiveness among women athletes with respect to controlling their image and brand, traditional gender stereotypes and gender roles (i.e., characteristics and traits believed to differentiate men and women and judgments about which behaviors are socially accepted and desirable; Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981) persist. Moreover, there is continued social pressure to adhere to societal norms and audience expectations (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018), as the coverage of women athletes tends to focus on traditional gender roles (e.g., being a wife or mother; Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013), feminine traits, and physical attributes (i.e., beauty, sexual attractiveness) instead of performance and skill (Ponterotto, 2014; Sherry, Osborne & Nicholson, 2016). In addition, women athletes have ascribed to the idea that "sex sells" and this ideal has been used to justify sexualized portrayals of women athletes on the basis that it draws attention to the sport and increases viewership or attendance (e.g., Kane et al., 2013). Thus, a generative paradox (i.e., "contradictions in which both sides of the opposition are true and both sides feed rather than fight each other;" Robertson, 2005, p. 182) has emerged. Although Instagram offers much freedom in self-presentation, the traditional trappings of convention hamper that liberty and that paradox is central to this research.

Performance of Self

As described by Goffman (1959), performance of the self is a conscious act of the individual and requires careful staging to maintain the self – a composed and norm-driven construction of character and performance. With women athletes, as public figures, performance is part of their identity. They perform in their sport, as well as in other dimensions of their life (e.g., interviews, advertisements/commercial endorsements, and award nights). Social media has provided a setting for the staging of the self as both character and performance (Marshall, 2010). Social media are important for women athletes because it potentially creates a connection

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between representational media (i.e., a production of self specifically dependent upon media culture) and the need for presentational structures (i.e., interests and desires); often displaying a performance of their everyday life (Marshall, 2010). Marshall suggests that social media are a hybrid of representational (i.e., socially constructed) and presentational culture (i.e., self-constructed) and that the concept of intercommunication can help us to understand how they are interconnected, in complex and intricate ways (Marshall, 2010). Intercommunication identifies that on social media, conversation is multi-layered (Marshall, 2010). For example, on Instagram, the posted photos act as a starting point for reactions and discussion and, in turn, a conversation that serves a social function and invites a response can be produced by an individual or a group of people.

Social media may be used by women athletes to express their identities as multidimensional. Mainstream sports media typically confine women athletes to rigid and traditional gender norms (Smith & Sanderson, 2015) and, thus, shapes the audience's perceptions of them (Knight & Giuliano, 2001). Through social media, however, women athletes can maintain the self. Women athletes are able to choose what mainstream media (representational) to post (presentational) on their account, thus creating the hybrid between representational and presentational culture (Marshall, 2010). In addition, the self they are creating is one that is both personal and interpersonal, and mediated differently than the self that is constructed by public relations personnel or through media outlets such as television broadcasts, newspaper, and/or magazine articles.

Moreover, there are very few mainstream media outlets that focus on the bodies of both men and women athletes, while simultaneously reporting on their athleticism. No general sports magazine compares with *ESPN: The Magazine's* Body Issue (Body Issue) in terms of women athlete representation from a percentage perspective (Pruitt, 2015). Furthermore, the Body Issue is unique in that alongside nude images (i.e., no clothing is worn by the athletes) of women athletes there are also nude images of men athletes. In addition, based on Clark (1956) the artistic representation of being naked has the ability to disassociate the idea of sexuality by rendering naked as nude, with nude simply acting as a category of clothing. Thus,

the nudity used in the Body Issue may be viewed as a form of artwork rather than sexualized athletes. Examining the chosen presentations of women athletes in the Body Issue, therefore, is particularly crucial to understanding the performance of self on social media and the distinct pieces of identity women athletes share with their online audience.

ESPN: The Magazine's Body Issue (Body Issue)

From 2009 to 2019, ESPN Inc. released the Body Issue aimed at featuring nude athletes in strong, powerful poses that celebrated their athletic bodies, without placing them in sexualized contexts. The Body Issue celebrated athletes of many shapes, sizes, sexual orientations, abilities, genders, and race (Smallwood, Brown, & Billings, 2014). The 2016 issue was the eighth annual edition and featured nineteen athletes (nine women/ten men; see Table 1 for list of athletes). An online version of the magazine was pre-released before the print copies. The Body Issue has enjoyed much praise and popularity, with a circulation of 14 million readers and 2.1 million subscribers (Kreiswirth, 2016) and evidence suggests that audiences interpret the depicted nudity in the Body Issues as athletic more than sexual (Smallwood et al., 2014). While the Body Issue focused heavily on the athleticism of its featured women athletes through the placing of them in strong, powerful poses, athlete nudity simultaneously created a potentially sexualized undertone to the images. In a recent quantitative content analysis of six editions of the Body Issue (i.e., the 2009-2014 issues; 278 images), Cranmer, Lancaster, and Harris (2016) have suggested the women athletes are being framed as sexualized more often than men athletes, with black women athletes sexualized more than any other group of athletes (i.e., white women, white men, black women). The potential for sexualisation may, in fact, have helped these women athletes negotiate their traditional femininity and athletic prowess since researchers have suggested that women athletes are aware of the need to balance and simultaneously manage both their traditionally feminine and athletic identities in the media (Kane et al., 2013). It could be argued that women athletes not chosen to be featured in the Body Issue may feel compelled to take part in media images that primarily highlight their physical attributes rather than their athleticism (Simmers, Damron-Martinez, & Haytko, 2009).

Table 1
Descriptives of Athletes in ESPN's 2016 Body Issue

Athlete	Sport	Race	Nationality	Age (yrs)
Emma Coburn	Steeplechase	Caucasian	American	26
Courtney Conlogue	Surfing	Caucasian	American	24
Elena Delle Donne	Basketball	Caucasian	American	27
Adeline Gray	Wrestling	Caucasian	American	25
Nzingha Prescod	Fencing	African American	American	24
Christen Press	Soccer	Caucasian	American	27
April Ross	Beach Volleyball	Caucasian	American	34
Allysa Seely	Paratriathlon	Caucasian	American	27
Claressa Shields	Boxing	African American	American	21
Nathan Adrian	Swimming	Chinese/Caucasian	American	27
Jake Arrieta	Baseball	Caucasian	American	30
Antonio Brown	Football	African American	American	28
Ryan Dungey	Motocross	Caucasian	American	26
Greg Louganis	Diving	Caucasian	American	56
Conor McGregor	MMA Fighting	Caucasian	Irish	28
Von Miller	Football	African American	American	27
Chris Mosier	Triathlon	Caucasian	American	35
Dwyane Wade	Basketball	African American	American	34
Vince Wilfork	Football	African American	American	34

Ideals of hegemonic femininity (i.e., the dominant qualities a women is believed to have in society) and hypersexualized portrayals (i.e., being treated or depicted as sexual objects) of women athletes in the media can compromise the credibility of, and respect for, women and women's sport (Kane & Maxwell, 2011). Moreover, Kane et al. (2013) argued that hypersexualized photos "do little to increase interest in women's sports," (p. 275) and Smallwood et al. (2014) suggested that these types of images are potentially damaging to women athletes' "brand". In a related study by Krane et al. (2011) it was discovered that young girls ($M = 11.5$ years) stated they would rather see the women in athletic poses and not pictures where "It looks like she's just taking a stroll with her bag and the camera guy was like, 'Stop, let me take a picture.'" (p. 762). Knight and Giuliano (2001) support this notion further with respondents displaying disapproval of articles focused on athlete attractiveness, regardless of gender. Specific to the Body Issue, a study conducted by Smallwood et al. (2014) suggested women posing, rather than wearing clothing (or lack thereof), determined audience perception of the images in terms of sexual or athletic. Smallwood et al. (2014) also reported that photos of women athletes in the Body Issue were more likely to receive high ratings (sample = 221 participants) for athleticism and muscularity compared to *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue, providing further evidence that these athletes, even in the nude, can still be seen as athletic. However, it should be acknowledged that although the Body Issue and *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue are both sports magazines, distinct differences exist regarding the phenotypes of these populations (i.e., one features athletes, the other featuring models). Yet, the finding from Smallwood et al. (2014) align with the desires of the featured athletes as Krane et al. (2010) report that women athletes prefer to emphasize their physical power, strength, and athleticism versus sexuality when given a choice about self-representation (i.e., repositories of values, beliefs, attitudes and feelings that evoke affects for those consuming; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). It has also been discovered that women athletes have a greater freedom with how they are represented when expectations of femininity are reduced (i.e., when sport is not contextualized within a masculine-dominated structure;Fink, Kane, & LaVoi, 2014).

Goffman's Framework of Self Presentation

One of the guiding theoretical frameworks for the current study is Goffman's (1959) work titled "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life." According to Goffman, self-presentation refers to how people convey their identity through verbal and non-verbal messages (Goffman, 1959). It is often goal-driven (Kowalski & Leary, 1990) with individuals wanting to display the most ideal image (i.e., one that balances individual goals but also the "self" that they perceive the audience to desire; Bortree, 2005) to their audience. In the past, self-presentation occurred strictly through face-to-face interactions. In the modern age, the Internet, particularly social networking sites (e.g., social media platforms like Instagram), allows self-presentation to be more self-determined (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Van Der Heide, D'Angelo, Schumaker, 2011; Vitak, 2012). The props and accessories of the stage can now be translated to the various profiles, images, and messages that are part of a social networking site (Marshall, 2010). Unlike face-to-face encounters, audiences (i.e., friends and followers) are not physically present to contradict self-presentation claims that would normally be met with skepticism (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). For example, an individual is able to post numerous photos of themselves with flawless skin (achieved partially through lighting, editing, and/or photo editing), that they may be unable to maintain in-person, but the online audience may not know that the image is artificially enhanced. Social networking sites allow the user to customize content (e.g., what followers/friends can see), and choose photos they feel are most flattering. Despite this amount of personal control over their digital representation, an application of Goffman's (1959) work would suggest that women athletes may still choose to select photos that appeal to traditional feminine norms to gain audience approval. To demonstrate how this self-determination still conforms to social expectations, envision two photographs were taken of a woman athlete in quick succession, both equally showing her athleticism. In the first photograph, however, her face is contorted in a grimace, while in the second one she is smiling. The woman athlete may choose to post the second photograph on social media as it allows her to balance her strength with her beauty/femininity (i.e., what she perceives the audience to want; Goffman, 1959).

Festinger's Social Comparison Theory and Social Media

The second guiding theoretical framework for the current study is the Social Comparison Theory. The Social Comparison Theory, originally proposed by Festinger (1954), suggests that people compare themselves with others who are similar or dissimilar to evaluate their own opinions and abilities, particularly when no objective information is available (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). Individuals engage in social comparison for self-evaluation purposes (Festinger, 1954), desire for self-enhancement, and the desire for self-improvement (Hakmiller, 1966; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Thorton & Arrowood, 1966; Wills, 1981). Past social media research using the Social Comparison Theory suggests young women users tend to make upward comparisons (comparing oneself to someone who is better off in the domain of interest) of their own bodies to images of slim and toned universalistic targets (i.e., distant sources of influence in mass media; Tiggeman & Zaccardo, 2015). A common comparison in this context is to photos of celebrities and fitness models that 'inspire' them to replicate these (often) unattainable ideals (Carrotte, Vella, & Lim, 2015; Santarossa, Coyne, Lisinski, &Woodruff, 2016). While previous media trends encouraged women consumers to aspire to be unrealistically thin and delicate looking (Richins, 1991), the current trends toward encouraging women consumers to be thin and fit/muscular (e.g., "#fitspiration" trend on Instagram) are equally as unrealistic (Benton & Karazsia, 2015; Santarossa et al., 2016). The Body Issue champions athleticism over sexualized beauty and does not promote uncommon thinness like previous mass media. Through Instagram, and other social networking site platforms, social comparison to idolized targets, like the women athletes in the Body Issue, promotes the perceived message of what healthy, fit, and strong looks like, and how a woman athlete should represent themselves.

As of yet, no known study has focused on the self-presentation of Body Issue athletes on Instagram. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to use Instagram's free expression and selected self-presentation as a lens through which to examine how women athlete representations are

negotiated and how audience (i.e., followers) feedback can be gathered and analyzed. The current study has three research questions (RQ):

Using Goffman's framework of self-presentation as the theoretical underpinning:

RQ#1: How do the featured women athletes chose to self-present themselves through their Body Issue photos on their personal Instagram accounts?

RQ#2: What differences exist from the way ESPN decided to present the Body Issue athletes on its official website?

RQ #3: Building off of previous work by Krane et al., (2011) and guided by the Social Comparison Theory, what type of feedback is provided by the audience of women (i.e., comments left by women Instagram users) in relation to these women athletes' self-presentation Instagram photos?

Methods

A two-prong analysis was utilized for this study. To explore the self-presentation of the women athletes, a content analysis was conducted using the Body Issue photos the athlete had selected (from ESPN's website) to share on their personal Instagram account (i.e., self-presentation) and those Body Issue photos on ESPN's website. As an unobtrusive and nonreactive method, content analysis is commonly used by social researchers and applied to all types of media content (Krippendorff, 2004) and was deem appropriate for the current study. In addition, guided by the Social Comparison Theory, a textual analysis of the comments left by women on the all the self-presentation Instagram photos was examined. In its entirety, this study was conducted between July 5th (date of online release date) and Oct 5th, 2016. The time points of data collection are explained in further detail below.

Data collection

Instagram accounts, of the women athletes in the 2016 Body Issue, were tracked in real-time by the researchers for Body Issue photos (i.e., "athletes' Instagram photos – website") and comments left on those photos being shared up and until three months post-release of the online issue (July 5th - October 5th, 2016). The contextually purposeful window of three months was chosen to capture the online release of Body Issue, as this was deemed a suitable length by the authors for contextual purpose (e.g., 14 hours; Burch, Frederick, & Pegotaro, 2015). Photos were gathered from both ESPN's website and the women athletes' personal Instagram, which would later be coded. As the focus of this study was the online world, the 2016 Body Issue photos of women athletes released onESPN'swebsite (http://www.espn.com/espn/photos/gallery/_/id/16797886/image/1/bodies-want-2016-bodies-want-2016), opposed to print edition, were copied and put into a PowerPoint presentation. Photos from ESPN's website were categorized by athlete to prepare for coding; these photos were titled as "ESPN's Body Issue photos" (i.e., photos that the women could have potentially posted on their Instagram).The primary researcher then manually went through each athlete's personal Instagram account and recorded the links of all 2016 Body Issue related photos. From here, the primary researcher made note of the photos that were specifically from ESPN's photo shoot/available on ESPN's website; these photos ($n = 16$) were titled "ESPN's Body Issue photos posted on athlete's Instagram" (see Figure 1). In addition, although not used in the photo coding analysis, self-presentation photos (i.e., posted on athlete's Instagram) that were not from ESPN's website ($n = 6$;e.g., the athlete's own behind the scenes photos, 2016 Body Issue promotional photos, photos of them holding the 2016 Body Issue hard copy magazine) were identified, labeled as "original Body Issue photos posted on athlete's Instagram," and used in conjunction with the "ESPN's Body Issue photos posted on athlete's Instagram" in the textual analysis (i.e., comments left on photo). The "original Body Issue photos posted on athlete's Instagram" were not included in the photo coding analysis because they could not be compared to those posted on ESPN's website. In addition, the total number of comments on each of the Body Issue Instagram photos (as posted by a women athlete on their personal account) were recorded at the end of the three-month mark (Oct 5th, 2016).


Figure 1. Descriptions of the "ESPN's Body Issue photos posted on athlete's Instagram" of 2016 Body Issue featured women athletes used in photo coding analysis.

Content analysis of photos

A similar coding scheme to Smith and Sanderson (2015) was used in this study because similar to the aforementioned study, the current study uses Goffman's notions of self-presentation and gender displays while exploring Instagram feeds of athletes. The Smith and Sanderson (2015) coding scheme was built from Goffman (1959), Hatton and Trautner (2011), and Kim and Sagas (2014) coding schemes, all of which focused on gender stereotypical displays and degree of sexualisation. The unit of analysis was the photo and each photo was coded on 17 elements. Descriptions of coded elements can be found in Table 2. Due to the nature of the study (i.e., the focus on self-presentation of Body Issue athletes on Instagram), all photos were coded on the first four elements (focus of photo, number in photo, overall category, and if posed), with the "ESPN's Body Issue photos posted on athlete's Instagram" (i.e., ESPN's Body Issue photos posted on the athlete's personal Instagram) undergoing a further, more detailed analysis than the "ESPN's Body Issue photos" (i.e., photos from ESPN's website).

Photo coding reliability

Before coding the sample of photos, the primary researcher trained two independent coders (one man and one woman) who were blind to the intent of the study (to decrease potential coding biases). This training included an explanation of each code in the codebook, as well as instructions regarding the proper application of the codebook to photos and how to record the codes in the data book (i.e., an Excel spreadsheet). For training purposes, the two research assistants coded a pilot sample of "ESPN's Body Issue photos" taken from earlier issues of the Body Issue (these photos were not part of the 2016 Body Issue, and this analysis was not included in the present study). Both research assistants independently coded all photos in the current dataset ("ESPN's Body Issue photos" $n = 141$; "ESPN's Body Issue photos posted on athlete's Instagram" $n = 16$). As presented in Table 2, a strength of agreement ranged of Cohen's Kappa from "Moderate" and "Almost Perfect" on all variables (i.e., 0.41-0.60 Moderate and 0.81-1.00 Almost Perfect; Landis & Konch, 1977). When a disagreement was present, both coders were asked to meet, discuss, and agree on a final coding decision.

Table 2

Description of variables used in photo coding analysis

Variable	n	Details	Cohen's Kappa (κ)
ESPN's Body Issue photos			
Focus of photo	141	Athlete, non-athlete (e.g., family member, friend), scenery, or other	0.479
Number in photo	141	number of people in the photo	0.896
Overall category	141	Getting pretty (e.g., behind the scenes), posed, athletic action (e.g., action image with emphasis on athleticism), or other	0.927
if posed	17	athletic marker (e.g., standing with athletic equipment), no athletic marker	0.767
ESPN's Body Issue photos posted on athlete's Instagram*			
Focus of photo	16	Athlete, non-athlete (e.g., family member, friend), scenery, or other	1.000
Number in photo	16	number of people in the photo	1.000
Overall category	16	Getting pretty (e.g., behind the scenes), posed, athletic action (e.g., action image with emphasis on athleticism), or other	1.000
if posed	2	athletic marker (e.g., standing with athletic equipment), no athletic marker	-
Active/Passive	16	Active in sport, passive in sport, active non-sport, or passive non-sport	0.800
Clothing	16	Unrevealing, slightly revealing, reveling, bathing , or naked	1.000
Pose	16	upright/active, suggestive, or overtly sexual	1.000
Breast	16	not a focal point, somewhat emphasized, or major focus	1.000
Genitals/Buttock	16	not a focal point, somewhat emphasized, or major focus	1.000
Touch	16	no touching, casual touching, or provocative touch	0.448
Size	16	larger than life, normal, or further from view	1.000
Withdrawal	16	no suggestion of sexual activity, somewhat suggestive of sex, or explicitly sexual	1.000
Stance	16	normal, posed knee/body arched, or sitting/lying on floor	0.317
Instruction	16	exhibiting, or not exhibiting	1.000
Type of shot	16	selfie, head shot, half body, or full body	1.000

*Athletes' Instagram photos-website refers to photos that were specifically from ESPN's photo shoot/available on ESPN's website that the athlete posted on their personal Instagram

Textual analysis of comments

As the scope of this study was on the women athletes in the 2016 Body Issue (to examine the conversation surrounding the women athletes), an analysis was conducted on all the comments left by women (identified as a woman based on the pronouns they used when commenting, if identified in the biography, and/or other information from their personal Instagram account; $N = 1,247$) on the Body Issue photos that the women athletes chose to post on their personal Instagram. Before coding the comments, the primary researcher trained three independent coders (one man and two women) who were blind to the intent of the study. This training included an explanation the Social Comparison Theory as well as instructions regarding how to organize coded comments into the data book (i.e., an Excel spreadsheet). For training purposes, sample comments where provided to the research assistants and practice coding took place. Once the research assistants met a set level of agreement (equal to or greater than 85%; MacQueen, McLellan-Lemal, Bartholow, & Milstein, 2008), comments from each women athletes' Instagram posts about the Body Issue were imported into Excel.

Using deductive analysis guided by the Social Comparison Theory (i.e., self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement; Wood, 1989), the comments left by women were analyzed qualitatively and grouped into themes (i.e., supported the Social Comparison Theory, opposed the Social Comparison Theory, or other). For comments to be grouped into the supporting the Social Comparison Theory theme, the coders relied on specific contextual markers. These contextual markers were based on the three types of appraisals encompassed by the Social Comparison Theory (Wood, 1989): self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement. Self-evaluation comparison comments would have some indication of one's own standing in relation to others in terms of attributes, skills, and social expectations (e.g., how do my muscles compare to that of the women athlete). Self-improvement comparison comments would have had mention learning how to improve a particular characteristic or for problem solving (e.g., how could I learn from the women athlete to have higher body satisfaction). Finally, self-enhancement comparison comments would have some expression of protection towards self-worth/self-esteem to allow a maintenance of positive self-image (e.g., she might be attractive, but she is not a skilled athlete). Using the contextual markers, the comments that supported the Social Comparison Theory were grouped into the following themes: comparison to the physical body, reflection of self, and a desire to be like or idolization toward the athlete.

Percentage agreement was found to be 90% per cent between the coders. According to MacQueen et al. (2008), a percentage agreement above 85% is classified as "good" agreement, therefore, the coding process was deemed trustworthy.

Results

Content analysis of photos

As presented in Table 3, among the 141 "potential photos," the main focus for 76 (53.9%) photos were of the individual athlete and 72 photos (51.1%) contained only a single subject. The photos were classified into two main categories, "getting pretty" (e.g., behind the scenes; $n = 64$; 45.4%) and "athletic action" (e.g., action photo with emphasis on athleticism; $n = 37$; 26.2%).

Table 3
Descriptive statistics of the women athlete's Instagram accounts and popularity of the posted ESPN's 2016 Body Issue photos

Athlete	ESPN's Body Issue photos ($N=$)	# of total comments post[a]	# of male comments	# of female comments
Emma Coburn	16			
Athletes' Instagram photo 1*		20	16	4
Athletes' Instagram photo 2		221	83	132
Courtney Conlogue	25			
Athletes' Instagram photo 1		5	4	1
Athletes' Instagram photo 2		110	56	43
Athletes' Instagram photo 3		232	102	105
Athletes' Instagram photo 4		130	59	54
Athletes' Instagram photo 5		229	97	99
Elena Delle Donne	16			
Athletes' Instagram photo 1		935	610	271
Adeline Gray	14			
Athletes' Instagram photo 1		101	59	32
Athletes' Instagram photo 2		101	59	33
Nzingha Prescod	15			
Athletes' Instagram photo 1		16	4	11
Athletes' Instagram photo 2		132	39	90
Athletes' Instagram photo 3		103	39	55
Athletes' Instagram photo 4		15	5	10
Christen Press	13			
April Ross	14			
Athletes' Instagram photo 1		205	60	134
Athletes' Instagram photo 2		16	2	12
Athletes' Instagram photo 3*		13	2	10
Allysa Seely	15			
Athletes' Instagram photo 1*		1	1	0
Athletes' Instagram photo 2*		4	2	1
Athletes' Instagram photo 3*		1	0	1
Claressa Shields	13			
Athletes' Instagram photo 1		219	136	71
Athletes' Instagram photo 2		209	124	78
Mean	15.67	137.18	70.86	56.68
Standard Deviation	3.46	193.974	124.82	63.45

Note. * indicates the photo is categorized as an "original Body Issue photos posted on athlete's Instagram" (e.g., the athlete's own behind the scenes photos, 2016 Body Issue promotional photos, photos of them holding the 2016 Body Issue hard copy magazine; not found on ESPNs website)
Note. [a] 3 months post-release

Overall, 16 "ESPN's Body Issue photos posted on athlete's Instagram" were coded, in which 14 (87.5%) focused on the individual athlete and, therefore, most (n = 15; 93.8%) contained only one individual, the athlete themselves. The majority of these photos were coded into an "athletic action" category (n = 11; 68.8 %) or an "active in sport" category (n = 10; 62.5%). Due to the nature of the 2016 Body Issue, clothing for the majority of the photos was coded as "naked" (n = 13; 81.3%). All of the photos had the athletes posed in an "upright/active" position (n = 16; 100%), where the breasts (n = 16; 100%) and the genitals/buttocks regions (n = 10; 62.5%) were not considered a focal point. There was no suggestion of sexual activity or exhibition of instruction (i.e., being told to do something by someone else in the photograph) in any of the photos. Lastly, the majority of the photos were full body shots (forward or side facing; not a selfie, head shot, or half body shot) (n = 13; 81.3%), where the athlete was of normal stance (not posed knee/body arched, or sitting/lying on floor) (n = 10; 62.5%) and normal size (not larger than life or further in the distance) (n = 11; 68.8%), with no touching present (n = 13; 81.3%).

Textual analysis of comments

In an attempt to provide a complete picture of how commenters who are women interpreted and responded to the Instagram photos posted by the women athletes, the results are presented in multiple formats. Often, quotes from individuals are presented to support various themes. Occasionally, segments of conversations from commenters are repeated here to show the interactions among the online environment.

The total number of comments on each photo at the time of data collection can be found in Table 3. Of the overall total number of comments posted (N = 3,018), 41.3% (n = 1,247) were comments left by women. Notably, 11.9% (n = 148) of comments left by women were categorized as fitting within the theoretical framework of the Social Comparison Theory and were explored further, categorized based on contextual markers into the themes: comparison to the physical body, reflection of self, and a desire to be like or idolization towards the athlete. Moreover, although only 11.9% may seem like a relatively small number of comments chosen for further analysis, a large portion of comments consisted of individuals' tagging another Instagram user (i.e., @username with nothing else written) or an emoji (e.g., a heart emoji with nothing else written).

Across the athletes, upward comparisons comments were left by women in regard to the athletes' physical body (n = 43; 29.0%). Of the comments that fit within the theoretical framework of the Social Comparison Theory (n = 148), 12.8% (n = 19) involved commenters using "body goals" or "#bodygoals" on photos of the athletes. The term "goals" is a trendy term often used by women on Instagram to describe an aspiration towards what is posted in the photograph. Often, comparisons were made in a sense that they believed that the athlete's body was unachievable for them. For example, a comment left on one of Elena Delle Donne's photos states: "Great shot I could go to the gym 24 7 and never be in that kind of shape." Similarly, on one of Courtney Conlouge's photos (taken underwater) a comment was left saying: "Why can't I look like this underwater😩😩🖤." However, some comments focused on aspiring to being healthy and not necessarily achieving a specific body type. For example, left on one of

Claressa Shields' photos was "Healthy! Now that's a body to aspire to."

Another common trend across the comments left by women was a sense of personally relating to the athlete in some way, or a reflection of self (n = 63; 42.5%). A comment was left on a photo of Adeline Gray where in the caption of the photo Adeline discusses her idea of "the real female body" and how she was "never the prettiest girl… never the smartest…never the funniest" but that doing the Body Issue was for her "To be vulnerable and confident in my own skin and to show what is tangible for women if they dream bigger sooner." In this comment a woman wrote:

> @adelinegray Thank you so much for being so brave and amazing and posting about body images. I am a girl who wrestled in high school at 152lbs and 160lbs. But I constantly kept hearing of success from girls on the lighter weight classes. While I was successful and made varsity, I still struggled with feeling good about how much I weighed and how I looked. Seeing you, a fellow female wrestler, in my current weight class, so successful and confident and beautiful and #strong really gives me some confidence and I hope it does the same for other girls. Thank you! #wrestling #adelinegray.

In response to this Adeline Gray replied to the commenter by tagging her in the following response: "keep working hard and know your weight class defines nothing about you. Good luck!" Similarly, a comment left on a photo of April Ross, with a caption discussing her struggle with body image and "years of cultivating a positive attitude," read:

> You are my body "message" inspiration. Empowerment, acceptance and appreciation is what I take away from the article and your amazing pictures. Your strength, courage and fearlessness is contagious. I needed to read your words, trying to embrace my body after baby is an everyday battle. I'm not looking to be skinny mini, but looking to feel healthy, strong and beautiful. Keep up the inspirational work by being you!!!

Along with the reflection of self, many commenters expressed a desire to be like the athlete (n = 48; 76.2%). This was shared by straightforward comments such as "My inspiration ☺" and "You are an inspiration!" as well as comments such as "future me" or "omg [oh my god] make me her." However, conversations also emerged where commenters were tagging others and sharing their aspiration or idolization toward the athlete. For example, on one of the pictures Courtney Conlogue shared, the following conversation emerged:

> @Commenter 1 "@Commenter 2 bad ass"
> @Commenter 2 "she's got guts man @Commenter 1 can I be just like her plz"
> @Commenter 1 "@Commenter 2 it's just too awkward those guys must have been really professional"
> @Commenter 2 "yea but she is too @Commenter 1"

Another common conversation that would occur among commenters would be in the instance where one commenter would tag another and create comparison to the athlete (n = 50; 33.8%). For example, @ Commenter 3 commented

"@Commenter 4 this is you" on a photo Emma Coburn had shared.

Finally, it was suggested that these athletes act as a role model for the commenter ($n = 54$; 36.5%). For example, the following comment was left on one of Adeline Gray's photos: "Seriously you are my idol! I watch your matches all the time! You go girl! I wish we could meet! I would love to get tips and learn from you! #womenpower #femalewrestlers I love you!!!!! @adelinegray." Similarly, the comment "Kind heart! Strong body and mind! You are such a great role model" was left on a photo Nzingha Prescod had posted. The idea of the athletes acting as a role model was shared by commenters across the various athletes.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to use Instagram's free expression, and self-selected self-presentation as a lens through which to investigate how women athletes choose to present themselves and how audience feedback can be both gathered and analyzed. Guided by Goffman's framework of self-presentation, the current study examines how the featured women athletes chose to self-present themselves on their personal Instagram accounts using their Body Issue photos and compare and contrast these photos with the ways ESPN chose to present the Body Issue athletes on its official website. Moreover, guided by the Social Comparison Theory and expanding on previous work by Krane et al. (2011), the type of feedback provided by women Instagram users on the women athletes' self-presentation Instagram photos was also conducted.

The results of content analysis of the photos support previous research (Kane et al., 2013) that found women athletes, when given a choice, prefer athletic depiction rather than objectification and sexualisation. The current study also reinforces Goffman's work by demonstrating the ongoing struggle that exists for women athletes who want to conform to typical depictions (i.e., hypersexualized) in order to grow their brand but also wish to present themselves as capable and talented athletes, not athletes desired only for their sex appeal. Furthermore, the current study found no suggestion of sexualisation (all athletes were in active positions where typically sexualized body parts, such as the breasts and buttocks, were not considered central points of the photo) in any of athlete's self-presentation photos (i.e., photos athletes chose to post to their Instagram), supporting Gill's (2007) findings relating to women athletes using social media as a means to self-present themselves in a non-objectified way. As well, most of the self-presentation photos were full body shots, with the athlete upright, taken from a normal distance (i.e., not close up or far away). Smith and Sanderson (2015) reported full body shots of women athletes at a normal distance allow their athletic prowess and muscularity (which is what allows them to dominate their given sport) to be displayed. In addition, by showing the athletes in a sporting context (as opposed to hypersexualized), the emphasis is placed on the power and strength the body provides, rather than its attractiveness (Smith & Sanderson, 2015).

The agentic dimension is unique to this analysis. The focal point of this study are the photos athletes posted for public consumption, not those chosen by media outlets. The athletes chose to self-present themselves in an athletic manner but when ESPN marketed the 2016 Body Issue release, it shared more "getting pretty" (i.e., behind the scenes) photos rather than "athletic action" (i.e., action photo with emphasis on athleticism). This supports Gill (2007) who suggests that social media, contrary to mainstream media, provide women with the ability to choose the ways they wish to self-present and perhaps feel more empowered in doing so. ESPN's photo selections add to the existing evidence that mainstream media, overwhelmingly, choose to use photos of women athletes outside of the athletic context in the belief that "sex sells" (Baken, 2014; Duncan, 1990; George, Hartley, & Paris, 2001; Hilliard, 1984; Messner, Duncan, & Cooky, 2003). The results support previous research that found women athletes, when given a choice, prefer athletic depiction rather than objectification and sexualisation (Kane et al., 2013; Smallwood et al., 2014).

Moreover, when Social Comparison Theory was applied, three overlapping themes were used to inform the analysis from women commenters (further advancing the understanding of these themes from previous research): a comparison to the physical body; reflection of self; and a desire to be like or idolization towards the athlete. While some commenters made positive comparisons and related to the athletes on a personal level (through similar situations of which both the athlete and the commenter had gone through), others left comments that can be classified as making upward comparisons (e.g., a commenter does not feel they could ever achieve a body as nice as the one the athlete has). Despite the Body Issue's claims to emphasize the athletic form, this study provides evidence that some consumers continue to focus on the aesthetics of the body, rather than its physical capabilities. The Body Issue's attempt to stand in contrast to the other conventional publications in this space and change the conversation around women's athletic bodies has been limited. Overall, the results from the comment analysis indicate that women athletes can, and do, play a role in how other women socially construct themselves.

However, this study is not without limitations. First, although an in-depth analysis of the 2016 Body Issue was carried out, only one issue (and the associated social media outcomes) was analyzed. Similar analyses could be carried out on upcoming Body Issue athletes who are women and their self-presentation photos to strengthen the reliability of this study. Furthermore, no information is available to investigate the reasons why the women athletes chose to be included in the 2016 Body Issue (or why ESPN decided to feature them) and/or why they chose to post the pictures they did (or did not) on Instagram. Similarly, there is no comparative in men available to which to define/clarify/contextualize the current results. Also, the researchers do not have knowledge of any social media policies or endorsement deals that may have influenced the type of photograph(s) or content of photograph(s) posted by the athlete. In addition, the authors are unaware of who curates the athlete's social media (e.g., themselves, a public relations manager, and/or publicists), as this information is not public knowledge. As such, social media managers and/or publicists could have influenced which "ESPN's Body Issue photos posted on athlete's Instagram" were chosen to be posted. However, even if athletes do not manage their own Instagram accounts, social networking platforms like Instagram are still important sites that are meant to be representative of the athletes' selves. An important limitation to make note of is that perceived gender was used in identifying

online respondents as women in the current study, and this does not fully account for the limitations of using self-presentation as a woman on social media as basis for assuming the commenters are or identify as women outside of social media. Lastly, while the Social Comparison Theory was used as one of two guiding frameworks for the current study, less than 13% of the recorded comments supported this theory. As such, while the Social Comparison Theory is present, it is not prominent. Although this could potentially be interpreted as an ill-fitting theory for the paper's purpose, it may actually to speak to the diversity of the online conversations and discussions surrounding physique photographs.

Future research should continue to evaluate the way athletes, especially women athletes, are using social networking sites to promote themselves and the potential disparities that exist between how the media choose to portray athletes and how the athlete would prefer to be portrayed. Gaining a deeper understanding of how each of the athletes' Instagram account has 'evolved' over time in terms of self-perception is an area of research that is warranted. As the original research question was to investigate how women athletes choose to present themselves and how audience feedback can be both gathered and analyzed, there are numerous other potential research questions yet to be answered. In addition, future research involving the Body Issue should explore the areas of race and ethnicity, sexuality, ability, identities, and non-traditional bodies.

Conclusion

In sum, through the use of self-selected self-presentation as a lens, the current study suggests that women athletes, in particular those featured in the Body Issue, are utilizing social media as a platform to gain more choice and empowerment in how they are perceived by their audience. The findings of the current study suggest that contrary to mainstream media's (i.e., ESPN's) portrayal, women Body Issue athletes choose to self-present themselves in a less objectified and more athletic way. Moreover, this study also sought to investigate how women audience members (e.g., followers) interacted with these athletes, with findings suggesting that while the purpose of the Body Issue is to emphasize physical capabilities, the aesthetics of the body are still a large focus of consumers when viewing women athletes' Body Issue photos. Thus, the current findings may help future researchers better understand how women athletes prefer to be portrayed (especially through the use on social media) and promote the investigation of the positive long-term impact pictures emphasizing athleticism and not sexuality can have on an athlete's brand. Lastly, this study also highlights the current disconnect between how women athletes want to portray themselves (i.e., for their physical abilities and not their looks) and how their women audience views them, and the need to investigate why this disconnect may be occurring.

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