

Grace Hand

HN-300-C

Dr. Loris & Dr. Rober

13 Dec 2022

The Effect of Social Media on Perceptions of Women in Sports

The popularity of the smartphone has led to a society where information can be accessed or shared at any time with just the tap of a finger. Social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have capitalized on this technology to create platforms where people can be more connected than ever before. The influence has bled into all levels of society. In terms of the sports world, social media has become an outlet for teams, athletes, and fans to grow a dedicated following of like-minded individuals. However, despite the progressive nature of these sites, they have not escaped many of the historical issues that plague modern culture, sometimes becoming breeding grounds for negative rhetoric surrounding issues of racism, homophobia, and more. One of these problems surrounds the representation of women's sports in comparison to their male counterparts. Historically, major sports networks have underrepresented female athletes and leagues, and this trend has continued to cause a rift. There is often a noticeable difference in social media coverage between the two genders that is not representative of the growing participation in women's sports both in the United States and across the globe. According to the University of Minnesota's Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport, female sports participants receive only four percent of sports media coverage despite making up 40% of the total (Harry 655). That being said, recent sports platforms have created spaces for women to change the narrative. Social media has impacted the perception of women in sports by cultivating

negative stereotypes about women in sports, challenging those same stereotypes, and by creating a community where women have a voice in sports.

In some ways, social media has continued the trend of the sports industry by pushing narratives that uphold the historical ideas surrounding women in sports environments. A major part of this patriarchal belief system is that women do not belong in sports at all. Traditional gender roles show a strict separation of different activities and traits as masculine or femininity, discouraging people from trying to blur the lines between. More masculine traits tend to include loudness, aggression, and strength. Feminine traits tend to center around being domestic and nurturing, as referenced by the common phrase “A woman’s place is in the kitchen.” A 2020 study by Miles Romney and Rich Johnson examined the Instagram posts of major sports networks to see how female athletes were represented visually in comparison to their male counterparts. In the pictures that were focused solely on women, more than 40% showed “passive poses” and more than 50% were from “non-athletic contexts” (Romney 747). Showing pictures of female athletes that do not showcase their full athletic capabilities next to photos of male athletes fully participating in their sports makes it seem that women are not capable of the same achievements as men. The result of “placing equal emphasis on [women’s] nonathletic characteristics such as beauty and grace” is that it “may lead audiences to identify athleticism as a male characteristic” (Romney 749). This stereotype can be easily seen by looking at traditionally female-dominated sports like gymnastics, cheerleading, or dance. There is significant strength and athletic effort involved, but there is a huge focus on the design of the uniforms or even the appearance of the competitor herself. Allowing such “girly” qualities to be equally or more important than the athletic aspects allows many people to dismiss these as sports altogether.

The continued ideology that women do not belong in sports is not only shown by the content of social media posts but the limited amount of coverage. Once again, this is a theme that is consistent in sports networks both on television and on the main social media platforms. The study by Romney and Johnson found that of the almost 1,600 Instagram images analyzed, only 52 had a “primary female subject,” which is just a little over three percent (Romney 747). This disproportionate ratio of women to men despite the growth of women’s sports in the US and across the globe is astounding. It is also important to note that higher coverages of women in sport are seen when they are highlighted alongside male athletes. Examples of this include “dual-sex” events like the Olympic games where the framing and coverage of female athlete’s achievements are much closer than at other times (Romney 742). This minimizes the respect given to female athletics by showing that the most important events for women happen at the same time as men instead of on their own. It also continues to uphold the ideology that sporting events are more masculine.

In 2020 during the height of the Covid pandemic, NCAA football saw Sarah Fuller become the first woman to play in a Power Five football game. Due to Covid protocols, the kicking squad of Vanderbilt University was ineligible, so they called on Fuller who was the goalkeeper for the women’s soccer team at the time. Her participation was met with mixed reactions, which became prevalent in the social media comment sections in posts that acknowledged her achievements. In a study of the three Vanderbilt University Instagram accounts, it was found that almost 58% of the 3,052 comments were considered “unsupportive” (Harry 662). Some examples of comments included “Women should stick to women’s sports,” “I hope she gets trucked so we can finally end this woman thing,” and others claiming that Vanderbilt only put Fuller into the game as a “publicity stunt.” Beyond comments negating

Fuller's status as an athlete, there were over 1,000 comments that had to do with the objectification of Fuller. Many commented on her appearance or her attractiveness, highlighting her sex appeal more than her athletic ability. One example of such comments was saying "she tic af" (Harry 663).

The significance of these stereotypes being continued through social media is that the reach of social media keeps women's sports in a box that makes them seem invalid in comparison to men's sports. When the public holds this opinion, major sports networks can continue to dismiss female athletics as unimportant because they can push the narrative that no one is interested in watching them or hearing about them. Negative commentary is also discouraging for young girls who want to participate in sports as either athletes or fans. For starters, it makes it seem like they are less feminine for liking sports, which disconnects them from other societal expectations. Making kids think that they do not belong in athletics prohibits the growth of women's sports on all levels, including professionally.

Though the negative stereotypes remain, social media has also provided an outlet for people to directly challenge previously held opinions of women in sports. When used to highlight the successes of female sports teams and individual athletes, it allows the fanbase to reach more people than ever before. In a study of the WNBA, one of the most popular professional women's sports leagues in the United States, it was found that there is a correlation between team successes and higher engagement on social media posts, specifically on Twitter. Factors that showed increased engagement for a team included winning the previous year's championship, having a higher number of all-star players, and having a higher winning percentage as an away team (Pegoraro 5). These findings are significant because it shows that highlighting the successes of women's sports on the social media pages of major networks will

allow engagement and awareness to continue to grow. Similar findings can also be found by examining espnW, the broadcast section of ESPN since 2010 that is meant to focus directly on women in sports. This branch and its “profitability and longevity” demonstrates that “a platform using sports to engage and inspire women can be successful” (Wolter 735). Though espnW encompasses more than a social media presence, its reception as a part of one of the biggest US sports networks encourages the growth of and focus towards highlighting women in sports.

Alongside the successes, social media has been able to sway public opinion in major battles for women’s rights in sports. A major example in recent years of this is the public court battle between the US women’s national soccer team and the US Soccer Federation. After winning the women’s World Cup in 2019 while the men’s team did not even qualify for their World Cup, the question was raised as to why the women were not paid for their greater successes. Calling for a contract renegotiation, they brought their case to social media, where it was met with an outpouring of support. According to a study, over 3,500 tweets analyzed expressed positive sentiments, and while there were many tweets that contained negative language as well, almost all of those were mildly worded. Examples of positive emotive language included “absolutely superb,” “impressed,” and calling the women “the best soccer team in the world, male or female” (Alkhamash 27). The case also gave root to many hashtags and trending topics on social media. Eventually, due to much of the pressure placed on the courts and the US Soccer Federation by the increasingly public conversations and debates, the US team won their case and were able to renegotiate their contracts to compensate them more fairly for their successes.

The increase in discussion of women’s sports on social media has also challenged stereotypes by embracing terminology that is traditionally reserved for male athletes. In the

examination of the Sarah Fuller comments, there were multiple that referred to her as a “beast” or as the “GOAT,” meaning “greatest of all time” (Harry 664). Fuller is not the only female athlete to get this kind of response from the media and the public. The reframing can be seen when looking at commentary on athletes such as Simone Biles and Serena Williams. In the past, female standout athletes have often been referred to as the greatest *female* athletes in their sports. However, removing the word female emphasizes their accolades and elevates them to the same level as male athletes. Uniting men’s and women’s athletic achievements as one is not the same as comparing them side by side, as seen with the coverage of the Olympics. Instead, it challenges the idea that true athletic prowess applies only to the male gender. The use of this terminology in social media posts spreads the idea that this is acceptable to more and more people.

The Sarah Fuller Instagram examination provides another key to understanding the role of social media in challenging historic perceptions of female athletics. Around 21% of the comments deemed supportive by the study involved directly challenging the negative comments (Harry 664). One example of a comment of this nature stated “The same salty a** guys who are mocking her kick are the same ones who didn’t even make the JV football team.” Calling out the sexism minimizes the effect that the negative commentary has. Showing that the people who were criticizing Fuller had no expert ability to do so shows that male opinions in sports are not valid just because they are men. It also makes clear the fact that many of the comments are only trying to bash Fuller because of her gender, not because of her skill. A significant portion of the negative comments talked about how little distance Fuller’s kickoff covered but did not acknowledge that it “was designed to be a squib kick... [which is] low and short” (Harry 664). Comments pointing out the situational facts of the game are important because they emphasize that Fuller was doing exactly what the game and the coach told her to do. Her kick was not

because of a lack of skill but was instead the opposite. Still more comments contained disgusted reactions around the conversations relating to Fuller's appearance, telling people to "stop being pigs" and to "have respect for women" (Harry 665). Calling out appearance-focused users allowed the conversation to be refocused on the actual athleticism instead of external factors that do not matter over the course of a football game.

The challenges against sexism in online spaces are significant for progress surrounding acceptance of women in sports. Social media has allowed for much greater awareness in this area by highlighting both struggles and successes of female athletes. Not only does this spotlight incite change, but it leads directly to growing interest in women's sports, which in turn increases revenue toward them. Often in the United States, money is a factor when media outlets are determining what content to push out. An argument against women's professional sports like the WNBA or the US women's national soccer team is often that the teams do not bring in the capital to make them worth putting on air or consistently promote them on social media pages. However, this is something that is changing. Social media allows the interest in women's sports to be much more visible. Also, social media has changed the way that people are referring to female athletes as a whole. When people are able to speak up against improper negative commentary, it sets an example so others can have more confidence in themselves and their place in the sports world. Directly going against commenters who enjoy the lack of censoring that that social media provides will make them think twice about their stance or, at the very least, give them pause before making another negative comment. The reframing of female athletes using phrases like "beast" or "GOAT" also provides visibility by putting them on the same stage as male athletes, removing the stigma around female participation in men's spaces.

Social media has also provided a space for female athletes and fans to have a voice in the sports world in a way that is less dependent on their gender. Quite frequently, it is viewed as a negative that social media and the internet as a whole gives a level of anonymity to discussions. However, for female sports fans, words that aren't attached to a face has been beneficial. It allows for their analysis to be taken more seriously and for their passion for the sport to shine through. In forums and other online public spaces, they can just be fans instead of female fans. A study on the social media platforms of Australian soccer clubs found that "women do want to engage as knowledgeable, informed, and attentive sports fans" and that the demographic was "first and foremost interested in the game of football" (Smith 22). Some male sports fans have tried to accuse women's fans of only enjoying the game for the attractiveness of the athletes playing. Examples of this include in the hockey community, where female fans are denoted as "puck bunnies," meaning that they are just chasing the idea of a partner who plays hockey. However, the soccer research directly contradicts that, showing that women are fans for the same reasons that men are. According to the same study, female fans were interested in "club announcements, match reports, highlight packages, and player/coach press conferences (Smith 22). Most of these aspects of sports reports go beyond what more casual sports viewers are interested in. The fanbase as a whole wants to be more deeply involved in the community.

The presentation of women's sports on social media has also had more serious implications for fans and athletes alike. A huge example of this is the growth of women's soccer in the Middle East. Since the introduction of the first women's national soccer team in the region in Bahrain in 2003, social media posts have allowed for built legitimacy for women's sports, increased community engagement, and changed perceptions on domestic and international levels (AlKhalifa 252). Social media pages that highlight the achievements of these teams have reach

that provides validity to women in communities where they have been historically oppressed. As people begin to realize that women are as capable as men, even in situations like sports leagues, they will challenge the political systems that have minimized women's rights. On the international level, it calls people from other countries to support the same causes because social media about marginalized groups both provokes outrage and shows proof of progress. It also seriously contributes to the growth of women's athletics in the area. Posts that focus on bringing together the community "worked to generate interest from young people which could potentially increase participation in the sport" (AlKhalifa 253). The increase of excitement makes it easier to build a community where people support female fans and athletes alike.

Another demonstration of female fan communities that have flourished in the age of social media is found in the use of hashtags. The first example of this is something that was not sports-centric, but instead a global phenomenon. Around 2017, the #MeToo movement spread rapidly on platforms like Twitter and Instagram, giving women a space to share their experience with sexual assault and violence throughout their lifetimes, taking away the taboo that surrounded discussions of those topics. One prominent story that rose out of #MeToo in the world of women's sports was the scandal surrounding Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics. Members of the USA Olympic team and others took to the internet in the wake of the hashtag and shared the sexual abuse they had faced at the hands of the doctor since they were as young as 12 or 13. With the space to share their story, the public outcry was huge. They were able to push for criminal charges as well as immense change within the way the sport of gymnastics is run in the United States. The athletes were also able to advocate for new rules that were to be put in place to protect future athletes that might have found themselves in similar situations. The second hashtag campaign that has been prominent for women on sports social media was

#HerStory. As shown by the play on words from “history,” these posts allowed for “women’s oppression in sport [to be] disputed and more feminist perspectives in sport to be advanced” (Harry 666). In short, the hashtag allows more women-positive stories and accomplishments to be shared in their own space. This helps to remove the comparison aspect of women versus men in athletics.

Organizations have begun to recognize the importance of female-dominant communities on social media when it comes to growing their reach and revenue. Pinterest is a social media site that has historically been used by women. Much of it is due to its nature of planning ideas through photo boards, which many people use for wedding and outfit inspirations. However, all four major sports leagues in the United States have recognized the reach of this platform. It was found that the marketing purpose for Pinterest was to “promote purchasable items... through a social-media outlet that caters to a predominantly female audience with the power to make sport-related purchasing decisions” (Conlin 370). Using social media to increase their target market has given more relevance to female sports fans because as they buy more merchandise, the sports leagues will be more likely to sell more merchandise to them. Pinterest also provides a space for leagues to post more fan-centric content. Instead of in game action shots, the platform gives more space for fan interactions and outside events such as community outreach, magazine shoots, or shots from player social media profiles that give insight into their daily lives (Conlin 370). This, alongside the manner of Pinterest allowing for users to “try” and repost content quite easily, allows for female fans to have a space of their own with exclusively curated content that they enjoy.

By allowing for the growth of female fanbases in a traditionally male-dominated community, social media has brought legitimacy to female fans and women’s sports globally. By

being able to share their stories and opinions in safer spaces, women can grow their passions for sports without being judged for their gender or their appearance. This then allows for more growth in the operation of sports leagues, even on the men's professional level. The investment into Pinterest from the four major US sports leagues is a representation of the new role that female fans have in sports. They have become a profitable target market that need to be considered when making content and merchandising decisions. Safe spaces for women on social media have also led to more serious change outside of the sports world. The viral nature of the Larry Nassar scandal gave inspiration to women and girls to speak up against abuse by showing them that even the athletes they idolize have gone through similar hardships. Social media in the Middle East has even allowed for people to push for greater political change. This has been prominent over the course of the FIFA Men's World Cup in 2022. Nationwide protests in Iran have gotten onto the international stage due to commentary on sites like TikTok and Instagram. Even the men's players have gotten involved in the push for women's right in the nation. It is also prominent in the branding for the FIFA Women's World Cup that will occur in 2023. FIFA wants their sport and its championship events to be "vehicle[s] for social development and enhanced international relations" (Beissel 792).

In conclusion, social media has accepted the perception of women in sports in both negative and positive ways. The widespread access to content allows people to remain stuck in the more historical views of women not belonging in the world of sports. These comments contribute to the oppression of female athletes and fans and work to stop female sports from progressing further. However, studies have shown that there is massive progress in the way that women are viewed both as competitors and participants in sports environments. Many people of all genders use the reach of social media to challenge the sexism that they see in traditional

media, forcing conversations that lead to more adoption of women in sports. The communities formed also provide a safe space for women to share their stories and opinions whether they are positive or negative. Social media allows for “a strong following for sports that are underappreciated in old media” (Vann 454). Utilizing social media as one of the faster growing forms of media, especially among young people, will allow for continued growth for women in the sports world. The improvements have led to a culture where young girls are more encouraged than discouraged of joining the sports world as athletes or fans, which in turn facilitates the growth of women’s sports on broadcast and traditional media networks.

Bibliography

- Alkhamash, Reem. "The social media framing of gender pay gap debate in American women's sport: A linguistic analysis of emotive language." *Training, Language, and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2021, 22-35.
- AlKhalifa, Husa and Anna Farello. "The soft power of Arab women's football: changing perceptions and building legitimacy through social media." *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2021, 241-257.
10.1080/19406940.2020.1854327
- Beissel, Adam et al. "'Winning the women's world cup': gender, branding, and the Australia/New Zealand As One 2023 social media strategy for the FIFA Women's World Cup 2023." *Sport in Society*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2022, 768-798.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2021.1980780>.
- Conlin, Lindsey et al. "Pinterest and Female Sport Fans: Gaining a Foothold in the Male-Dominated Sport World." *International Journal of Sport Communication*, vol. 7, 2014, 357-376. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/IJSC.2014-0027>.
- Harry, Molly. "More Than a Kick: A Liberal Feminist's Analysis of Instagram Commentary on Sarah Fuller's Historic Kick-off." *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 2021, 652-673. <http://csri-jiaa.org>.
- Pegoraro, Ann et al. "An Analysis of Broadcasting Media Using Social Media Engagement in the WNBA." *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, vol. 3, May 2021.
10.3389/fspor.2021.658293.

- Romney, Miles and Rich Johnson. "The Ball Game Is for the Boys: The Visual Framing of Female Athletes on National Sports Networks' Instagram Accounts." *Communication & Sport*, vol. 8, no. 6, 2020, 738-756. 10.1177/216747959836731.
- Smith, Kelsey et al. "Finding a Voice for Female Sports Fans in Online Spaces: A Case Study of the Greater Western Sydney Giants Football Club." *The International Journal of Sport and Society*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2017.
- Wolter, Sarah. "A Longitudinal Analysis of espnW: Almost 10 Years of Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity." *Communication & Sport*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2021, 718-741. 10.1177/2167479519895479.
- Vann, Portia. "Changing the Game: The Role of Social Media in Overcoming Old Media's Attention Deficit Toward Women's Sport." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 58, no. 3, 2014, 438-455. 10.1080/08838151.2014.935850.