Permitted but Problematic:
Unveiling Layers in Reddit Forum r/HottestFemaleAthletes

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Abstract

The gendered and sexualized coverage of female athletes commonly depicted in mass media reinforces negative stereotypes about female athletes and contributes to a broader culture of objectification and sexualization of women. Using virtual ethnographic content analysis, this study investigated one week's worth of discourse found on the Reddit forum r/HottestFemaleAthletes. The objective of this study was to determine conversational trends and if they played a role in objectifying women, a phenomenon indirectly linked to sexual violence through rape myth acceptance in previous research. Analysis of the data determined three coding categories of comments: attractiveness, the use of pet names, and body-focused remarks. The forum lacked overtly sexual or hostile discourse, due to the rules of the forum and the numerous content moderators. Additionally, most of the sexualized and objectifying visual content shared consisted of athletes' personal pictures and videos uploaded to social media. Highlighting how self-commodification online is incentivized for building a successful athlete brand, an important factor in generating capital for female athletes. Themes of sexualization, objectification, and commodification of female athletes' bodies were recurrent throughout the comments, through perpetuating traditional gender roles that depict women as passive objects of desire. The study determined that r/HottestFemaleAthletes contributes to the objectification of women and primarily propagates traditional gender roles, viewing women as passive objects of desire which has been linked to rape myth acceptance.

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Introduction

Reddit, an immensely popular social media platform comprising thousands of forums (known as communities or subcommunities) dedicated to specific topics or discussions, has frequently made headlines due to its numerous problematic, and sometimes more overtly harmful, communities. In July 2021 online news outlet *Vice News* released an article detailing the existence and use of a Reddit subcommunity titled 'Oh-lympics'. This online forum was dedicated to the sexualization of female Olympic athletes and had amassed over 215,000 anonymous members (Montgomery, 2021). Photographs and videos posted to the forum were often those that displayed athletes in a sexually suggestive position or angle. In response, users commented on their desires to have sex with the athlete or explained how attracted they were to her (Montgomery, 2021). In addition, the article outlined the larger problem regarding the trend of objectifying women in sports.

Past literature has documented the importance of studying the sexualization and objectification of female athletes caused by media representation. Numerous studies have shared proof of the disproportionate, gendered, and sexualized representations of female athletes throughout mass media and have documented the negative impact this coverage has had on perceptions of female athletes, female athletics, and self-perceptions of both female viewers and female athletes (Cooky et al., 2021; Messner et al., 1993; Fink and Kensicki, 2002; Eagleman, 2015; Daniels, 2009; Krane et al., 2011; Angelini et al., 2013). The incentivization of sexualized coverage of female athletes can be attributed to the Televised Manhood Formula and The Sports Media Complex (Messer et al., 2000; Jhally, 1984). Which intersect to not only show women in a sexualized manner, but to profit off such representations by working within the framework of neoliberal capitalism (Downey et al., 2023). Such structures serve to commodify the female body

and appeal to the male gaze, a trend frequently exhibited in entertainment media (Bordo, 2013). Sexualized presentations of sportswomen not only influence perceptions of female athletes but have also been linked to harmful phenomena including sexual objectification, rape myth acceptance, self-objectification, and ambivalent sexism towards women (Custers and McNallie, 2017; Gervais and Eagan, 2017; Hust et al., 2023; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997).

Media's influence on public perceptions is now further expanded online through the creation of social media where users can engage in discourse with others and share their opinions, often without facing real world consequences due to the anonymity and social distance allowed by digital spaces (boyd, 2010). This lack of consequence has been postulated to lead to online inhibition (Suler, 2004) where users' act in ways they often wouldn't in face-to-face interactions, which can potentially result in the commission of technology-facilitated sexual violence (Henry and Powell, 2015; 2018). Technology-facilitated sexual violence encompasses acts such as online sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, and gender and sexuality-based harassment, which are far more frequently directed towards women than men (Henry and Powell, 2015).

Despite the risks associated with engaging in digital spaces, the creation and popularity of social media has provided female athletes a chance of having agency over how they are presented. Historically female athletes have had little to no control over the way the media portrays them, and social media allows female athletes the chance to create personal accounts where they can post as they please, and in some cases create monetary revenue for themselves (Arai et al., 2014). Furthermore, female athletes don't make as much money as male athletes through their sports alone making navigating the online space often a necessary risk (Pocock and Skey, 2024). However, female athletes have shared that they feel a pressure to self-commodify online, mimicking the mass media representations of them as such content has been shown to receive

higher engagement, leading to endorsements and increased revenue (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016; Dakroub et al., 2023; Lobpries et al., 2018). With increased popularity online female athletes are at risk of experiencing high rates online abuse known as virtual maltreatment, a rapidly growing behaviour sparking concern among researchers (Litchfield et al., 2016; Kavanagh et al., 2019).

Although scholars have investigated more overt abuse and sexualization of female athletes online, there remains limited information regarding more covert manifestations of objectification often exhibited through benevolent sexism (Barreto and Ellemers, 2005). This research study will look at conversational trends in the Reddit subcommunity r/HottestFemaleAthletes, a self-proclaimed 'classy' and moderated forum dedicated to posting 'beautiful/sexy' female athletes. This study uses a virtual ethnographic approach alongside a dual theoretical lens encompassing critical feminist theory and objectification theory, to understand the roots of such sexualization and objectification, alongside the harms in which they can cause. The objective of this research is to discern whether the forum is engaging in innocent sexualization or is rather propagating a harmful culture of objectifying female athletes and women.

Media Representation of Female Athletes

In the 2012 London Olympic Games, the International Olympic Committee reported that 44% of the athletes competing were women, a stark difference from the 24% who competed at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games (Chappell, 2012). Women are competing in elite level sports more than ever before and although this increase in women's participation shows progress, female athletes remain underrepresented in media coverage. In fact, the most recent version of a longitudinal study conducted by Cooky et al (2021) showed that televised coverage of female athletes has remained relatively the same over the last 30 years. Between 2014 and 2019, there was only a 0.7% increase in televised women's sports coverage (Cooky et al., 2021). This iteration

of the study also included an analysis of online sports newsletters and social media platforms.

Despite the expanded scope for this study, it was determined that there has been little to no change

in the proportional coverage of women's and men's sports in the last thirty years (Cooky et al.,

2021).

Messner et al (2003) also conducted a study regarding televised coverage of female athletes

and found that they were underrepresented. Researchers studied 6 weeks' worth of sports news

and analyzed a total of 251 broadcasts and 15 hours of airtime. Female sports and athletes were

not usually covered during the week, and sometimes a couple of days passed without mention of

female athletics (Messner et al., 2003). In addition, a study by Billings et al (2010) of the 2008

Beijing Olympics determined that the gap between media coverage of female athletes and male

athletes in the Olympics is in fact growing. The gap of coverage between men and women was

8.4% in 2008, compared to 4.6% that was documented in the 2004 Athens Olympics (Billings et

al., 2010).

Coverage of female athletes in print media such as magazines or news articles has also

shown that female athletes are underrepresented. Sports Illustrated is an extremely successful

sports magazine in the United States, and includes pictures, advertisements and news stories

regarding various sports teams, leagues, and athletes. Fink and Kensicki (2002) conducted a

content analysis of Sports Illustrated and analyzed 817 articles and 958 pictures from issues that

were published between 1997 and 1999. The study concluded that female athletes only appeared

in 10% of articles and 11% of photos (Fink and Kensicki, 2002). Similar findings regarding female

athletes' underrepresentation in print media are echoed in research by George et al (2001).

When provided media attention, female athletes are also covered differently in comparison

to their male counterparts. Media coverage of female athletics is often plagued by factors such as

gender marking, infantilizing language, ambivalent and differential framing of athletic achievements, and most commonly a focus on their femininity through sexualizing and objectifying coverage (Cooky et al., 2021; Billings et al., 2010; George et al., 2001; Higgs et al., 2003; Eagleman, 2015). Coverage of female athletes presented in media has been shown to influence public perceptions of them and, due to their frequent sexualization and objectification in visual and textual media, they are often praised for their attractiveness and desirability rather than their athleticism (Nezlek et al., 2015; Daniels, 2012; Fink and Kensicki, 2002).

A study by Eagleman (2015) discovered that almost every article analyzed that depicted female athletes focused on the sports women's appearance rather than their athleticism. Similar findings have also been reported by Higgs et al (2003) and Bissell and Duke (2007) regarding televised coverage of female athletics. Bissell and Duke (2007) analyzed the camera angles from six women's beach volleyball games in the 2004 Olympics and discovered that coverage frequently highlighted the desirability and sexuality of female athletes through close shots of their buttocks or chest. Higgs et al (2003) also reported that traditionally feminine sports such as gymnastics and figure skating, where athletes sport more exposing uniforms receive higher amounts of media coverage than other female sports. These discoveries from Eagleman (2015), Higgs et al (2003), and Bissell and Duke (2007) show that media coverage habitually focuses on female's athletes' femininity and desirability when covering the sport. This type of exposure tells the world and female athletes that their attractiveness and femininity are more important traits than their athleticism.

Objectification of Female Athletes

Female athletes who are depicted in a manner which accentuates and draws attention to their sexual appeal or attractiveness are perceived as less capable, less competent, and less talented

that those represented in a way that highlights their athleticism (Daniels et al., 2021; Knight and Giuliano, 2001; Nezlek et al., 2015). This sexualized portrayal leads to their objectification, reducing them to objects of desire or commodity (Custers and McNallie, 2017; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Female athletes' athleticism is often marginalized by media via gender marking, infantilizing language, and differential framing, whereas their desirability and femininity are magnified through their sexualization in visual and textual media (Messner et al., 2003; Angelini et al., 2013; Fink, 2013; Eagleman; 2015; Higgs et al., 2003; Bissell and Duke 2007).

Messner et al (2000) coined the term the "Televised Sports Manhood Formula" to explain how such representations of women within televised sports both advocates for and emphasizes the objectification and dominance of women by men. This occurs through women being shown in commercial breaks and in wrestling tournaments as sexualized commodities present to support men's violence and domination of each other on the court, field, and in the ring (Messner et al., 2000). In addition, this televised 'formula' intersects with another concept known as the 'Sports Media Complex' which delineates the relationship between sports and mass media within the context of sharing ideologies and perpetuating capitalism (Jhally, 1984). The broadcasting of commercials and advertisements featuring food, alcohol, and entertainment during sporting events contributes significantly to the financial success of the producing companies. The substantial revenue generated from these promotions serves as a vital source of funding for the networks and broadcasts involved (Messner et al, 2000). Therefore, the objectification of women within sporting media is both incentivized and encouraged, meaning such ideologies permeate many aspects of sport media institutions. Such objectifying coverage results in a myriad of consequences including the perpetuation of ambivalent sexism, promotion of the sexual objectification of women by men, acceptance of rape myths, and self-objectification in female viewers (Daniels, 2009; Hedrick,

2021; Linder and Daniels, 2018; Hust et al., 2023; Varnes et al., 2015: Custers and McNallie, 2017: Loughnan et al., 2013).

The framework of ambivalent sexism is characterized by the combination of benevolent and hostile sexist beliefs (Glick and Fiske, 1996). Benevolent sexism perpetuates traditional gender roles through seemingly positive but rather patronizing beliefs which hold that women need to be protected by men and are there to fulfill men's romantic desires (Barreto and Ellemers, 2005). Benevolent sexism also often goes unnoticed due to the lack of outright hostility and has been shown to perpetuate gender inequality alongside contributing to negative reactions to rape victims (Barreto and Ellemers, 2005). Whereas hostile sexism is characterized by an overarching desire for male dominance and is displayed through outward animosity towards women (Agadullina et al., 2022; Begany and Milburn, 2002). Hostile sexism can be exhibited through making threatening comments towards women, using sexist rhetoric, and can result in negative perceptions surrounding women who threaten the desired hierarchy of men (Agadullina et al., 2022). The resulting combination of hostile and benevolent beliefs, known as ambivalent sexism, supports and perpetuates the sexual objectification of women through upholding traditional gender roles alongside diminishing competence of women; and has been shown to be correlated with rape myth acceptance (Abrams et al., 2003).

Rape myth acceptance, a form of victim blaming, is a collection of inaccurate beliefs and attitudes that can perpetuate sexual violence through justifying such acts and are often directed towards instances of male on female sexual violence (O'Connor, 2021). Justification for sexual violence can occur in a multitude of ways including: blaming the victim for drinking too much, staying out too late, or dressing in an explicit manner (Yapp and Quale, 2018); taking blame off of the offender by asserting that men's sexual desires are uncontrollable and there they cannot help

it (McMahon and Farmer, 2011); and through trivializing cases of sexual assault by claiming such acts are not serious enough to be considered rape (Payne et al., 1999). Rape myth acceptance has been correlated with intentions to perpetrate sexual violence, also known as rape proclivity, and has shown to be a cognitive distortion used to justify sexual violence among convicted rapists (Chiroro et al., 2004).

Rape myth acceptance, sexual objectification and ambivalent sexism are interdependently driven and have all been linked indirectly and directly to both sexual aggression and sexual violence toward women (Agadullina et al., 2022; Yapp and Quayle, 2018; Hedrick, 2021). Sexualizing and objectifying media representations of female athletes that follow the Televised Manhood Formula and work in tandem with the Sports Media Complex, help to propagate a larger widespread culture which perpetuates sexual violence through objectification, rape myth acceptance, and ambivalent sexist beliefs. Aiming to dismantle such societal values should be of paramount importance as sexual violence towards women has been categorized as a 'major public health problem' by the World Health Organization (2021).

Viewers Self-Perceptions

Objectifying depictions of female athletes can also impact how young women and girls see their bodies and, in some cases, can influence their mental health (Linder and Daniels, 2018; Daniels 2009; Daniels et al., 2021). Non-objectifying media representation of female athletes have the power to positively affect young women's attitudes towards their body. Females who view sports performance depictions of female athletes have been shown to make more frequent positive statements about their own body, strength, and physicality (Daniels 2009; Linder and Daniels, 2018). Unfortunately, objectifying portrayals of female athletes can have negative and sometimes dire consequences on female viewers. Multiple research studies have concluded that exposure to

sexualized media of female athletes results in female viewers making more negative comments about their own appearance (Daniels, 2009; Linder and Daniels, 2018; Daniels et al., 2021). Self-objectifying statements have also been determined to be more prevalent in females who are exposed to sexualized depictions (Linder and Daniels, 2018). Due to the previously mentioned negative impacts of sexualized female athletes and the positive impact of sports performance representation on viewers, media platforms should be mindful of the type of content being posted regarding female athletes. More performance-based media representations could potentially improve the self-perceptions of women and girls, additionally an increase in this type of media could garner more respectful perceptions towards female athletes and women.

Female Athletes: Social Media Use and Technology-Facilitated Abuse

Media coverage of female athletes often misaligns with the way they want to be presented as well as how they see themselves and their respective sports (Krane et al., 2011; Kane et al., 2013). Historically both male and female athletes relied heavily on mass media coverage to present themselves to the world but with access to social media, athletes can start self-presenting alongside external media coverage. Although this provides many opportunities, such as creating a self-brand and gaining revenue from various sponsorships, female athletes still struggle with societal expectations of how to present themselves (Arai et al., 2014; Geurin, 2017; Lobpries et al., 2018). Navigating the online space as a female athlete also comes with risks of encountering a variety of technologically facilitated harms, including technology-facilitated sexual violence due to the online space providing opportunity for unregulated abusive behaviour alongside the objectifying culture created by pre-existing sexualizing coverage of female athletes provided by mass media outlets (Litchefield et al., 2016).

Social Media Use

Social media can lead to athletes creating a brand of themselves to generate revenue and increase popularity for their sport and team (Arai et al., 2014). On the surface, it appears that female athletes can now exert control over how they present themselves. Although this is partially true, there still exists a myriad of pressures and barriers when it comes to female athletes' self-presentations, due to the need to follow societal and marketing norms in order to generate revenue and popularity (Geurin, 2017; Smith and Sanderson, 2015; Pocock and Skey, 2024).

Arai et al. (2014) defined an athlete brand as "a public persona of an individual athlete who has established their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face, or other brand elements in the market" (p. 97). In layman's terms this means that an athlete brand is the way the player is seen publicly. An athlete brand is established when a sports player uses factors such as their name, face, and other branding factors to show how much they contribute to the sports world. When athletes create accounts on social media, it allows them to interact with their fans and increase their own popularity as well as their sport (Arai et al., 2014). Athletes that use social media to create an athlete brand can create revenue for themselves through endorsements and sponsorships with various brands to promote their products. The way the public perceives athletes can influence the types of endorsements and sponsorships given to them (Smith and Sanderson, 2015).

Female athletes have identified pressures and barriers that make creating a brand and presenting themselves difficult and sometimes stressful, these include pressures to post sexualized pictures of themselves and wanting to be authentic but feeling a pressure to stay relevant by self-presenting a way that pleases the public (Pocock and Skey, 2024; Geurin, 2017; Lobpries et al., 2018). Through semi-structured interviews with female athletes Kane et al (2013) discovered that

some female athletes have noted a need to sexualize female sports women to increase interest in their sport and this finding has been echoed in studies on female athlete's use of social media to brand and present themselves. Geurin (2017) conducted in-depth interviews with 6 elite female athletes to understand how they presented themselves on social media platforms such as X and Instagram. Half of the athletes shared that they felt pressure to self-commodify online due to the digital gratification they receive from the large amounts of attention that those types of images create (Geurin, 2017). Previous research that has examined social media posts of female athletes has supported the claim that sexualized or objectifying posts of female athletes are more popular among users (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016; Dakroub et al., 2023). In addition, being attractive and desirable to the public can increase an athlete's chances of getting sponsorship deals or endorsements as attractiveness plays a significant role in marketing (Arai et al., 2014, Lobpries et al., 2018). Many female athletes have shared their desire to show themselves authentically, but often struggle to balance this desire with the expectations of the public (Geurin, 2017; Lobpries et al., 2018).

Female athletes clearly still feel pressure on social media due to the sustained influence of the combination of the Televised Manhood Formula and the Sports Media Complex to achieve brand deals and sponsorships. Additionally, they must present themselves in a way that the public respects and likes to receive contracts with various sports teams, and even improved commentary by sports commentators (Smith and Sanderson, 2015). Creating a successful brand is vital for female athletes as they don't make as much money as male athletes through their sports alone (Pocock and Skey, 2024), yet this may incentivize them to put themselves in positions that make them more at risk of experiences technology-facilitated sexual violence.

Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence

Henry and Powell (2018) define technology-facilitated sexual violence as the diverse array of actions in which digital technologies are employed to enable sexually harmful behaviors in both virtual and face to face contexts, such as gender-based violence. Gender-based violence refers to behaviour that perpetuates sexist gender norms such as sexual harassment, hate speech, and image-based sexual exploitation (Dunn, 2020). Women experience violence online at a much higher frequency than men and the rate of such conduct is now classified as a global pandemic (Ging and Siapera, 2018). The architecture of cyber space allows for people to connect across space and time instantly (Yar, 2013). This quick connection between individuals can allow predators to reach victims easily thus contributing to the growing problem of technology-facilitated violence.

The online disinhibition effect outlined by Suler (2004) also helps to explain how behavior in cyberspace differs from that in offline settings. Using Suler's (2004) framework, the use of technology in facilitating sexual violence can be influenced by the dissociative anonymity, dissociative imagination, and the minimization of status and authority that the internet provides. Dissociative anonymity provides users the chance to divide their online and offline selves, allowing themselves a degree of separation from their online behavior (Suler, 2004). This separation of the self works alongside dissociative imagination which encapsulates the impact this separation has on psychological processes, where users believe that what happens online is make believe so when they log off, they can leave behind responsibility for their behavior (Suler, 2004). These concepts also work in tandem with the minimization of status and authority online. In offline settings authority figures such as a boss or teacher, can influence behavior due to wielding power and the potential to dish out punishment to those who engage in what is deemed to be unacceptable conduct. Cyberspace is presumed to allocate an equal voice for everyone and provides a lack of

authority in which individuals can behave in whatever manner they choose and not face consequences surrounding such behavior (Suler, 2004). When dissociative anonymity and imagination work alongside the minimization of status and authority, individuals can engage in reprehensible behavior in an 'imaginary' world which lacks consequences and responsibility and subsequently log off and dissociate from their online identity and conduct whenever they decide (Suler, 2004).

Female athletes are no stranger to forms of technological-facilitated violence on the web. In the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, World Athletics discovered that female athletes received 87% of the online abuse directed towards the athletes (Thompson, 2021). Numerous studies have documented the rising trend of female athletes facing online abuse, also known as 'virtual maltreatment'. This mistreatment can manifest in various forms, including emotional, physical, discriminatory, and sexual contexts (Litchfield et al., 2016; Kavanagh et al., 2019). Feminist scholars and theories have characterized the consequences of online abuse against women as embodied harms that pose real consequences within social, physical, and psychological contexts, challenging the traditional offline/online binary that historic legal and social responses to harm have been based upon (Henry and Powell, 2015).

The real-world impact of embodied harms regarding virtual maltreatment or technology-facilitated abuse/violence towards female athletes has been particularly notable in American professional golfer Paige Spiranac. Spiranac faced insurmountable amounts of abuse online after a golf tournament in 2015. She subsequently broke down in an interview sharing her intense battle with depression and her need for time away from social media following the conduct of online users (The West Australian, 2016). Spiranac is not the only female athlete who has been a victim of such online abuse, other high-profile female athletes including British pole vaulter Holly

Bradshaw, alongside WWE athletes Ronda Rousey and Becky Lynch have also been victim to such experiences (Watta, 2023; Banerjee, 2022).

Consequences of such online abuse towards women can propagate a culture of misogyny and sexual violence towards women, parallel to that of the widespread cultural impact of both the Televised Manhood Formula and the Sports Media Complex (Messner et al., 2000; Jhally, 1984). Limited studies have investigated the relationship between interacting and engaging with sexist content with online and offline behaviour, but the first its kind conducted by Fox et al (2015) discovered that users who anonymously wrote sexist tweets were more likely to show hostile sexism towards women and classified female job applicants as less competent than males. This research provides a preliminary connection between the influence of online sexualization/objectification of women and its impact on behavior towards them in offline settings. In this case providing insight on how interaction with such content by those in hiring positions can affect both women within the workplace setting and the chances of being hired within those institutions. More general studies have found that online content holds influence over our cognitive and moral processes, as well as our offline behavior (Paciello et al., 2021; Ge, 2020; Branley and Covery, 2017). To gather a more solid understanding of the specific role that sexism and objectification on social media plays in our offline lives, future research should investigate the connection between engaging with and observing sexist content in the online world, and our psychological processes and socio behavioral traits.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Feminist Theory

Critical feminist theory is an interdisciplinary conceptual framework that analyzes and critiques social structures, cultural norms, and power dynamics that uphold and contribute to the

oppression, inequality, and dominance of women (Baxter and Braithwaite, 2008). In the context of this research study understanding the structures of neoliberalism and capitalism are vital to uncover roots of the objectification of female athletes. Within this framework neoliberal capitalism encompasses the ideology of promoting consumerism and encouraging competing against others for achieving goals, consequently contributing to the commodification of body image through supporting the use of others for one's own desires (Downey et al., 2023). Therefore, the use of women's bodies as objects for sexual gratification or other desires is encouraged. Within our neoliberal capitalist society, the female body has historically been used as an object to be consumed by men through pornography, advertisements, and other forms of entertainment media, while simultaneously generating revenue for the companies creating it (Rubin, 1998; Bordo, 2013; Messner et al., 2000; Jhally, 1984).

Despite print and electronic media not always accurately representing cultural ideas surrounding women, the commonly depicted sexualized women influences and guides ideals of the expected women in both visual appeal and social roles (Bordo, 2013). The frequent sexualization of women and girls in media can be attributed to the fact that neoliberal and capitalistic structures are permeated by patriarchal ideologies, and such systems have worked in tandem to disseminate and uphold a culture that commodifies the female body thus leading to the objectification of female athletes. In addition, despite the agency in which all female athletes hold, such structures limit personal autonomy to a degree as they serve to incentivize female athletes to self-commodify to achieve financial gain within a system that limits their opportunities to gain power and capital in ulterior ways (Bordo, 2013).

Such structures of neoliberal capitalism and patriarchy have also been shown to be connected to sexualized violence towards women due to the way they follow the historical

ideology of dominance of men over women, characterized in the literature as both hostile, benevolent, and ambivalent sexism (Downey et al., 2023; Barreto and Ellemers, 2005; Agadullina et al., 2022; Begany and Milburn, 2002; Glick and Fiske, 1996). This dominance in the context of sexualized violence is characterized through the traditionally assigned traits to men and women, connecting men to aggression and violence and women as submissive and weak (Downey et al., 2023). Understanding how these structures intertwine and bolster gender roles, the dominance of women, and the objectification of female bodies is essential for dismantling the resulting societal culture and its associated harms.

Objectification Theory

First published in 1997 by Fredrickson and Roberts, objectification theory is a framework for depicting the myriad of consequences of being a woman in a society where the female body is frequently sexualized (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Societal objectification has been shown to cause a phenomenon known as 'self-objectification' where women and girls internalize the idea that their bodies are simply objects of desire (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Self-objectification has been shown to be associated with feeling of body shame, diminished well-being, low self-esteem, and habitual body monitoring - a psychological behaviour characterized by constantly thinking about how one's body appears (Mercurio and Landry, 2008; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Sinclair and Myers, 2004). In addition, self-objectification has also been linked to the acquisition of mental health conditions such as depression and eating disorders (Breines et al., 2008; Szymanski and Henning 2007; Moradi et al., 2005).

Several studies have looked at the connection between women's self-objectification, well-being, and life satisfaction (Mercurio and Landry, 2008; Brienes et al, 2008; Sinclair and Myers, 2004). This research has discovered a link between the three, documenting that self-objectification

can lead to negative impacts on well-being and life satisfaction in women. Mercurio and Landry (2008) conducted a research study to inquire into how self-objectification impacts the wellbeing and self-worth of women. Many participants reported high levels of self-objectification, which was statistically correlated with body shame (Mercurio and Landry, 2008). Feelings of body shame were also connected to feelings of low self-esteem, and low self-esteem was connected with lower rates of life satisfaction. Similar findings were reported by Breines et al., (2008) and Sinclair and Myers (2004), who both reported such a relationship between women's self-objectification, body shame, and well-being. Mental health conditions such as disordered eating and depression have also been shown to have a relationship with self-objectification of women (Szymanski and Henning, 2007; Noll and Fredrickson, 1998).

In the research study this dual theoretical lens will be used to consider the influence of the reciprocal relationship of neoliberal capitalism and sports media in both the self and societal objectification of female athletes. Critical feminist theory and objectification theory were chosen to help understand the phenomena of objectifying female athletes from the cause to the consequences. This duo of theories aims to not only explain why and how female athletes are objectified on Reddit forums but also what the consequences of this are.

This Study

This study aims to build on the existing literature through analyzing a Reddit forum dubbed 'r/HottestFemaleAthletes', one of many that depicts female athletes in a way that accentuates and draws attention to their sexuality or sexual attractiveness, as defined by the term 'sexualized.' With over 170 000 members this forum is one of most popular of its kind and is the second result that appears after searching the term "female athlete" under subcommunities. This forum is moderated by 10 Reddit users who have been appointed by those on the forum, who check content posted to

ensure it complies with the forum rules. There are 14 rules regarding content and conduct on this forum. The most important are the following: no emojis, all material must be related to beautiful/sexy female athletes, mark any nudity or near nudity NSFW, and keep it classy and respectful. Through its many rules regarding 'appropriate content', this community characterizes itself as a classy and respectful place to appreciate female athletes' beauty. Much of the research regarding virtual maltreatment or technology-facilitated abuse, has focused on more unregulated areas of the internet, where overtly explicit or threatening content is rampant. The research aims to investigate more moderate forms of sexualization of female athletes on the internet in areas where behaviour is claimed to be regulated. The objective of this study is to determine if the discourse on this forum is simply innocent appreciation for the athletes as it claims, or if it is rather contributing to the larger issue of female objectification which has been linked to potential sexual violence towards women. Using virtual ethnographic content analysis this research study will discover and analyze the content posted to r/HottestFemaleAthletes, as well as examining the public social interactions between users regarding this content.

The proposed research questions are: What are the conversational trends in sexualized Reddit forums about female athletes? And how does this discourse contribute to the objectification of female athletes? Research question "What are conversational trends in Reddit forum r/HottestFemaleAthletes?" is answered through the aim of the study as the conversational trends are discovered through data collection. Furthermore, the trends found in data collected will answer the second research question, "If and how this discourse contributes to the larger problem of objectification of women".

Methods

A qualitative approach using ethnographic content analysis was chosen for this study as a qualitative research method results in a deeper understanding of social phenomena than quantitative research and aims to answer the "how" research questions (Tewksbury, 2009). This aligns perfectly with the aim of this research. Online spaces have also often encouraged an unobtrusive research approach due to the large amounts of data they can provide to a study, especially those focusing on controversial areas of discussion (Hine, 2011). Additionally, unobtrusive research allows the observer to gather and analyze evidence without interaction with those they are studying, helping to prevent unconscious conditioning in the population (Hine, 2011). By using such an approach for this research, it saves time when collecting data, as well as providing the opportunity to study content on a delicate topic without contacting the Reddit users which are creating it. Thus, ensuring the data collected is unbiased and valid, alongside removing the need for receiving ethics approval for research.

Virtual Ethnographic Content Analysis

Ethnographic content analysis combines tenets of both ethnographic and content analysis approaches, providing researchers the opportunity to both engage with and actively reflect on important concepts, data collection, and data analysis (Altheide, 1987). Qualitative content analysis refers to a research approach which can be both inductive or deductive in nature and aims to systematically analyze qualitative content into categories or 'codes' (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Such an approach aims to conceptualize phenomena through discovering or determining themes, patterns, or meanings within qualitative data (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008) The inductive approach to content analysis allows for flexible data analysis processes due to the lack of predetermined codes or coding categories, allowing the researcher to let the data guide the coding categories rather than a predetermined theory or conceptual framework (Mayring, 2000). Ethnography another

qualitative research approach involves observing behaviors of those studied, which in tandem with content analysis, can direct the observer towards appropriate inquiries regarding the data (Altheide, 1987)

Due to the medium of this study being the Internet and the prior conceptualization of online space in the literature as a digital society where social interaction can occur, 'virtual ethnography' sometimes named 'digital ethnography', is a more fitting term to describe a portion of the methodology being used in this research (Stratton et al., 2017). Virtual ethnography takes a wide range of forms and in this study a covert approach was taken. The covert classification of virtual ethnography encompasses the role of the researcher being 'undercover', in which the observer does not participate or allow those being observed to know they are being researched (Calvey, 2019). Although historically such an approach has been ethically controversial between researchers in both offline and online settings, Grincheva (2017) has argued that in public and freely accessible online spaces where users are aware that anyone can see their behaviour, covert unobtrusive ethnography can allow observation of organic behaviour to occur without biasing interactions. Grincheva (2017) however emphasizes the importance of anonymizing users' identities to protect privacy concerns, which will be done in this study to prevent such ethical concerns from arising.

In this study virtual ethnographic content analysis was used to observe what type of comments were left on the posts within r/HottestFemaleAthletes and subsequently generate common categorization of comments. Such categorizations can be then analyzed for themes associated with key issues within the phenomena of the objectification of female athletes while simultaneously aiming to understand the attitudes and behaviors of those within r/HottestFemaleAthletes as it relates to their activity on the forum. I did not join or engage with

the community I was studying, and therefore did not bias or skew the behaviour or comments of users left on the forum. Additionally, because virtual ethnographic content analysis can be used to create quantitative inferences, not only did research reveal themes within the data categories but allowed for a supplemental quantitative summary of the frequency of each coding categorization found within the data set.

Data Collection

The population that was used to collect the data sample were users active on r/HottestFemaleAthletes, which sexualizes female athletes through posting videos, photos, and gifs, that focus on the attractiveness and desirability of the athletes. Reddit was chosen for this study as unlike social media platforms Instagram and X, Reddit allows users to join communities focused on specific topics where they can engage in extensive discourse (Reddit, 2024). Posts from this forum, and subsequent comment(s) on those posts from November 30th, 2023, to December 6th, 2023, were collected and placed into a word document. A total of 56 posts and 92 comments were recorded throughout the weeklong period. The data collection document listed the athlete's name, the categorization of the post, followed by the number of comments, along with what each comment said.

Posts on r/HottestFemaleAthletes are visual in nature meaning users can post either photographs, gifs, or videos. Posts were categorized as either sexualized, sexualized-athletic, athletic, and neutral. Those categorized as sexualized were considered as any post that only focused on a female athlete's attractiveness and desirability, which are taken outside of a sports context. Women in these images are dressed in revealing clothing, such as a swimsuit, and/or posed in a sexually suggestive manner or with a focus on an intimate body part. Sexualized athletic posts focused on both the athlete's athleticism and desirability. These images are those that have been

taken in a sports/athletic setting and/or with the athlete in uniform. Athletes in the sexualized

athletic setting are either posed in a sexually suggestive manner, and/or the post focuses on the

intimate area(s) of the athlete's body. Athletic posts were those that solely focus on the athlete's

sports ability/identity. Athletes are depicted in a sport setting and in uniform or non-revealing

clothing, with no sexually suggestive poses and no focus on intimate body parts. Lastly, neutral

posts were those where the athlete is outside or a sports setting, not wearing any athletic gear.

These images are non-sexual in nature and the athletes are wearing non-revealing day to day

clothing and were not posed in a sexually suggestive manner or with a focus on an intimate body

part.

To code comments, a free online qualitative research interface known as Taguette was used.

The document containing the data was imported into Taguette and comments were iteratively

analyzed and subsequently highlighted or "tagged" into coding categorizations and later sub-

classifications which revealed narrative themes within the data. An inductive coding process was

used when coding the data due to the limited prior knowledge of the conceptual framework of

sexualization of female athletes online, in alignment with the recommendation of when to use such

an approach as highlighted by Elo & Kyngäs (2008). Additionally due to the rules of the forum,

hate speech and more overtly violent comments are banned therefore adapting coding frameworks

from previous studies of online violence towards women or female athletes would not adequately

code data found within this community.

Three main categorizations of comments: attractiveness, body focus, and pet names were

discovered in this Reddit forum. Body comments were broken down into generalized statements

or focus on specific body parts. Attractiveness and pet name comments were not broken down in

sub classifications. In addition, there were two comments outlining the desire to engage in sexually

explicit acts with the athlete. Despite not having enough comments to create a separate main coding category for these remarks, they will be addressed in the discussion section alongside the main classifications, and account for the 3% missing from the quantitative summaries among the coding categories outlined in the results section.

Limitations

This study is limited by scope, the time frame in which it was conducted, and the interrater reliability of the coding process. The data collection provided an extremely small snippet of the posts and comments made on r/HottestFemaleAthletes. Gathering one week's worth of data doesn't provide a large picture regarding content within this forum. Furthermore, this research only looks at one Reddit forum dedicated to such content despite many of them existing within this social media platform. Due to the time frame in which this research was achieved, gathering a larger data set was not possible, therefore the findings may not encapsulate the themes that could be found on this forum and across Reddit as a whole. Furthermore, the comments and posts were coded by me only, therefore the interrater reliability of the coding categories may be lacking. To ensure the most appropriate conclusions were reached, both the creation of coding categories and the data placed within them were reviewed multiple times until they reached my satisfaction. In addition, to ensure that data was not biased by my involvement on the forum and to avoid needing ethics approval for this research, I was unable to reach out to users and moderators within the forum. This limits the inferences of users' and moderators' perspectives regarding the content and behavior within the forum.

A Note on Reflexivity

I acknowledge that my personal identity and beliefs impacted the research process. I identify as Caucasian adult woman and I have experienced unwanted sexualization and objectification

throughout my life especially in online settings. I have never been a part of a serious organized sports team and have never identified myself as an athlete. I have no meaningful affiliations with the athletic world or the media which covers it.

<div align="center">**Results**</div>

Out of the 56 posts recorded during data collection 39 (70%) were coded as sexualized or sexualized athletic and 17 (30%) were coded as athletic or neutral posts. Additionally, most pictures and videos posted to the forum were those that the athletes had taken themselves and posted to their social media. Out of the 92 recorded comments 62 (67%) were found to be commenting on the athlete's physical appearance and were coded into attractiveness, body, and pet name comment classifications. Comments that were not included in coding were those stating what country the athlete is from, incoherent spam comments, and questions about songs playing in the background of videos. In addition, engagement with posts wasn't particularly high, with only 30 (54%) posts having comments left on them. Furthermore, regarding the physical appearance comments being analyzed in this thesis, there was no interaction between users with all comments being individualistic rather than in response or discourse with other forum users.

Attractiveness

Attractiveness comments were most frequent due to the wider definitional scope used for this coding category and encapsulated 39 (63%) of comments. Comments placed within this classification were those that indirectly or directly commented on the appearance of the athlete but not on specific body parts or bodies of the athletes and didn't ask for sexually suggestive acts. This category of comments ranged on a continuum from covert to overt in nature and were not broken down into subcategories due to many comments having the potential to be double coded.

More innocent discourse included one-word comments such as "pretty", "nice", and "wow". On an individual level these comments conveyed an appreciation for the athlete's appearance without holding a tone of aggressiveness or objectification. Despite this more respectful way of communicating these feelings, such comments lacked an appreciation for the athlete's athleticism. These sports women were not noticed for their accomplishments, skill, or careers, but rather their appeal to the user's commenting, a clear manifestation of the often-unnoticed benevolent sexism noted in Barreto and Ellemers (2005). When such comments are observed all together, the athlete's apparent sole usefulness for satisfying the visual desires of the observer is clear and can be argued to be a contributor to the larger issue of objectification in this context.

The tone of appearance comments with more innocent wording can be difficult to gauge due to the lack of cadence in what is said. However, when such comments are coupled with emoticons the tone conveyed by the commenter is slightly clearer. Emoticons, frequently referred to as emojis are pictograms that can be used in digital interaction. These hold both symbolic and emotional meaning and can provide visual cues that serve to intensify or impact the tone of what is being articulated. Many emojis used in day-to-day digital interactions hold meanings relating to attractiveness, desires, and sexual appeal. For example, both the fire emoji (🔥), chili emoji (🌶️), and red-faced sweating emoji (🥵) are associated with heat and can be used to convey perceived hotness of a person. Additionally, emojis such as the eggplant emoji (🍆) and the sweat drop emoji (💦) are frequently associated with more sexually suggestive meanings, relating to male genitalia and ejaculation. Comments including suggestive/attractiveness based emojis appeared to be more aggressive than those without. Examples of comments left on r/HottestFemaleAthletes with a lack of aggressive wording but coupled with such symbolic emojis include:

"She's one of my absolute favorites 🥵 🥵"

"I can dig it 🔥"

Without the added emoticons, the message projected would be perceived in a different way and such comments can appear to be more aggressive and sexualizing than those without. Additionally, when comments already include more intense wording and are coupled alongside emoticons, the impacts are magnified at a greater level. Words that were considered to be more 'aggressive' or directly included were adjectives like "sexy", shocked terms like "god damn", and comments including profanity. More directly worded attractiveness comments were always coupled with emojis on this forum:

"God Damn 🥵 🥵"

"Good lord 🥵 🥵 👅 🍆 💦 💦"

"Fuckkkk baby, 🥵 🍆 💦 💦"

These comments were more clearly objectifying and have more of a sexual undertone than those previously quoted. The added emojis emphasized this greatly, especially those which symbolized male genitalia and ejaculation. However, these were deemed to be following the rules of the forum and were gauged as 'classy and respectful' content. Thus, such rhetoric was not taken down by moderators. Remarks such as these overtly commodified these women to objects that were approved by users to be sexually gratifying or appealing in nature. Such response to and uses of the female body align with the ongoing use of such bodies to provide entertainment through satisfying the male gaze (Rubin, 1998; Bordo, 2013; Messner et al., 2000).

Finally, there were comments which didn't use emojis or specific adjectives to describe the attraction to athletes in the posts, but still conveyed users' perceived attractiveness of the athletes alongside their personal use of the images. Although not necessarily visually alarming at first

glance, the undertones and meanings of these comments hold both benevolent and ambivalent sexist ideologies and relegate women to the traditional gender roles in which they have historically been assigned, while promoting men's dominance over them (Barreto and Ellemers, 2005; Glick and Fiske, 1996). Examples include:

"I may need to watch this a couple hundred more times…."

"So golf is my favorite 'sport' now"

"Mhmmm brilliant physics"

Similar to the more direct comments with emojis, these symbolize the personal gratification that the users are getting or want to get from the posts on this forum. Although not conveyed in an overtly explicit way such comments still serve to limit these sports women to their bodies to sexual objects to please men. Such comments also simultaneously diminish the accomplishments and careers of the female athletes depicted.

Body Comments

Remarks that specifically focused on the athlete's body were the second most frequently coded and encompassed 15 (24%) of the coded comments. Body comments were further broken down into those which made generalized statements and others which focused on specific body parts. There were no emojis attached to any of the comments coded within this classification, and almost every comment regarding the athlete's bodies was complimentary in tone with only one negatively toned remark.

Generalized Body Comments

Generalized statements surrounding the athletes' bodies were less frequent than body part focused comments, and only made up (6) 40% of the total number body coded comments. Generalized body comments coded in this study include:

"Not an ounce of fat on her"

"What a body"

"Why would a woman that big want to do gymnastics when it's usually for the pixie sized

women?"

These types of comments, complimentary or not, serve to propagate idealized beauty standards which remains a prevalent issue among women and can lead to their societal and self-objectification (Bordo, 2013; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Many of the athletes on this forum already fit into the body standard enforced across mass media. Due to the clear body shaming in the final comment listed above, which holds obvious implications regarding idealized beauty standards, commentators leaving positively toned comments may believe they are simply complimenting athletes and may fail to realize the larger cultural impact such remarks can have. In addition, direct comments on women's bodies serve to dehumanize them and reduce them to physical objects rather than human beings. An additional coded comment in this category with troubling repercussions was:

"That body spells trouble, sexy sexy trouble"

Alongside upholding idealized body standards, a remark such as this can also be argued to be contributing to the idea that women are temptresses, and the attractiveness of their bodies leaves men unable to control their urges. Such comments covertly uphold the notion of ambivalent sexism through reinforcing the traditional gender roles of male dominance over women, which has been shown to not only diminish women's perceived competence, but lead to rape myth acceptance, potentially impacting rates of sexualized violence (Glick and Fiske, 1996; Abrams et al., 2003, O'Connor, 2021).

Body - Part Focused Comments

Body part focused comments contributed to 60% of the coded body remarks on r/HottestFemaleAthletes. Such coded comments included:

"Holy gluteus"

"Wow!! She looks powerful and sexy and f@ck! I love the way her shorts are filling up those skimpy rugby shorts…. Smoking hot!!!

"I'm loving that mound"

"Wow. Thighs for days! so powerful and sexy"

A theme that ranged across some of these comments was the correlation between being strong and being considered sexy because of it. Although these types of comments at face value are remarking on the strength of the athletes which is a step in the right direction, unveiling the layers of these comments discovers a more troubling implication. Commenters who had remarks with this appeared to find strength to be a turn on. Therefore, the praise of their strength isn't isolated to the athletic skills of the athletes, but rather part of a larger personal desire on behalf of the user which serves to undermine the compliment regarding the strength of the sports women.

Body part focused comments that didn't fetishize the strength of female athletes were often focused on more intimate parts such as the buttocks or the pubic mound of the athlete. Such comments fracture the woman into body components, dehumanizing her through the prioritization of specific sexualized areas used to satisfy or appeal to the commenter's sexual desire. These comments exhibit female body commodification, an already prevalent phenomena in our neoliberal capitalist culture (Downey et al., 2023).

Pet Names

Pet names were the final and smallest coding classification for this research study and encompassed 6, approximately (10%) of comments coded. Such comments were those that used

words such as "wifey", or "goddess" to refer to the athletes in the posts. Examples of comments within this category included:

<div align="center">

"Wife material"

"Czechian babe"

"Mommy"

"Wonder woman"

</div>

The majority of the pet name classified comments undervalued the athletes' athletic ability due to the infantilizing nature and connotations associated with such terms. The use of such language on this forum mirrors that of the infantilizing rhetoric used in female sports coverage (Fink, 2015; George et al., 2001). In the comments noted above, "wife material" and "mommy" reinforce traditional gender roles used to categorize women, as laid out within the framework of benevolent sexism (Barreto and Ellemers, 2005). Such language simultaneously diminishes the athleticness of female athletes while also holding a slight sexualized undertone. For example, in certain societal contexts the pet name "Mommy" appropriates the term typically associated with maternal relationships but adds an element of sexualization. The use of such a term can be inferred to mean an attractive woman who is there to take care of a man, and "wife material" can also be applied to the same concept, with a slightly less maternal undertone. The use of the pet name "wonder woman" is an outlier here, drawing inspiration from DC's Wonder Woman; it provides a tone of admiration regarding the strength and ability of the athlete in the post. Such a remark is a refreshing change in nature from many of the comments coded in this research study.

Discussion

The impact of sexualized/objectifying representations of female athletes is clear on the comments posted to R/HottestFemaleAthletes. Themes of sexualization, commodification of

female bodies, alongside benevolent and ambivalent sexism, were apparent throughout the comments in all three coding categories. Such phenomena have been shown to contribute indirectly or directly to harms such as rape myth acceptance, sexual violence, alongside societal and self-objectification of women (Barreto and Ellemers, 2005; Custers and McNallie, 2017; Daniels 2009; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997).

Due to the nature and rules on this forum, it is unsurprising that sexualization was a key thematic finding regarding the posts and comments on r/HottestFemaleAthletes. As previously noted, most posts on this forum depicted athletes in a sexual nature, with a focus on intimate body parts or outside of a sport setting in revealing clothing. Aggressively worded comments, the use of emojis, and pet names were all contributing factors. Despite this forum being moderated, many of the comments violated the community rules, which raises concern of whether this area of cyberspace is truly as moderated as it so claims. Many of the comments included emojis, a direct rule violation, alongside engaging in discourse that despite looking respectful, upon analysis reveals disrespectful conduct.

Despite moderators' roles of monitoring and taking down content which violates rules, during data collection two sexually suggestive comments were coded and later taken down by the forum shortly after collection. These stated "I want to lick her all over" and "Would love to put some liquid on those abs". These comments are similar in nature to the online sexual harassment that has been documented in other studies of behaviour towards female athletes on social media (Litchfield et al., 2016; Kavanaugh et al., 2019). Due to such comments being removed from the forum, it begs the question as to what other comments of a similar nature were taken down before collection and what types of comments would be on the forum if such moderation didn't exist.

Like media depictions of female athletes within the sports media complex and the televised manhood formula noted by Messner et al (2002) and Jhally (1984), the commodification of these sports women and perpetuation of societal gender roles was apparent in all areas of the forum from the posts to the comments. The dedication to posting female athletes in a way that commodifies them through the aim of appealing to the desires of users, follows the familiar historical trend of such use of the female body (Bordo, 2013; Rubin, 1998). On a micro level many of these individual comments don't appear to be overly problematic due to the lack of hostile sexism at play. However, a baseline of overt hostility being deemed as problematic as outlined by the forum rules may contribute to the members of this forum believing that their behavior isn't harmful. Taking a step back and looking at these comments collectively on a macro scale unearths a layer of this 'respectful rhetoric' and shows that the use of these athletes' bodies for the male gaze remains prevalent and reinforces a preexisting culture that perceives these women's bodies as commodities to be used for the desires of others. A system which perfectly mirrors women's social roles as outlined in Bordo (2013) and follows the benevolent sexism ideology as defined by Barreto and Ellemers (2005). The benevolent sexism, alongside the commodification and objectification of female athletes' bodies is clear within r/HottestFemaleAthletes and contributes to the larger culture permeated with gender inequalities critiqued by critical feminist theory (Baxter and Braithwaite, 2008).

The role of neoliberal capitalism in guiding women to engage in self-commodification for digital gratification and obtaining capital as outlined by Bordo (2013) is present throughout this forum. Many of the sexualized or sexualized athletic pictures of female athletes within the forum were selfies and personal pictures for social media, that were not taken within professional settings for the purpose of being on display within sports magazines or websites. As previously stated,

female athletes have shared the pressures of self-commodification and objectification when establishing an online brand to generate revenue, deriving from a disparity in earnings between themselves and male athletes (Geurin, 2017; Lobpries et al., 2018; Pocock and Skey, 2024; Arai et al., 2014). However, such content doesn't serve to increase interest in the athletes' sports, as documented in the literature but also seen in the comments on r/hottestfemaleathletes which lacked athletic based compliments and desires to become a fan of the sport (Custers and McNallie, 2017).

Despite the digital gratification achieved from these photos, it is worth noting that sportswomen who have posted such images to the net may be unaware that these types of communities and discourse exist about them on the internet. Despite being more moderate in nature and not being shared to the athlete directly, content within r/HottestFemaleAthletes technically falls under Dunn's (2020) definition of gender-based violence which includes behaviors that uphold and perpetuate sexist gender norms. Furthermore, gender-based violence is placed within the umbrella of technology-facilitated sexual violence as outlined by Henry and Powell (2018). Although definitionally falling into this category, the embodied harms of such forums against female athletes in both the online and offline directly are less harmful than the direct harassment of athletes on their social media (Litchfield et al., 2016; Kavanaugh et al., 2019). However, such content can lead to societal harms such as rape myth acceptance, societal objectification, and self -objectification of women, through the perpetuation of benevolent and ambivalent sexism, commodification of the female body, and encouragement of traditional gender roles (Barreto and Ellemers, 2005; Custers and McNallie, 2017; Daniels 2009; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997, Bordo 2013, Glick and Fiske, 1996).

Conclusion

The ubiquitous nature of gendered and sexualized portrayals of sports women within mass media both fosters negative perceptions of female athletes and athletics, but also propagates a wider culture of objectification and sexualization of women (Daniels, 2009; Hedrick, 2021; Linder and Daniels, 2018; Hust et al., 2023; Varnes et al., 2015: Custers and McNallie, 2017). This research study explored discourse on Reddit forum r/HottestFemaleAthletes and aimed to determine the conversational trends within this forum and investigate whether and how this discourse played a role in the objectification of women, a phenomenon linked to sexual violence and rape myth acceptance in previous research studies and literature (Abrams et al., 2003; Custers and McNallie, 2017: Loughnan et al., 2013). Data collection determined three coding categories of comments, encompassing an emphasis on the physical attractiveness, the use of pet names and body focused comments towards the sports women featured. Notably, the forum exhibited a lack of overtly sexually suggestive comments and hostile sexist discourse, likely due to the forum rules banning such content. Most of the visual content posted to the forum were photographs and videos the athletes had posted to their social media accounts. Highlighting the incentivization of self-commodification through brand building, a vital component for revenue streams for female athletes. Themes of sexualization, objectification, and commodification of female athletes' bodies through a benevolent sexism framework were frequent within the comments and were present throughout all three coding categories.

While the study concluded that r/HottestFemaleAthletes contributed to the overarching issue of the objectification of women, it revealed that the observed objectification predominantly served to perpetuate traditional gender roles. Specifically, women were depicted in terms of passivity, seductiveness, and their appeal for the male gaze, rather than being directly associated with sexual violence through violent rhetoric or hate speech. This understanding sheds light on

the complex dynamics at play within online forums dedicated to the sexualization of female athletes and emphasizes the need for diverse approaches in addressing gender-related issues in the digital spaces which impact the ever disintegrating online/offline binary of our daily lives.

Looking forward research should analyze more moderate forms of online sexist behavior manifested primarily through benevolent sexism as discovered in this forum. Conducting research into this area on a larger scale could serve to provide a clearer and more generalizable picture of the potential widespread societal harms faced by women as a result. Alongside looking at the sexist content and discourse itself, diving deeper into the attitudes and perceptions of those engaging with and creating such material would be useful to determine if they believe there is a degree of harm associated with or resulting from such online content and conduct. Furthermore, creating a stronger connection between the online behavior and offline behavior regarding hostile, benevolent, and ambivalent sexism should also be researched, due to limited preexisting studies examining this relationship.

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