

Female Athletes' Self-Presentation on Instagram

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

Professional female athletes in almost every sport experience minimal media coverage, lower compensation, and less respect for their athletic ability than their male counterparts (Fink, 1998). Before Title IX was passed in 1972, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex, there were three hundred thousand girls and women that participated in sports. After Title IX, that number increased to a total of 2.4 million by 2013. However, despite the incredible growth of female athletics, media coverage of women's sports did not see a similar rise. In the United States, women make up 40% of the athlete population yet women receive less than 2% of the television media coverage (Wenzhao Mu, 2018). In order for women to compete with male athletes for publicity, they have been sexualized, from tight and/or revealing uniforms to provocative magazine covers. The attention given to these women is directed at their physical traits as opposed to their athleticism (Liang, 2011).

The sexualization of female athletes presents a wide breadth of ethical issues. First, by focusing on an athlete's body, the female is reduced to her physical characteristic and little to no regard is given for what she has to offer in her mind or on the field. Second, research has shown that girls and college women are more inclined to self-objectification when seeing female athletes in a sexualized portrayal as opposed to their portrayal as performance athletes (Daniels 2009; Reichart Smith 2016). Third, Daniels's research determined that when young boys view images of female athletes as performance athletes they focus more on the female's athletic ability than when viewing sexualized images (Daniels, 2011). The perceived performance and competence of an athlete is significantly diminished when the athlete is sexualized, particularly when the athlete is a female (Nezlek, 2015). Lastly, the sexualization of female athletes reinforces male dominance in sports since the portrayal of athletes in this way seeks to highlight

the athletes' femininity while they participate in what are considered traditionally masculine activities (Liang, 2011). The introduction of social media, especially the platform Instagram which focuses on sharing photos, offers a means for athletes to personally cultivate their public image.

Social media is now a key, and arguably essential, aspect to an athlete's brand (Su et al., 2020). The platforms allow women to shape their image, garner support, and attract sponsors. Founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010, Instagram is a photo-based social media platform that allows user to share images and videos, comment on other users' posts, and like photos (Blystone, 2020). In 2020, Instagram reached a total of 2.3 billion users and generated \$24 billion in revenue (Iqbal, 2021). This provides female athletes with the ability to curate their image for a wide audience instead of being at the mercy of large media companies. The goal of this research is to address the question: How do female athletes choose to portray themselves on Instagram and how do their followers respond to their branding choices?

Goffman's Theory of Self-presentation

In order to address how female athletes portray themselves on Instagram and what impacts their decisions, Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation will be considered. Self-presentation theory was first introduced in 1959 in Goffman's book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. This theory is concerned with how people are constantly aware of how they portray themselves to others and the impression that they are giving. He likens life to a theatrical performance where people in their everyday life are the actors and all of the audience consists of other individuals or things that interact with the actor (Li 2021). Depending on the setting and

the audience, an actor adjusts how they portray themselves. According to Goffman, the central motivating factors for any actor are to seek approval and avoid disapproval.

There are two terms about behavior that are important in understanding Goffman's theory: region behavior and audience segregation. Region behavior refers to how one acts differently with different audiences, for example, interacting with strangers versus friends. Audience segregation is in reference to how people keep some parts of their life private and some public (Tseëlon, 1992). Goffman refers to the public aspect of one's life as on-stage. In this setting, one is very aware of how he/she is portraying him/herself and is careful to present the desired version of his/herself. Backstage is the more private parts of life when one is around family or friends and can relax and be less hyper aware of one's words and actions.

It is evident that this theory would apply to how individuals portray themselves on social media and why different features of the technology drive their actions. This is especially relevant when viewing famous athletes since they are more likely than normal individuals to be diligent about what aspects of their life are private versus public and curating their public image. Therefore, the theory will be applied to examine how the human behaviors described by Goffman are impacted by the current design of Instagram. It will also be used to analyze how users, specifically female athletes, respond to Instagram features. When looking at the types of pictures that an athlete posts, the audience will also be considered.

Case Context

Over the last 15 years the percentage of Americans who use social media has increased by 65% going from only 5% to 70% (Pew Research Center, 2021). People use social media platforms to connect with friends, family, celebrities, athletes, and even strangers. The largest

group of users comes from people ages 18 to 29 and Instagram is the third most popular social media site behind YouTube and Facebook.

The concept of social media started in the 1990s when people started blogging and personal computers became more affordable and popular (Jones, 2015). This stage planted the seed for user generated content that could be shared through the internet. An early form of social media is Friendster, which emerged in 2002, and reached over one hundred million users. This allowed users to share pictures and videos and receive feedback from people who were part of their network. LinkedIn was also founded in 2002 and is still a widely popular site for professional networking. The next year MySpace was released and reigned as the top social media site until it was overtaken by Facebook in 2008. Facebook was created at Harvard by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes in 2004 (Hall, 2021). Currently, the platform has almost three billion users worldwide and produced an annual revenue of \$117 million in the year 2021 (Statistica Research Department, 2022). The platform Instagram was built in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and reached a billion users by 2018 (Brown, 2018). In 2021, Instagram was purchased for \$1 billion by Facebook while it had only thirteen employees (Reiff, 2021).

Many studies have been conducted concerning female athletes and social media. A study done in 2013 found that female athletes prefer images that represent themselves as highly capable athletes but when concerned with which images would increase interest, gravitated towards more sexualized images (Kane, 2013). Another group of researchers studied Twitter profiles of athletes. They found that female athletes focus their written profile biographies on their athletic career but more prominently highlight their femininity in visuals on their page such as their profile picture. Male athletes used action shots of themselves twice as much as the

female athletes and showed images of themselves in a sports context significantly more than the women (Coche, 2017).

The expansion of social media has provided an opportunity for businesses to increase their marketing, connect with more customers, and grow their brand (Lavoie, 2015). The same concepts apply to athletes. It is necessary for athletes to grow their personal brand to garner more support and to increase fan loyalty which helps lead to popularity, exposure, and sponsorships (Arai, 2014). It is especially important for female athletes to take advantage of the opportunity that social media offers to dictate what image of themselves is being broadcast instead of being at the mercy of the mainstream media (Shreffler, 2016). However, female athletes have faced many barriers in creating a personal brand. One barrier is explained by social role theory which proposes that a hinderance for female athletes could be the gender stereotypes that society places on men and women. Social role theory says that the stereotype expectations for women are to be nurturing, compassionate, and helpful whereas men are leaders and possess qualities of strength and self-confidence (Eagly, 2000). Female athletes who demonstrate these perceived masculine qualities can receive backlash and critique for not adhering to extreme feminine behavior. ESPN released a film called *Branded* that sought to address the struggles that female athletes have in creating their brand. The film describes two roles, “vixen” and “girl-next-door”, that the women feel they have to choose between (Ewing, 2013). The athletes felt that if they failed to conform with either of these images, themselves and their career would face negative consequences. A study done in 2018 examined what female athletes’ perceived barriers were in creating their brand. The findings showed that they struggle to be assertive and vouch for themselves because they are “taught to speak in the collective terms rather than promote ourselves.” It also found that they assumed being physically attractive was an important requirement for building a successful

brand. One finding that was the most relevant to the topic of this report was that female athletes don't feel that they have a "visible platform to showcase their brand (Lobpries, 2018)." This is where social media could come in and provide an avenue for athletes to reach fans. It has the potential to help break down barriers for female athletes in creating their brand or reinforce the restricting stereotypes.

Research Question and Methods

This research will focus on how female athletes choose to portray themselves on Instagram and how their fans react to different types of images. The research will also consider how the features that are present on Instagram play a part in encouraging different human behaviors. The research question will also be addressed through a case study analysis of how four popular professional female athletes present themselves on Instagram. All of these athletes will be selected from the top ten highest paid athletes of 2020 to 2021 and two of the four will also be among the top ten most followed professional female athletes on Instagram.

The four athletes that were chosen to be analyzed were tennis legend Serena Williams, Olympic gymnast Simone Biles, WNBA player Candace Parker, and tennis star Naomi Osaka. These athletes are among the top ten highest paid female athletes in the world. Simone and Serena are also two of the ten most followed female athletes on Instagram and will be referred to as the 'high profile' athletes later in this report. The posts from the individuals' accounts will be evaluated based on the image. All the data was manually collected from Instagram. The 100 most recent pictures were categorized as an athletic competence, mixed, lifestyle, or revealing photo. Posts without the athlete and videos were skipped. Using a very similar categorization method as Mary Jo Kane applied in her research (Kane et al., 2013), images will be classified

into four categories: athletic competence, combination, lady-like, and revealing. An example of an athletic competence photo is Serena on the tennis court playing a match. Mixed refers to a photo that displays both the athlete's femininity and her athleticism. An example would be Candace in a suit holding a basketball. A lifestyle photo could be any image that displayed the athlete in her daily life activities that don't involve her sport. For example, a lifestyle image of Naomi would be her posing in a dress by the pool. Lastly, a revealing image might be Simone in a bikini (Appendix A).

After the image was categorized, the number of likes and comments were collected. These likes and comments were then normalized for each athlete. All of the data analysis was done using the normalized number of likes or comments in order to better compare athletes when they all have a different number of followers. For each athlete, comment data was gathered from one randomly selected photo in each of the four categories. Due to the manual collection process, 10% of the comments or a max of 100 comments were gathered and classified by whether the comment referenced the athlete's appearance and whether the comment had a positive or negative sentiment. Appearance comments included comments that mentioned any of her attire or included statements like "sexy", "lookin' good", or "beautiful". Each comment will be categorized based on whether its focus is on the female's athletic ability or her body and if it is positive or negative. Any comments that degraded the athlete based on her weight, appearance, athleticism or other qualities were deemed a negative comment.

The collected data was analyzed using statistical tests in R to answer a variety of question around how different athletes portray themselves on social media and how their followers respond. The number of likes and comments were compared across the different athletes and

photo types. Analysis was also conducted to compare the higher profile athletes, Serena and Simone, to the lower profile athletes, Naomi and Candace.

Results

This research of female athletes on Instagram found that there are statistically significant differences between the types of photos that athletes post and the response that each type of image receives from fans. When looking at all of the posts from all athletes together, revealing photos and athletic competence photos got significantly more likes and comments than mixed or lifestyle photos. Additionally, the athletes post lifestyle images most frequently and revealing images the least. There was no statistically significant difference in how many athletic or mixed photos were posted. I determined that lifestyle images get the most comments that are focused on the athlete's appearance and athletic competence photos get the fewest. When examining the number of appearance comments by athlete, Simone Biles and Candace Parker were significantly more likely to get a comment that focused on their appearance than Naomi Osaka or Serena Williams. Additionally, the higher profile athletes post significantly more lifestyle and revealing images than the lower profile athletes. The lower profile athletes post significantly more athletic competence or mixed photos, displaying their athleticism, than the higher profile athletes.

To investigate which type of photos received the most likes, a sequence of t-tests was performed. Revealing photos received more likes than mixed or lifestyle photos. Athletic competence images got more likes than lifestyle and mixed images. Therefore, revealing and athletic competence photos received the most likes and mixed and lifestyle photos received the fewest. For comments, athletic competence and revealing images get statistically more

comments than lifestyle or mixed images (see Table 1). Considering both likes and comments, athletic competence and revealing posts get the most attention from fans as seen in Figure 1.

Alternative Hypothesis: $X_1 > X_2$			
Category	X₁	X₂	P-value
Number of Likes	Revealing	Mixed	0.00046
	Revealing	Lifestyle	0.00023
	Athletic Competence	Mixed	0.00564
	Athletic Competence	Lifestyle	0.00325
Number of Comments	Revealing	Mixed	0.05143
	Revealing	Lifestyle	0.01042
	Athletic Competence	Mixed	0.01014
	Athletic Competence	Lifestyle	0.00360

Table 1. Overall Significant Differences in Number of Likes and Comments

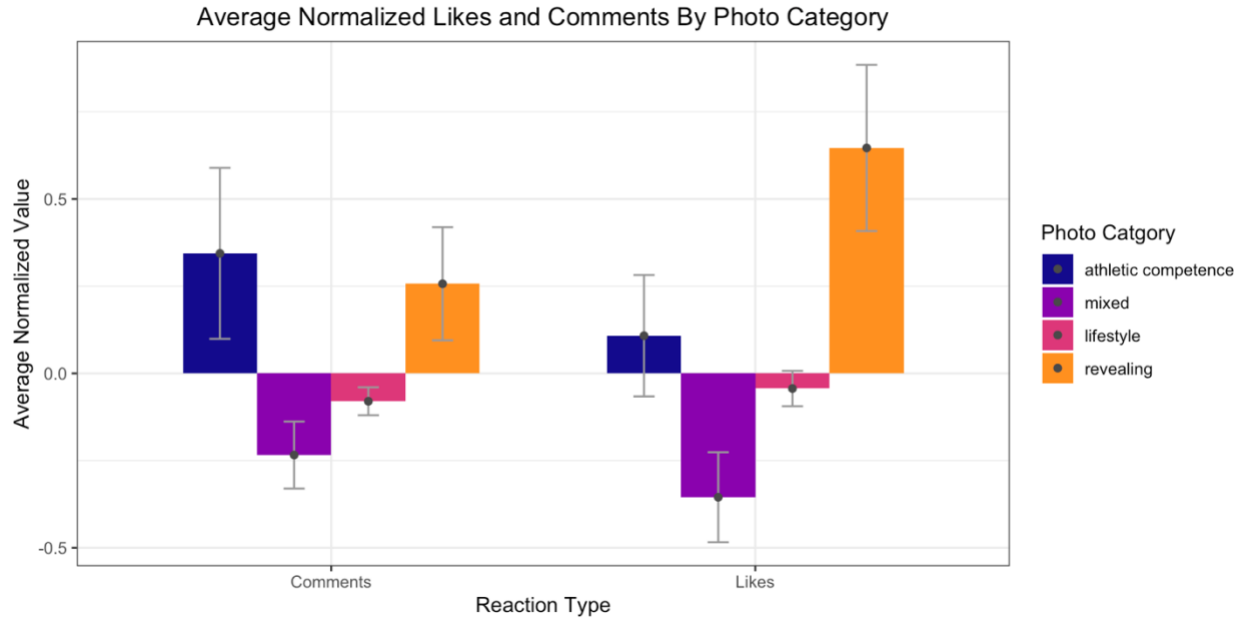


Figure 1. Average Normalized Likes and Comments by Photo Category with 95% Confidence Intervals

The next step was to evaluate each athlete separately to see if there was a difference in how their fans respond to posts and the types of images that they post. T-tests were used to compare the number of likes and comments given to each image category for each athlete (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). Two-proportion z-tests were conducted to determine which types of photos each athlete posted as seen in Figure 4.

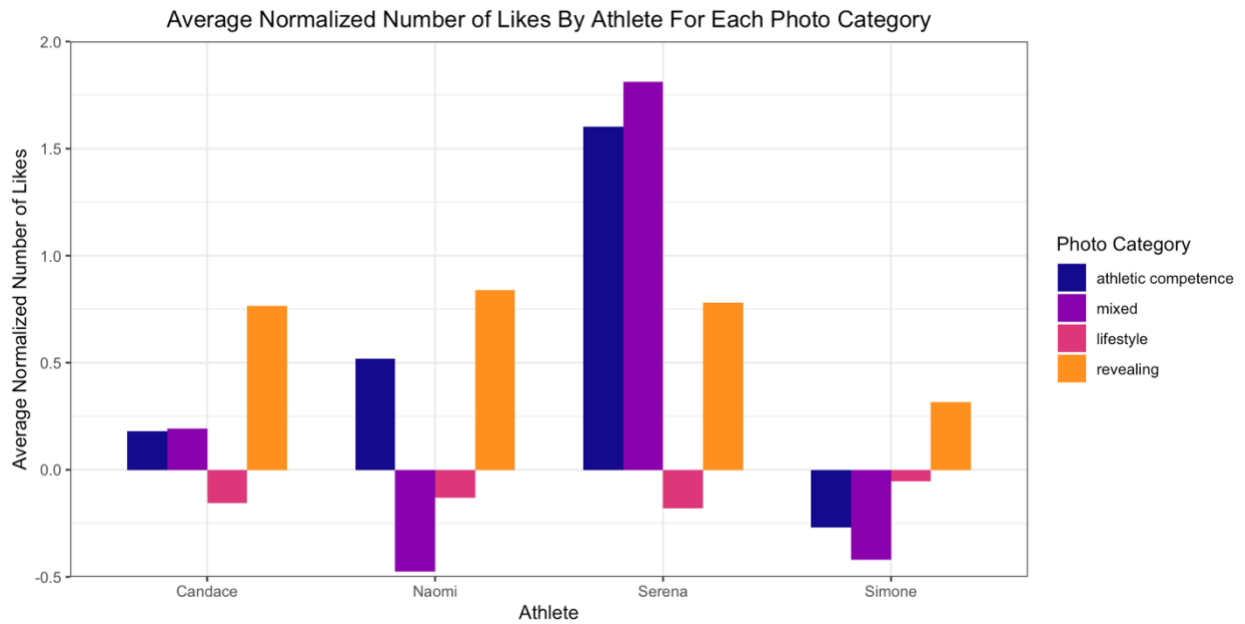


Figure 2. Average Normalized Number of Likes by Athlete for Each Photo Category

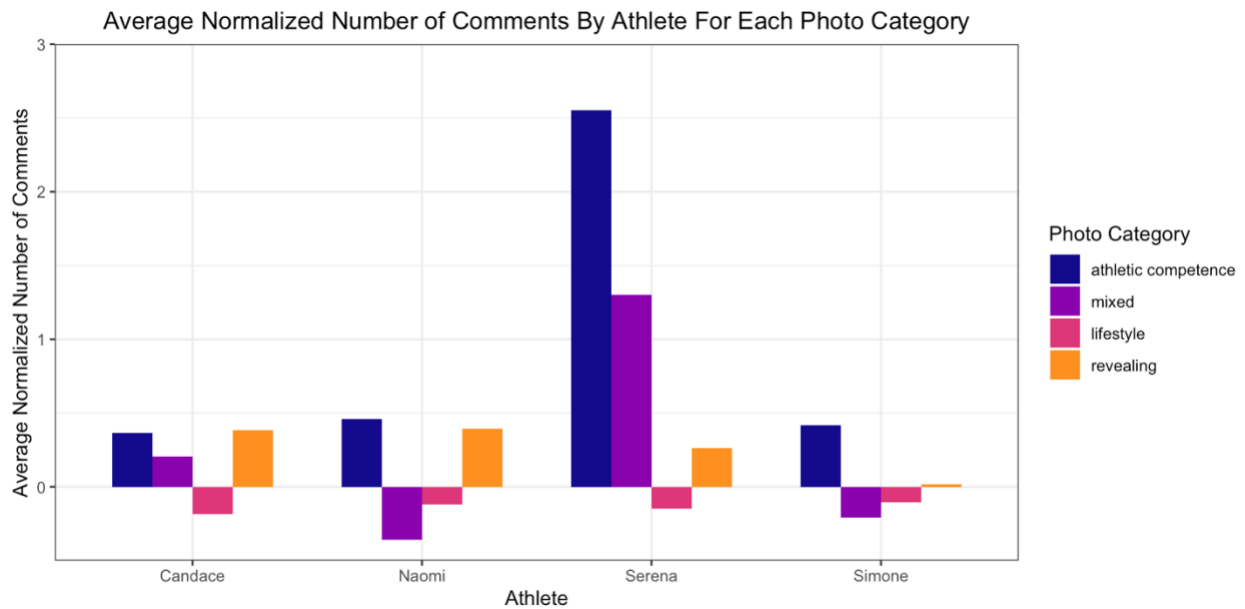


Figure 3. Average Normalized Number of Comments by Athlete for Each Photo Category

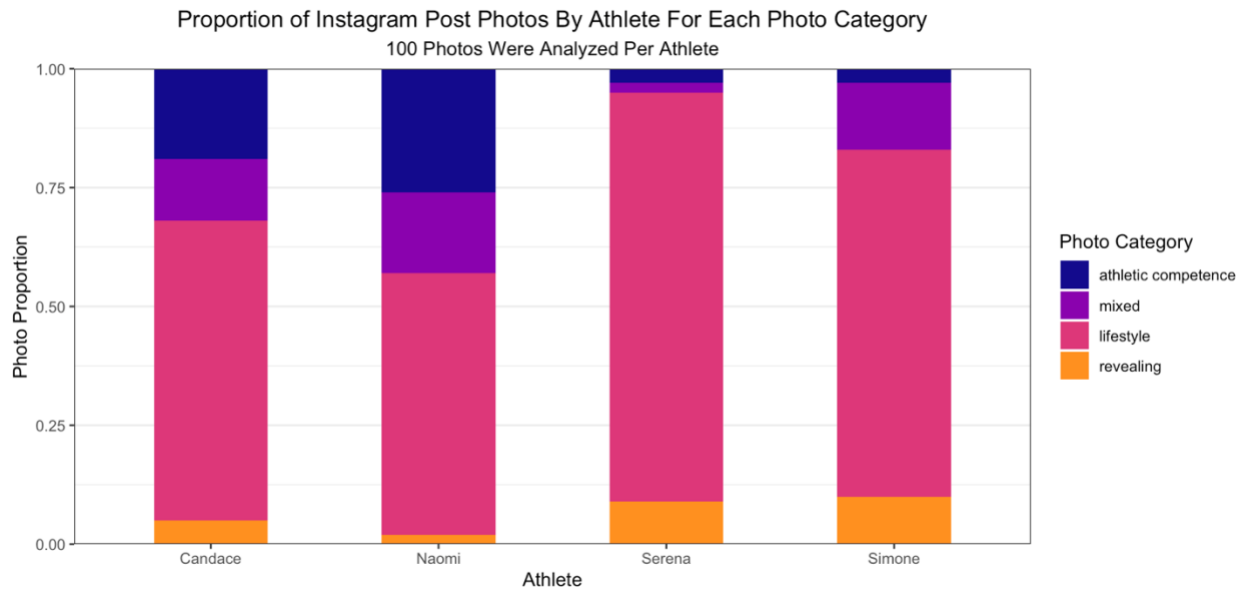


Figure 4. Proportion of Instagram Post Photos by Athlete for Each Photo Category

Naomi Osaka's revealing images got more likes than mixed and lifestyle images. Athletic competence photos had more likes than mixed and lifestyle photos. Overall, Naomi's revealing and athletic competence images received the most likes followed by lifestyle images and lastly, mixed images received the fewest. A similar analysis was also done for comments and athletic competence images received the largest number of comments. Mixed and lifestyle photos received fewer comments than athletic photos. Revealing images did not receive a statistically different number of comments from any other category. When conducting tests to compare the proportion of each type of post, I found that Naomi posts lifestyle images most frequently followed by athletic competence photos, then mixed images, and lastly, revealing pictures (see Table 2).

Alternative Hypothesis: $X_1 > X_2$			
Category	X₁	X₂	P-value
Number of Likes	Revealing	Mixed	0.02964
	Revealing	Lifestyle	0.04116
	Athletic Competence	Mixed	0.00054
	Athletic Competence	Lifestyle	0.01349
	Lifestyle	Mixed	0.01553
Number of Comments	Athletic Competence	Lifestyle	0.03203
	Athletic Competence	Mixed	0.003801
Proportion of Type of Pictures Posted	Lifestyle	Athletic Competence	2.75E-05
	Athletic Competence	Revealing	1.39E-06
	Athletic Competence	Mixed	0.08426
	Mixed	Revealing	0.00037

Table 2. Naomi Osaka Significant Differences in Number of Likes, Comments and the Proportion of Type of Pictures Posted

Serena Williams received significantly more likes on her revealing images than lifestyle images. All other comparisons were insignificant. For comments, there was no statistical difference across the categories. When examining the types of photos that Serena Williams posts, I discovered that she posts the most lifestyle images followed by revealing and the fewest posts are from the mixed or athletic competence categories (see Table 3).

Alternative Hypothesis: $X_1 > X_2$			
Category	X₁	X₂	P-value
Number of Likes	Revealing	Lifestyle	0.00854
Proportion of Type of Pictures Posted	Lifestyle	Revealing	2.20E-16
	Revealing	Mixed	0.03137
	Revealing	Athletic Competence	0.06828

Table 3. Serena Williams Significant Differences in Number of Likes and the Proportion of Type of Pictures Posted

Simone Biles gets significantly more likes on revealing images than mixed or athletic competence images. There was no significant difference between the number of likes on revealing or lifestyle pictures or between athletic competence and mixed images. Therefore, revealing and lifestyle images received the most likes whereas athletic competence and mixed photos received the fewest. There was no significant difference in the number of comments that Simone received in the different categories. For type of pictures posted, Simone posts the most lifestyle images followed by mixed or revealing pictures and athletic competence photos are posted the least (see Table 4).

The final athlete that was analyzed is Candace Parker. All of her photos received statistically the same number of comments and likes aside from two results that were significant only at the 0.1 level. When considering the type of images she posts, Candace posts the most lifestyle pictures followed by athletic competence, then mixed, and lastly revealing images (see Table 5).

Alternative Hypothesis: $X_1 > X_2$			
Category	X₁	X₂	P-value
Number of Likes	Revealing	Mixed	0.0183
	Revealing	Athletic Competence	0.09644
Proportion of Type of Pictures Posted	Lifestyle	Mixed	<2.2E-16
	Mixed	Athletic Competence	0.00561
	Revealing	Athletic Competence	0.04263

Table 4. Simone Biles Significant Differences in Number of Likes and the Proportion of Type of Pictures Posted

Alternative Hypothesis: $X_1 > X_2$			
Category	X₁	X₂	P-value
Number of Likes	Revealing	Lifestyle	0.05922
	Athletic Competence	Lifestyle	0.08231
Number of Comments	Athletic Competence	Lifestyle	0.08231
Proportion of Type of Pictures Posted	Lifestyle	Athletic Competence	3.16E-10
	Mixed	Revealing	0.04185
	Athletic Competence	Revealing	0.00234

Table 5. Candace Parker Significant Differences in Number of Likes

The types of comments made on posts were also analyzed using two proportion z-tests over all the athletes and for each specific athlete. Comments made about an athlete’s physical appearance were referred to as “appearance comments”. Athletic competence posts received the smallest proportion of appearance comments. Mixed and revealing images had a significantly smaller proportion of appearance comments than lifestyle images. Therefore, lifestyle photos had the largest proportion of appearance comments, followed by revealing and mixed photos with athletic competence photos having the smallest proportion (see Table 6).

Alternative Hypothesis: $X_1 > X_2$		
X₁	X₂	P-value
Lifestyle	Athletic Competence	9.591E-11
Mixed	Athletic Competence	0.00058
Revealing	Athletic Competence	0.02663
Lifestyle	Mixed	3.13E-06
Lifestyle	Revealing	0.00035

Table 6. Overall Significant Differences in the Proportion of Appearance Comments Received

This shows that when an athlete posts images that highlight her athleticism, followers are less likely to focus on her physical appearance. This demonstrates that the type of images displayed to the public does impact how the athlete is perceived and how the public react. I would like to note that the majority of the comments simply said “Beautiful” or had other vague appearance praising terms. A very small proportion of comments sexualized the athletes. When

comparing the number of appearance comments between athletes, I found that Simone Biles and Candace Parker receive the most appearance comments followed by Naomi Osaka with Serena Williams receiving the fewest appearance comments. Lastly, nearly all of the collected comments had a positive sentiment so no analysis was done with negative versus positive sentiment.

The last thing that was tested involved comparing the higher profile athletes, Serena and Simone, to the lower profile athletes, Naomi and Candace. I analyzed this through two proportion z-tests. The higher profile athletes posted significantly fewer athletic competence photos than the lower profile athletes. Higher profile athletes also posted fewer mixed photos. Rather, the higher profile athletes posted more lifestyle and revealing photos as seen in Table 7. This observation seems contradictory to the previous conclusion that athletic competence photos and revealing photos get the most attention. This would suggest that the athletes with more followers would be the ones that post the two most popular types of images frequently. However, this is not the case and the higher profile athletes are least likely to post anything related to their sport. I also anticipated that athletes would respond to likes and comments by changing their posting behavior but this doesn't appear to be the case since all of the athletes post lifestyle pictures the most even though these photos received the fewest responses.

Alternative Hypothesis: $X_1 > X_2$		
X₁	X₂	P-value
Lower Profile Athletic Competence	Higher Profile Athletic Competence	6.11E-09
Low Profile Mixed	High Profile Mixed	0.0208
High Profile Lifestyle	Low Profile Lifestyle	7.32E-06
High Profile Revealing	Low Profile Revealing	0.01284

Table 7. Significant Difference in the Proportion of Type of Pictures Posted by High and Low Profile Athletes

Discussion

The construction of Instagram was likely informed, directly or indirectly, by the principles of Goffman's theory of self-presentation. Allowing people to like pictures gives them the means to receive positive feedback from others. However, it does not appear from these findings that the female athletes observed are motivated by the number of likes or comments that they receive on photos. Despite lifestyle images being the least popular images among followers, the athletes gravitated towards them the most. This is very contradictory to Goffman's theory of self-presentation that suggests people's central motivating factors are to seek approval and avoid disapproval. It is possible that the frequency of lifestyle pictures is the athletes' attempt to present the side of themselves that isn't typically included in media sources that are outside of their control. It could also be societal pressure to focus on their femininity as opposed to their athleticism which seems likely given that the higher profile athletes post about their sport the least.

When considering if the sexualization of female athletes is still prevalent in how the athletes portray themselves, there are conflicting results. Followers respond equally to athletic competence photos as they do to revealing images, yet the most followed female athletes on Instagram in this study rarely post anything related to their sport. This poses the question of whether fans actually prefer athletic images, as suggested by the high response level, or if they simply respond well to these photos but gravitate towards following accounts with less athletic content. The results also suggest that the athletes' different audiences play a part in the reactions that their photos receive. Simone and Candace both get the most appearance comments and Simone gets significantly more likes on posts that don't reference her sport. The likely factor for the difference between these two athletes and the two tennis players is their audience. The results imply that the individuals viewing Simone and Candace's photos are more likely to comment on the athlete's looks and gravitate towards non-athletic photos.

Considering how the research could be improved, I would choose athletes at the same stage in life and around the same age. Serena Williams is married and has a young daughter who made frequent appearances in her photos. In contrast, Simone Biles is young and unmarried. These two athletes post very different photos and have different audiences. I would also try to collect data from female athletes in the same sport. When considering females across several sports, the audience is so varied. Basketball fans and tennis fans are likely not the same and therefore it is harder to contribute the difference in Instagram reaction purely to the photo posted.

A large challenge of this research was the manual data collection. If I were able to automate large data collection from Instagram, I could be more confident in the results. Additionally, posts that were videos were not analyzed and it would be useful in the future to be able to classify the videos, especially for the athletes that post videos very frequently.

Conclusion

Following the finding of this research, a reasonable next step would be to compare female athletes' pictures on Instagram to male athletes. I hypothesize that male athletes of a similar caliber are more likely to post athletic competence photos than female athletes. I also predict that men are less likely to post revealing images than female athletes.

Overall, this research showed that followers' reactions on Instagram do not heavily influence the types of images that female athletes post. It showed that fans are most likely to react, through likes or comments, to revealing images or pictures of the athletes that highlight their sport. The notable response to athletic images suggests that main stream media could garner just as much attention by focusing on a female athlete's athleticism as they do when they sexualize her. The most followed accounts have the lowest proportion of posts about their sport. This could be due to pressure for very famous athletes such as Serena Williams and Simone Biles to step into an influencer role and divert attention away from their sport. Lastly, when an athlete posts images that highlight her athletic ability, followers are less likely to focus on her physical appearance. This presents an opportunity for the media to direct attention away from athletes' bodies and looks by moving away from more feminine and sexualized depictions of female athletes.

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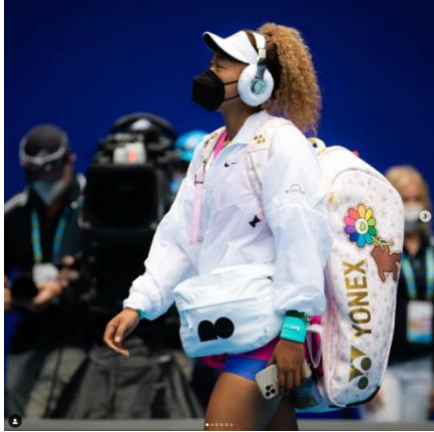
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Appendix A

Athletic Competence



Mixed



Lifestyle



Revealing

