

A Postfeminist Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Red Bull Sponsored Female Action Sports
Athletes' Digital Media Representation

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Abstract

This study applies a multimodal discourse analysis to social media content produced by Red Bull Media House. The aim of the research is to determine what postfeminist sensibilities discourses are used and how in the framing of the female action sports athletes the energy drink company sponsors. Specifically, Instagram posts, YouTube videos, and the biographical web pages about the 23 athletes were analyzed using multimodal discourse analysis. The findings revealed that while action sports have the potential to disrupt dominant discourses around femininity in sports contexts, ultimately Red Bull repackaged the discourses into different narratives.

Keywords: postfeminism as a sensibility, red bull, action sports, multimodal discourse analysis

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Chapter I: Introduction

The purpose of this study is to expand the application of Gill's (2007) postfeminism as a sensibility in sports media research by investigating its utility for examining social media depictions of women in action sports. To date, feminist sports scholars have increasingly used female athletes' personal social media profiles to identify how new structural and cultural conditions become the prevailing logic by which women self-police themselves. These criteria—such as the cultural emphasis on difference, the self-discipline, and consumerism as ways to reach self-actualization—operates “in the context of neoliberalism and late-capitalism to frame women as no longer objects under patriarchy but as active subjects responsible for their own self-making” (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 370). The ways in which postfeminism as a sensibility functions in social media content from outlets other than sports women's personal profiles has largely gone unidentified until this study.

Background of the Study

A rich body of feminist sports and media literature documents the ways in which female athletes are underrepresented and misrepresented in sports media. The history of research has marked the trivialization of women athletes through overt sexualization and extreme objectification in the early days of sports media to ambivalence and respectful, gender-bland—framing of women athletes that is uninspiring and lackluster—sexism today (Bruce, 2016; Fink, 2015; Kane, 2013; Musto, Cooky, & Messner, 2017). However, the rise of social media platforms, such as Instagram, and the newly emerging forms of femininity that adopt both pretty and powerful (Thorpe et al., 2017). It is a new moment in the sports media culture where objectification becomes subjectification, sexualization blends with empowerment, the appearance of choice belies ongoing self-surveillance, and feminism intertwines with anti-

feminism (Gill, 2007). Taking root in the contemporary sports media landscape, this convergence between social media and multiplicities of femininity complicates the traditional theorizations of how framings of female athletes are created, circulated, and consumed. It is a time marked by what Gill (2007) refers to as postfeminism as a sensibility and requires an update to the traditional conceptualizations of power and gender dynamics. In a postfeminist media culture, women are framed as no longer passive objects but as active agents, and their success, choices, and empowerment serve as the prevailing logic through which normative femininity, and the subsequent (hetero)sexism, and other inequalities are reproduced and reinforced (Thorpe et al., 2017). According to Gill (2007), postfeminist media culture is the critical object of inquiry, and the aim of the analysis is to understand “what is distinct about contemporary articulations of gender in media” (p. 148). Informed by constructivist and postmodernist perspectives, this approach can help feminist media researchers interpret how the conditions resulting from late-capitalist, neoliberal societies shape understandings and attitudes toward gender, identity, and politics (Thorpe et al., 2017).

Despite the growing influence of postfeminist critiques in a wide range of fields, including media studies, sociology, cultural and gender studies, the analytical framework remains largely absent in sports media research (Thorpe et al., 2017). It is this field that the study seeks to engage with by considering what and how discourses are used in social media content about female action sports athletes to legitimize new articulations of desirable femininity, which include promotion of one’s bodily capital; choice, individualism, and empowerment; and self-discipline, among others.

The What and Why of Action Sports

Defined more fully in the literature review, action sports are defined briefly in this section as sports that are unorganized, participant-led, active pursuits of risk and creativity in largely unaltered spaces, either in nature (ocean, river, forest) or urban areas (buildings, benches, drained pools) (Thorpe, 2017; Wheaton, 2015; Van Bottenburg & Salome, 2010). There are two key reasons why I chose to study postfeminist media culture in the context of action sports. First is their massive rise in popularity in both participation and media viewership, particularly in the context of the decline in mainstream sports' participation and viewership (Foundation, 2013; Kaufman, 2001; U.S. Department of the Interior, 2016; Thorpe, 2017; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). Second, scholars over the years have suggested that the anticompetitive, pleasure-seeking, and unorganized nature of action sports provides opportunities “for more progressive gendered power relations than many of the traditional, institutionalized sex-segregated sports” (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018, p. 318; see also Huybers-Withers & Livingston, 2010; Rinehart, 2005). However, the continued growth and increasing commercialization and institutionalization of these pursuits—such as through the inclusion of surfing, sport climbing, BMX freestyle, and skateboarding into the Tokyo Olympics—mark major structural changes across the local and global levels and require an updated examination into the possibilities and obstacles for women and girls as athletic and feminine subjects (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018).

Positionality. Understanding how those involved in action sports and media specifically make sense of female action sports athletes is rooted in my personal experiences as an action sports journalist and participant for more than a decade. As an online editor and editor-at-large, I often was frustrated by both the absence of female athletes in sports I covered, like whitewater

paddling, motocross, and mountain biking and also by what I perceived as the token stories of female empowerment that I was often assigned to produce—and did. These stories were then shared on outlets' social media platforms, where I engaged with our audiences in conversations, whose interpretations ranged from excitement to outrage over the content we produced. What I took from these experiences was that, almost inevitably, stories about female athletes were complicated. What is more, they were complicated and scrutinized in ways that men's stories were often not (Thorpe, 2008). As a participant, I have had many conversations about female representation in sports media and social media, particularly with fellow paddlers and mountain bikers. These conversations were and still are complicated about ideas regarding femininity, athleticism, empowerment, marginalization, respect, and disregard (Thorpe et al., 2017).

Therefore, this study is grounded in my personal experiences and feminist literature related to the articulation of female action sports athletes in a postfeminist sports media culture. Many feminist sports scholars already approached this object of inquiry by using the social media profiles of sportswomen such as Alana Blanchard, Serena Williams, and others to highlight the distinctive ways in which postfeminism as a sensibility functions in the sports context (Thorpe et al., 2017, Toffoletti, 2016, Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a/b). Specifically, they focused on the ways in which sportswomen represented themselves via their social media accounts and used that focus to argue that women's abilities to self-represent on social media are impacted—and ultimately limited—by wider structural and cultural conditions under which heteronormative femininity articulates with neoliberalism to (re)produce a depoliticized feminism.

Red Bull Media House

To understand how contemporary sporting cultures operate today, it is becoming increasingly imperative to examine the structure, strategy, and culture of international enterprises (Du Gay et al., 2013), such as Red Bull Media House. Since posting its first video in 2008, the energy drink company's marketing department has built a following of 10 million YouTube million subscribers, compared to the ESPN channel's 7.8 million and 918,000 followers that Fox Sports has. In addition, Red Bull's top-viewed YouTube video of all time garnered 151 million views compared with Fox Sports and ESPN's top, at a mere 19 million and 28 million views, respectively. Some of their other content include Red Bull TV and the Red Bulletin lifestyle magazine, which has a monthly circulation of 3.1 million per month globally (Red Bull Media House). Another unique aspect to Red Bull is that, rather than pitching its content to companies like many other brands, they license media, including contracts with Netflix, Discovery Channel, Nintendo, among others. The company also sells its own advertising space to other big companies, including Dodge, Patagonia, and Nike. Finally, Red Bull sells sponsorship and advertising campaigns for its action sports TV series, which is broadcast by NBC and sells advertisements for the program itself. One of the keys to the company's success in garnering so many companies willing to pay for advertising with it is that it has tapped into that "coveted and elusive young demographic across the globe," (Benkoil, 2014, p. 4).

The emblematic consumption of brands such as Red Bull can assist in constituting and circulating sociocultural norms around gender, age, and social status. This level of consumption can also reinforce subcultural values such as the making of one's authenticity within those action sports cultures (Wheaton & Beal, 2003). In this context, authenticity is an iterative process wherein the consumption of Red Bull Media by core sports participants establishes it as part of

the dialectical relationship in the broader production of cultural meaning. Therefore, exploring how contemporary action sports cultures work requires consideration of questions posed by Wheaton (2015). How are contradictions within action sports cultures working in tandem to produce new athletic subjectivities and gendered subjectivities? Are action sports cultures in a moment of postfeminism, and, if so, is Red Bull contributing to narratives that these postfeminist ideas are popular?

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to develop a means of studying the gendered nature of a postmodern action sports media ‘culture’ using Red Bull Media House content of its sponsored female action sports athletes as a case study. This study seeks to answer the questions above by examine how power shapes the contemporary articulations of the female action sports athletes as a cultural product, using Red Bull Media House content. I chose to use the term “action sports athletes” in the plural form to emphasize that my focus is not on the athletes themselves, which other researchers have done by analyzing their specific social media profiles. Rather, my focus is on how the other moments that structure culture—specifically production—constitute the social and structural conditions under which postfeminist sensibilities emerge and become the governing logic used to determine how female action sports athletes receive media attention. I also use the category of “action sports athletes” to argue that while subjects are constituted by discourse, they also enact discourses that contradict in ways that could challenge and transform dominant discourses. Finally, by expanding analysis of the sensibilities of postfeminism into an action sports context, this study will explore how the conditions of a neoliberal, postmodern society shape the analyses of the following question:

RQ1: What postfeminist discourses are expressed about the action sports athletes in Red Bull Media House's social media content?

Significance of Research

This research is important in the context of Red Bull Media House because it speaks to a pervasive sense that entrepreneurialism, self-discipline, and consumerism are indicative of female empowerment in sports. This study responds to this postfeminist discourse by squarely interrogating Red Bull Media House's role in constituting "the distinctive cultural condition(s) that invite and legitimate new articulations of desirable and acceptable femininity, and produces new mechanisms by which sexism and gender injustice flourish" (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 369; see also McRobbie, 2004, 2008; Gill, 2011). By exploring the ways in which discourses of feminism and anti-feminism become entangled in other media about female athletes, as opposed to simply by female athletes, my dissertation updates the traditional conceptualizations of power and gender dynamics in sports media and sports culture. This study also offers applied significance in its findings to offer different narrative frameworks for journalists and sports media practitioners.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the research goals, namely to investigate the complexities of postfeminist discourses that connect feminism and anti-feminism in action sports media contexts, such as Red Bull Media House social media content. I noted the limitations of applications of postfeminist sensibility to athletes' personal social media profiles in terms of illuminating the degree to which structural and cultural conditions impact sportswomen's visibility in sports media. The chapter also reviewed the research significance to update traditional conceptualizations of power and gender dynamics in sports media and sports culture. I want this

study to offer insight and clarity to these challenges and also solutions to my fellow journalists. The chapter also noted the role of positionality in guiding the research.

This study will apply a postfeminist sensibility lens to explore how the female action sports athlete gains meaning through the articulation of social processes found in a neoliberal, late-capitalist society. Three more chapters of the proposal follow. In chapter two, the literature review details how those theories will be used to expand the boundaries of sports media analysis, using Red Bull Media House as a case study. Topics of chapter three include the philosophical foundations underlying the qualitative methodology, followed by the applicability of critical discourse analysis in this case study. The research plan, including the method, data used, procedure, analytical approach, and ethical concerns are also outlined in this chapter. Chapter four provides the results, and chapter five is the discussion chapter, where the findings are contextualized with theory and connected to the literature. Chapter six serves as the conclusion section, which includes future research directions.

Chapter II: Literature Review

While the historical contributions to feminist understandings of sport and the media cannot be understated, concepts of hegemonic masculinity and gender order are proving too dualistic and reductionist in explaining gender (in)equality in these contemporary sporting cultures (Thorpe, 2008). In working to theorize the dynamic, fluid, and often contradictory productions of female athletes as sexualized and empowered, I concur with other feminist communication and sports scholars, that “(s)ome of the older critical languages seem to have lost their purchase as a means of grasping gender in the media” (Gill, 2011, p. 63; Thorpe et al., 2017). Therefore, the goal of this study is to expand current thinking of gender in sport and media in new directions concurrent with a neoliberal, late-capitalist society.

The review of the literature consists of three main parts. First will be summarizing how feminist scholars historically have theorized issues of power and gender in sports culture and sports media’s role in that discourse, followed by an argument for using postfeminist sensibility to update theorizing the complexities of challenges sportswomen face today. The second part will explicate how doing so will require examining action sports because unlike mainstream sports, they not only have been free from the institutional and historical segregations of gender but also appear confined to particular patterns of analyses by feminist scholars both in sociology and in media research. The third and final section of the literature review will be a discussion of how Red Bull Media House (Red Bull) will serve as the case study to examine the social processes by which the female action sports athlete gains meaning as a cultural product of a postfeminist sports culture.

Traditional Theorizations of Gender and Power in Sports

Sport has been a major definer of masculinity in western societies, where traditional sports such as hockey, football, and basketball are recognized and celebrated for their aggression, power, competition, and courage (Fink, 2015). In turn, such characterizations serve to reinforce cultural notions of sport as belonging to what has historically been theorized as hegemonic masculinity (Fink, 2015; Keon Yoo, Smith, & Kim, 2013). Gramsci (1971) described hegemony as the domination by the ruling class through manipulation of a society's culture—the norms, attitudes, and beliefs—so that the worldviews of that dominant group become the accepted cultural norm. This dominant ideological structure is presented as commonsense and serves to justify the social, political, and cultural hierarchy that privileges some groups while oppressing others as normal and inevitable (Hardin et al., 2005). When ideological-discursive practices legitimize particular traits and behaviors as masculine and ascribe them with meanings of superiority over traits and behaviors associated with femininity, they create a cultural hierarchy in which men maintain social dominance over women. Conceptualized as hegemonic masculinity, this set of ideological practices constitutes the most socially prized type of masculinity to which man can aspire, whether or not it represents the lived identities of any men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is one such way of organizing people according to gender categories by signifying ideological practices that reify men's power over women in society (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Keon Yoo, Smith, & Kim, 2013).

Sports Media and Hegemonic Masculinity

There also exists a comprehensive body of literature on how sports media function as a conduit for the expression of hegemonic masculinity. For example, sports media exert social, cultural, political, and economic influence over the way people are organized within society as

they constitute, reflect, reinforce, and alter a particular “reality” (Barker & Jane, 2016; Fink, 2015; Hardin, 2005; Kane, 2013). The research has tended to emphasize how hegemonic masculinity operates in sports media in two ways. One way is through what Tuchman (1978) referred to as the symbolic annihilation in media, where coverage of male players overwhelmingly dominates different platforms from across decades and levels of sport (e.g. Billings, Angelini, MacArthur, Bissell, & Smith, 2014; Billings & Young, 2015; Coche & Tuggle, 2016; Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015). Not only is national coverage of women in mainstream sports media low, but in many instances is also *declining*, from fewer cover shots in *Sports Illustrated* to the lowest broadcast coverage by ESPN’s SportsCenter since the 1980s (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015; Weber & Carini, 2013). Moreover, despite the possibility the internet era has in bringing about equality for sports coverage, Billings and Young (2015) found that sports media such as Fox Sports 1 and ESPN SportsCenter chose instead to increase the depth of coverage on male athletes as opposed to airing more inclusive coverage. As the researchers concluded, “when it comes to sports media, the landscape may be flatter than ever before, yet a hierarchy of sports interests has never been more entrenched” (p. 13).

While national sports media often reduce sportswomen to near invisibility, the trend is not constant across all context and media. For example, women have been near half or more of the total Olympic coverage in recent summer and winter games, aligning with advocate goals for inclusive coverage (Coche & Tuggle, 2017; Billings & Angelini, 2019). A similar story exists at the local level, where community news outlets cover high school female athletes and sports much more frequently than at the collegiate or professional level (Whiteside & Rightler-McDaniels, 2013). However, these examples are not quite as emancipatory as they seem. Prep sports are not currently the money makers collegiate or pro sports are, but according to Hardin

and Corrigan (2008), that is changing and so, too, may the trend toward gender equity in coverage at the high school level. The other example suffers from what the literature summarizes as misrepresentation of female athletes, which is the second way in which hegemonic masculinity operates in sports media.

Researchers have argued that, throughout a range of sport contexts, not only do sportswomen face symbolic annihilation from an absence of representation in the media, but also the majority of coverage they do receive often reinforces the gendered social order of sport and, most importantly, their low place within it (Angelini, MacArthur, & Billings, 2012; Fink, 2015). Looking at the Olympics, most of what women have received in NBC coverage since they became equally represented in the 2012 Olympics has been constrained within “socially acceptable,” “gender-appropriate” sports (Coche & Tuggle, 2016; Hardin & Greer, 2009). These include gymnastics and figure skating, which are individual, non-impact sports that judge aesthetics such as grace and flexibility, which are deemed “natural to women” (Coche & Tuggle, 2016, p. 123). For spaces where women receive far less coverage, they have historically been framed as inauthentic athletes through infantilization, gender marking, gender-bland sexism, compulsory hetero-femininity, lower production values, and differential framing, among others (Bruce, 2016; Fink, 2015; Kane, 2013). These journalistic practices bolster the notion of sexual difference and reinforce the notion of male superiority in sport and society overall.

The Times, They are a Changin’

The contributions of hegemonic masculinity and gender to critical feminist sports communication cannot be overstated, particularly in theorizing female athletes’ representation in sports media. This feminist theorizing that has guided much of the existing sports literature starts from the position that female athletes are bound to a small set of discursive opportunities,

grounded by cultural notions of hegemonic masculinity and sports that play a key function in creating media content that privileges male athletes and men's sports (Bruce, 2016; Fink 2015; Kane, 2013). These naturalized ideologies also foster a newsroom environment in which sports media professionals struggle to represent female athletes and women's sports within the standards of news coverage (Bruce, 2016). As important as this conceptualization has been, and the multitude of published articles since the 1970s it has informed, the increasingly dynamic and fluid nature of femininity that embraces "pretty and powerful" (Bruce, 2016, p. 361) coupled with the explosion of digital media and social media platforms such as Instagram have substantially changed how representations of action sports athletes are produced, circulated, and consumed.

Arguably the biggest change has been the birth of social media and the internet. With those tools, female athletes have found a way to create space for themselves, bypassing gatekeepers that have a stranglehold on mainstream media content, build a sustainable and passionate following, and essentially "prove interest to mainstream media gatekeepers" (Bruce & Hardin, 2014, p. 781). Because social media are decentralized, instantaneous, and interactive communication spaces, they may offer opportunities for feminist challenges to the dominant representational narratives by enabling athletes to take agency over their own representation and to develop new and even bigger followings (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012; Bruce & Hardin, 2014; Thorpe et al., 2017). What's more, social media enables conversations to take place between producers and consumers throughout the world, fundamentally changing the media landscape (Pegoraro, 2010). This increasingly popular way for female athletes to attract coverage in certain contexts raises new questions about why and how sportswomen find visibility in sports media.

In addition, what Gill (2007) argues makes media today so different from the print, radio, and broadcast of the last half century is that “feminism is now part of the cultural field” (p. 161). Feminist ideas are now part of the collective discourses, whether it is TV conversations about growing beauty pressures on girls to magazine stories on date rape to radio programs on anorexia (Anonymous, 2019; Donevan, 2017; Henson, 2018). Indeed, according to Karlyn (2010), “popular culture infuses the world in which today’s young women live, and the face of feminism today, for better or worse, is being written across media culture” (p. 178). These evolutions particularly complicate and challenge the current sports communication literature on female athlete representation as objectified, sexualized, and oppressed. Sports media has shifted significantly its representations of female athletes toward what Bruce (2015) calls “hot and hard discourses,” where women are depicted as powerful and active while at the same time highly sexualized (p. 383). For example, how do scholars rectify the media capturing American surfer’s Lakey Peterson’s dominating aerial performances in the ASP world tour—using photos of her bikini-clad backside? To attempt to do so, Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce (2017) challenge feminist sports and media scholars to focus on new questions:

In an evolving media landscape where seemingly contradictory messages about women athletes as highly sexualized while strong and empowered proliferate, how do we understand the workings of gender (in)equality in sport? How might we theorize the ambiguities and multiplicities encompassed in the production of contemporary sporting femininities? (p. 360)

In a context where female athletes are becoming increasingly seen and recognized as active, autonomous, and visible while discriminations regarding race, sexuality, gender and class still exist across sporting practices, this dissertation is motivated by the understanding “that (s)ome of the older critical languages seem to have lost their purchase as a means of grasping gender in the media” (Gill, 2011, p. 63; see also Gill, 2007, 2016; Thorpe et al., 2017).

That increased visibility offered through social media is serving as fertile ground for new, evolving, and dynamic discourses of femininities that position female athletes as pretty *and* powerful, which are argued to be challenging the hegemonic framing of them as passive objects for male consumption (Bruce, 2015; Thorpe et al., 2017). Once considered exploitative of women by sports media, representations of sexualization and the body are now seen as women's expression of agency and empowerment in the context of late-capitalism and neoliberalism (Thorpe et al., 2017). These seemingly contradictory messages crafted about and by sportswomen as both highly sexualized and empowered complicate the established theorized representations of female athletes as passively marginalized, exploited, sexualized, and oppressed, and compelling feminist sports researchers to advance theoretical frameworks for making sense of the “ambiguities and multiplicities encompassed in the media coverage of contemporary sporting femininities” (p. 360).

Among the emerging feminist theories seeking to explain how the discourses of female empowerment become articulated with neoliberalism and late capitalism to uphold articulations of idealized femininity is postfeminist sensibility, which enables the researcher to explore what media representations can reveal about the structural and cultural conditions that legitimize such articulations. Postfeminism has been theorized in many different ways, most notably as an epistemological framework, a backlash against feminism, and as a distinct wave or phase of the feminist movement, all of which Gill (2007) argues are limited in their ability to identify and understand postfeminist texts. Instead, postfeminism should be conceptualized as a sensibility, which enables analyses of texts to address the increasingly complex representational practices, by which “the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them” (p. 147) become an emblematic feature of media

narratives about sportswomen. According to Gill (2007), postfeminist sensibility moves beyond examination of the representation of women in media and instead argues that “postfeminist media culture should be the critical object” (p. 148). Discourses of postfeminist sensibility are characterized by the rearrangement from objectification to subjectification; stress on choice, individualism, and empowerment; the idea that femininity is bodily property; a focus on self-surveillance and discipline, a marked sexualization of culture; a revival of beliefs in natural sexual difference; and the commodification of that sexual difference as well as a focus on consumerism more broadly (Gill, 2007). Informed by constructivist and postmodernist perspectives, the approach can help feminist media researchers interpret how the conditions resulting from a late-capitalist, neoliberal society shape understandings and attitudes toward gender, identity, and politics (Thorpe et al., 2017).

Despite its influence as an interpretative lens in other disciplines such as cultural and media studies, education, and sociology, postfeminism as a sensibility has been underutilized in feminist sports research (Thorpe et al., 2017). Only just recently is work being done to consider in what ways postfeminism sensibility can be applied to examine sport practices, and cultures as points in postfeminist media objects for critical inquiry (Toffoletti, 2016). One example is Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce’s (2017) application of a postfeminist sensibility critique to the Instagram account and posts of 29-year-old, heterosexual, white, former professional surfer who self-identifies as a bikini model, Alana Blanchard. In so doing, the researchers argued,

critiquing the workings of a postfeminist sensibility allows us to identify new forms of media sexism that function via neoliberal logics to deflect attention away from wider structural and cultural conditions that sustain gender inequalities (p. 369).

However, their analysis, as well as the theoretical mapping of postfeminism as a sensibility overall, remains limited by analyzing only the representations and self-representations

of sportswomen. Yet self-representation by the athletes themselves is just one way of understanding how meaning is made and constraining analyses to just that limits the potential for a fuller understanding of the social and structural conditions by which sports cultures come to make sense of and respond to female action sports athletes. To address this limitation, this study will examine how the female action sports athlete gains meaning through the articulation of cultural conditions through media production about action sports athletes. Because in postmodern societies, the “economic” and the “cultural” are interwoven, we must also understand the ways in which female action sports athletes are framed by sports media according to postfeminist discourses (Leve, 2012). That is the object of this study—interrogate the gendered nature of specifically postfeminist action sports media culture, using Red Bull content of their sponsored female action sports athletes as a case study.

Action Sports Culture(s)

As mainstream sports become more structured and controlled by adults, more young people are seeking alternatives to allow them to engage more freely in physical activities on their own (Thorpe, 2008; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011). Alternative sports are those that are not bound by the same organizational structures as mainstream sports such as basketball, football, among others. They are, quite literally, the alternative to mainstream sports in Westernized societies. Because organized sports are the most visible and accepted settings for children’s sports participation, these participant-directed, unstructured sports are referred to as alternative sports (Thorpe, 2008).

Within that wide umbrella is action sports, which this study defines as those that are conducted in unorganized settings such as nature or urban spaces and are self-directed or participant-controlled and individualistic. Action sports also differ from mainstream sports in

that they are not centered around competition with winning as the primary objective. Rather, the engagement in and enjoyment of the sports themselves are the ultimate pursuits of their participants (Wheaton, 2015; Van Bottenburg & Salome, 2010). Finally, action sports are characterized by the participants' relationship with what Laurendeau (2008) called edgework, the intentional seeking of danger while keeping control over themselves, their gear, and their mental game. The edge, as Laurendeau (2008) described it, is the point at which action sports participants are at risk of losing control, and edgework is the process by which individuals test the limits of their capabilities (and gear being used) while maintaining enough control to not go over the edge: "edgework most typically involves an effort to define the performance limits of some form or object and, in the process, explore the line between form and formlessness" (Lyng 1993, 111).

This relationship differs from mainstream sports, particularly high-impact sports such as football and hockey, where risk is an accepted part of the game. In action sports, risk is, to some extent, *the game* (Laurendeau, 2008). Following Donnelly (2004) and Laurendeau's (2008) critical social constructivist position, I argue that individuals engage in the risk-taking aspects of action sports as part of the exploration and development of their social identity, where "the kinds of material and emotional rewards to be found in particular risk-culture formations are worth the investment in and of themselves" (Laurendeau, 2008, p. 300). Action sports provide a space for the development of social arrangements that "value character, a shared identity, and comradeship," (Donnelly, 2004, p. 47). Examples of action sports defined with these characteristics include mountain biking, snowboarding, whitewater paddling, surfing, skateboarding, BASE jumping, and rock climbing, among others (Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013; Laurendeau, 2008; Thorpe, 2008, 2010).

Significance of Action Sports Culturally: Exploding Growth

While exact numbers regarding the degree to which people participate in action sports are hard to quantify, available sources such as market research, gear sales, and participation surveys verify that numbers of participants in many types of action are increasing rapidly and even outperforming the growth of many mainstream sports in Western societies (Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011; Wheaton, 2015). For example, Kaufman (2001) found that in 2000, 100 million people around the world had participated in mountain biking, snowboarding, bouldering and rock climbing, skateboarding, snowmobiling, and whitewater kayaking and canoeing. Over ten years, whitewater kayaking grew 10% in participation from just over 828,000 participants in 2006 to 2.6 million in 2016 (Outdoor Foundation, 2017; U.S. Department of the Interior, 2016). Other examples include mountain biking's increase of 7.5% to 2.7 million, adventure racing 10% to 2.9 million, snowboarding 1% to 7.7 million, and trail running 11% to 8.1 million, among other sports. Also, while much of action sports research relates to young adults (Millennials and Gen Z), studies have also shown that once people become interested in participating and consuming action sports, they tend to remain participants and consumers throughout their lives (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011).

Significance of Action Sports Culturally: Reimagining Gender

Many action sports emerged in the 1960s and 1970s such as snowboarding, windsurfing, skateboarding, and whitewater paddling (Wheaton, 2015; Wheaton & Tomlinson, 1998) during the counter-cultural movements of the era at a significant moment when the increase in female participation defied the cultural notions of organized sports as exclusively male territory. According to Thorpe and Olive (2016), women were actively involved in many action sports from their nascence, including surfing, skateboarding, rock climbing, and snowboarding.

Because relatively speaking, action sports appeared only recently and are unorganized and participant-led, they are not often constrained by the institutionalized and historical gender segregation that plagued many of the traditional sports. For example, unlike in the mainstream sports, women usually have historically and continue to engage in their sports together with men, which functions to destabilize wider cultural notions of sexual difference and male superiority in mainstream sports. Thus, scholars have argued that action sports offer the possibility for inclusive sporting cultures (Thorpe, 2008; Thorpe & Olive, 2016, Thorpe & Wheaton, 2019). Research has shown that along with the rise in participation in action sports has been the increase of women participating in them, especially among the upcoming generation (Foundation 2017; U.S. Department of the Interior, 2016). By 2016, 49% of overall action sports recreationalists from 6 to 24 years old were girls and women (Outdoor Foundation, 2017), and the majority (62%) of whitewater kayaking participants from 18 to 24 years old were female.

Therefore, action sports may offer a critical framework for examining the theoretical and methodological paths and challenges of the contemporary sporting landscape. These alternative pursuits that negotiate between performance and freedom offer insightful cultural arenas to map how the sporting landscape, including dynamic gender identities, is transitioning from modernity to postmodernity. As Wheaton (2015) writes,

Are these sport sites where traditional sporting identities, discourses and forms of embodiment, are reproduced, or challenged? Do these 'reflexive life projects', forms of identity management and lifestyles surrounding these cultures 'hold potentially emancipatory potential' (Carrington, 2007, p. 51) confronting what sport is, or could be? (p. 636).

Action Sports Media Culture

This alternative way of imagining gender relations is particularly important in a developing media landscape where ostensibly opposing narratives about sportswomen as both

incredibly sexualized and empowered thrive (Thorpe et al., 2017). The excitement and allure of action sports have become so widespread that media companies and corporations wishing to recruit new consumers are sponsoring competitive forms of these “extreme” sports, such as in the X Games (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2019). The ESPN-sponsored event’s viewership grew to 50 million audience members worldwide within only eight years since its inauguration in 1995 (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011). Contrast with this boom in action sports media viewership with the bust of mainstream sports numbers such as billions lost in television contracts of the Big 3—U.S. football, basketball, and baseball—for North American networks and a 30% drop in 18-34-year-old TV viewers between London and Rio of the world’s most-viewed sporting spectacle, the Olympic Games (Wenner & Billings, 2017; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2019).

Much of this viewership transfer from mainstream over to action sports can be attributed to Millennials and especially to Generation Z, whose viewership patterns differ from earlier generations (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). And while traditional sports such as basketball and football might still dominate cable, it is the digital media spaces such mobile and computer technologies where Millennials and Generation Z are and action sports dominate (Dougherty, 2015). With increasing opportunities for alternative forms of leisure to compete with such as the internet, video games, and music, broadcast-based sports are working harder and harder to capture their attention, particularly the prized sports viewership of teenage boys. The rising media backing for action sports such as in the Olympic Games through inclusion and coverage of snowboarding, mountain biking, BMX, and more is emblematic of their capability to transition from ‘lifestyle’ sports to achievement sports and appeal to the much-desired youth market. Despite the continued growth of the action sports market both in the United States and throughout the world, there remains a dearth of mass communication and media studies research

exploring the ways in which this increased visibility comes at a cultural cost. For example, though offering more exposure to athletes, these events are also transforming them to conform to organized competition and media production models, particularly along gender lines. Research that has begun looking into this comes from sociology.

As one example, Wheaton and Beal (2003) argued the incorporation of action sports cultures into mainstream discourse and subsequent commercialization has, in some contexts, also brought on an increase of sexism in some action sports cultures such as skateboarding and windsurfing. They found that by framing white hegemonic heterosexual masculinity as a standard for acceptance, media positioned such values as ‘generic’ characteristics that are required of any person (read, male) to be considered accepted. What is more, incorporation of mainstream sports media values seems to be contributing to what Henderson (2001, p. 326) calls the “hardening process” of certain action sports, which reinforces patriarchal ideology and eventually forms a sort of “hyper-masculinity” that demonstrates courage, aggression, skill and a reluctance to give women space within the sports. Specifically, Henderson refers to the hardening as a specifically

postmodern form of masculinity that is “an exaggerated version of the traditional hegemonic model [which] is transfigured in the nexus of the increased commodification of the male body, the advances made by feminism, and the omnipresence of the capitalist image culture industries (of which sport is an integral part) (p. 326).

Action Sports, Postmodernism, and the Rise of Red Bull

To understand how action sports gained such popularity over the last few decades and operate in the present day, it is becoming increasingly imperative to examine the structure, strategy, and culture of enterprises that sponsor them (Du Gay et al., 2013). As one of the premier purveyors of action sports content, Red Bull offers a prime case for such inquiry. Red

Bull's involvement in action sports is not accidental, and the historical context in which that connection evolved is culturally significant.

Neoliberalism is a specific way of organizing individual conduct and social relations based on the rationality of the free market (Simon, 2002). In neoliberal, late-capitalist societies such as the United States, individuals build their identities largely through reflexive projects of highly personalized consumer lifestyle choices, which produces a subjectivity believed to be and considered by others as capable of acting on or wielding power over their own lives (Simon, 2002). Red Bull as the energy drink company entered the marketplace partway through this societal shift in the mid-1980s. After learning about various energy and health drinks made in east Asian countries, Austrian Dietrich Mateschitz was inspired to create a new product for the western market. Between 1984 and 1987, Mateschitz worked on the Red Bull's formula as well as the packaging, marketing, and branding of the company.

Then on April 1, 1987, Mateschitz officially launched the Red Bull energy drink in Austria, which marked the beginning of an entirely new category of product: energy drinks (Red Bull Media House; Tierney, 2019). The following year saw Red Bull's next major milestone, the company's creation of a landmark sports event that would give Red Bull a presence in the action sports scene. The brainchild of world-renown downhill skier Werner "Grizzly" Grissmann and organized by Red Bull, the Dolomitenmann "extreme" 4-man relay race of uphill mountain running, hangliding, mountain biking, and whitewater kayaking (Tierney, 2019). Back in 1988, the Dolomitenmann was noteworthy not just in itself but also in its timing with the rising popularity of action sports, which exemplify neoliberal ideas of individualism, pleasure, risk, consumerism, and lifestyle, ideas that were seductive to America's youth (Binkley, 2007; Simon, 2002). Of particular interest for Red Bull was the notion of lifestyle, which is understood in the

context of neoliberalism as the expression of an individual's identity through the seemingly unconstrained but patterned daily choices they make (Binkley, 2007). The Dolomitenmann legitimized Red Bull as *the* consumer choice of the action sports culture. For the next 20 years, it fostered that association by creating and organizing more than 90 international, distinctly branded action sports events and competitions (e.g., the Red Bull X-Fighters and the Red Bull Rampage). In addition, Red Bull hired or contracted some of the most renowned photographers and cinematographers in the world to shoot these events (Red Bull Media House; see also Thorpe, 2017).

Red Bull Media House

Almost 20 years after selling its first drinks, Red Bull founded Red Bull Media House (Red Bull) as an umbrella for its extensive production of online, print, feature film, and TV content (Thorpe, 2017). Since 2007, Red Bull has grown to become “an award-winning, globally distributed multi-platform media company on a mission to inspire with ‘beyond the ordinary’ stories—both direct-to-consumer and through partnerships” (Red Bull Media House). What makes Red Bull stand out among the competition as a consumer brand, is that it does not follow traditional marketing strategies focused on its product (Long, 2019). Rather, Red Bull creates many of its media to stand alone, as real media, for audiences to consume and engage with for information or entertainment. It is an approach that works. Since posting its first video in 2008, Red Bull has since built a following of 8.3 YouTube million subscribers, almost double that of ESPN's channel and more than 13 times the followers that Fox Sports. Red Bull's top-viewed video garnered 116 million views compared with Fox Sports and ESPN's top, at a mere 19 million and 18 million views respectively. Some of its other content include Red Bull TV and the Red Bulletin lifestyle magazine, which has a monthly circulation of 3.1 million per month

globally (Red Bull Media House). Another unique aspect to Red Bull is that, rather than pitching its content to companies like many other brands, it licenses media, and this includes contracts with Netflix, Discovery Channel, Nintendo, among others. They also sell their own advertising space to other big companies including Dodge, Patagonia, and Nike. Finally, Red Bull sells sponsorship and advertising campaigns for its action sports TV series, which is broadcast by NBC and sells advertisements for the program itself. One of the keys to its success in garnering so many companies willing to pay for advertising with them is that they have tapped into that “coveted and elusive young demographic across the globe,” (Benkoil, 2014, p. 4).

Probably the most famous example of what the energy drink company does in terms of content creation is the world record-breaking Red Bull Stratos Project back in 2012, where skydiver Felix Baumgartner became the first human to break the sound barrier after leaping from a helium balloon in the stratosphere. The stunt earned 45 million views on YouTube, secured a licensing contract with BBC for a documentary project. At the time, it was the latest in a long history of projects showcasing elite athletic performances in the emerging genre of action sports such as BASE jumping, cliff diving, and more dating back to that 1988 Dolomitenmann Relay Race in the company’s own Austrian Alps. And Red Bull has continued to combine innovative media with action sports over the last seven years since the Stratos Project, maintaining its legacy as the adrenaline-fueled “publishing empire that also happens to sell a beverage” (Bacon, 2017). In describing how they worked to become known as the action-sports media mogul, Gerrit Meier, chief executive of Red Bull Media Network and Red Bull’s managing director, said,

I think what we’ve managed to do successfully is [to get involved in] so many sports—whether it’s urban sports or other local or niche sports—that have long, deep traditions in specific countries...That is where the model is a little bit different...and that has allowed us to do a lot of sports over the years that now have become Olympic or bigger sports (Long, 2019, p. 4)

Such involvement with sports and ownership rights raise critical questions for the impacts Red Bull has on constituting and legitimizing certain sporting femininities (white, heterosexual, high-class, young) over others. For example, three of the sports Red Bull has sponsored for decades have made their way into the upcoming Olympics in Tokyo: skateboarding, sport climbing, and surfing. According to the IOC president, Thomas Bach, one of the reasons for bringing the sports into the Olympics was for increasing gender equity in the international institution of sport (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2018). Given that emblematic consumption of Red Bull as a lifestyle brand can assist in constituting and circulating sociocultural forms such as gender, age, and social status in sports Red Bull sponsors and advertises itself through associations with, it could be possible that the drink company's decades of marketing these sports played some role in that idea they would foster gender equity in an institution so harshly criticized for the lack of it.

This process can happen in part by using media content to reinforce subcultural values such as the making of authenticity and one's definition of what authenticity looks like within those action sports cultures (Wheaton & Beal, 2003). In this context, authenticity is an iterative process wherein consumption of Red Bull by core sports participants serves to establish it as part of the dialectical relationship in the wider production of cultural meanings. Examining Red Bull media content about its sponsored action sports athletes to interrogate the relationship between neoliberalism and feminism, then, requires a consideration of questions posed by Wheaton (2015) in the context of a postfeminist sports media culture. Rather than discourses of either/other, challenging/reinforcing, or emancipation/appropriation, scholars must ask instead how are contradictions in media content about action sports cultures working in tandem to produce new athletic subjectivities and gendered subjectivities? Are there postfeminist

sentiments in Red Bull content? This alternative way of imagining gender relations is particularly important in a rapidly changing media landscape where ostensibly opposing narratives about as sportswomen both incredibly sexualized and empowered thrive (Thorpe et al., 2017).

Chapter III: Methodology

The chapter begins with the philosophical foundations underlying qualitative methodology and how it enables the exploration of the human meaning-making process. Then, I describe Critical Discourse Analysis broadly and how multimodal discourse analysis specifically informs my analysis. I will then provide an outline of the study's methodological approach and the tools for data collection that I used in my analysis. Next, the chapter will describe the data that I examined. I also go over the time frame and the reasoning behind my data selection and coding. Ethical concerns and assurances of rigor are also outlined in this chapter.

Restating the Research Purpose

The primary goal of this research is to explore the ways Red Bull contributes to the construction of female action sports athletes as products of a postfeminist media culture. To do this, I examine how discourses in Red Bull's social media posts about its sponsored athletes use postfeminist ideologies to construct them "as free to choose how they present their feminine and sporting subjectivities that paradoxically becomes evidence that sexism in sports media no longer exists" (Toffoletti, 2016, p. 205). In studying Red Bull's social media content of athletes, I aim to explore the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist discourses in this influential site and understand the ways visual and textual language shape the contemporary articulations of female action sports athletes. This study will explore in what ways the conditions resulting from a late-capitalist, neoliberal society shape the analyses of the following research question:

RQ1: What postfeminist discourses are expressed about the action sports athletes in Red Bull Media House's social media content?

Philosophical Foundations and Justification of Qualitative Methodology

According to Creswell and Creswell (2020), particular philosophical traditions guide an individual's decision on which methodology to choose for conducting research, including beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology) and about how that reality can be known (epistemology). These assumptions serve as the foundation on which communication scholars build their research. Because this study examines the social processes by which the female action sports athlete becomes culturally meaningful through the production of Red Bull Media House content, constructivism was the appropriate epistemological assumption. Constructivism, along with interpretivism and hermeneutic empiricism, emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a departure from and challenge to the positivist and postpositivist epistemological assumptions of communication scholars (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). For positivist and postpositivist researchers, the purpose of inquiry lies in discovering knowledge to explain human behavior, with the ultimate goal of predicting or controlling it (Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007). However, a shortcoming of positivism and post-positivism is that they have "the elements of being reductionistic, logical, an emphasis on empirical data collection, cause-and-effect oriented, and deterministic based on a priori theories" (Creswell 2007 & Poth, p. 20). Their resulting methodology, quantitative research, is necessary but insufficient for detailing the reflective and contextual human experience, where statistical generalizations use random samples representational and generalizable (Tracy, 2010). Furthermore, quantitative research often employs data divorced from any specific context or event and demands a separation between the researcher and the researched (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). Quantitative measures provide a broad picture of associations, relationships, and trends, but in their generality, they miss the context for why people respond or act as they do in various contexts and interactions.

By contrast, constructivism underscores humans' roles in actively using symbol systems to create, express, interpret, and share meaning in their environments and their existence. Thus, meaning is not assumed to be stable, singular, or passively received but rather depends on human actors using cultural stocks of knowledge (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Fairclough, 2010; Lindlof & Taylor, 2017) to create an emergent, shared social reality. Thus, social reality emerges through collaboration and discourse, and meaning is negotiated historically and socially. These meanings are many and diverse, which drives the researcher to seek a multiplicity of views as opposed to constraining them into a few simplified categories, variables, or concepts (Creswell & Poth, 2007).

Because of this philosophical assumption of emergent realities, the primary purpose of a constructivist inquiry is to gain a meaningful interpretation of human thoughts, feelings, and motives, which requires the use of qualitative methodology (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Qualitative researchers must reveal how humans develop and exchange shared meanings through language to interpret and make sense of their world. Qualitative research must also provide evidence of different perspectives and accept possible contradictions in the narratives. Achieving these ends requires the researchers to examine how understanding social reality develops from a necessary interdependence between the researchers and their study data. Because of this, qualitative researchers do not employ methodological instruments such as surveys or statistical software. Instead, they *are* the instruments developing analysis through the lens of their positionalities, and they must, therefore, reduce the distance or objective separateness between themselves and their data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Finally, qualitative methodology is an approach where researchers must dedicate to developing theory inductively, repeatedly testing exploratory explanations against knowledge gained from ongoing analysis

with data, in this study, analysis of various forms of media visual and written texts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017).

Critical Discourse Analysis

This study was conducted using critical discourse analysis (CDA) because this tradition in discourse is centered around the political and ethical relationships among ideology, discourse, and power created in cultural and historical struggle (Hall, 2001; Wodak, 2002). Before I delve into detailing multimodal discourse analysis, I describe the fundamental principles that generally inform CDA as they inform this dissertation.

CDA is predicated on the argument that social reality is not determined outside of the discursive but rather is structured and restructured, articulated and re-articulated, through processes of ideological struggle (Laclau, 1977). Many disciplines and fields have used CDA, such as sociology, communication, and media studies, to produce insights into how discourse shapes social and political inequality, power abuse, or domination. Scholars generally agree CDA is not just one method but actually “an approach, which constitutes itself at different levels and each level a number of selections have to be made” (Meyer, 2001 p. 14). The general tenet of the approach has been its use in examining language as a type of social practice tied to particular historical contexts. Second, CDA examines how existing social relations are constituted, reinforced, or challenged. Using CDA requires one to recognize the historical determination of how cultural objects are given meaning and how this meaning-making process is constrained within dominant discourses. Third, in CDA, scholars can consider the visual, verbal, and written, which for the study will include the company’s website, posts, photos, and videos. Finally, CDA should be considered a methodology in a dialectical relationship with other social methods and theories; CDA is a methodology with an agenda. In CDA, scholars work to

destabilize naturalized ideologies, the taken-for-granted understandings that establish and maintain the power of some groups and subordination of others (Fairclough, 2010). A central aim when using CDA analysis is to engage with and deconstruct the various aspects of the communication process. For this study, that was the moments of Red Bull's social media and web page production of its sponsored female action sports athletes.

Multiple Approaches in CDA

CDA is composed of a series of approaches bound by a particular theoretical framework and related research questions. This key characteristic of CDA becomes most apparent in the lack of consistency regarding data collection across research projects, where some scholars make no mention of their data collection process while other researchers extensively use approaches outside of the linguistic field wherein CDA is camped (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Though many scholars have used and adapted different approaches for CDA, I outline three of the most well-known theorists: Fairclough, van Dijk, and Wodak.

Informed by ideas of discourse, ideology, and power, Fairclough (1992) conceptualized CDA as a three-dimensional framework that interweaves three distinct types of analysis together: the study of language texts (written and spoken), the examination of discursive practice (the acts producing, distributing, and consuming text), and investigation into how discursive events represent occurrences of broader socio-cultural practices. Analysis of text involves examining the relationship between the 'micro' events—such as language use, communication and interactions—and the 'macro' structures—such as social hierarchy and inequality—and scholars can view the second as both the conditions for and products of the first. In this way, Fairclough (2010) rejected the rigid barrier that separates the two. In addition, Fairclough was concerned with the meso-level—discursive practice level—which includes examining matters regarding

production and consumption (i.e. who created a text, who are the target consumers). Another major influence in CDA is work by van Dijk's approach, which merges social and linguistic theories with cognitive theories to explore the relationship between discourse, cognition, and society (Dijk, 2008). Using a cognitive approach enables researchers to investigate how wider social phenomena are underpinned by everyday common discourse, though some scholars critique this CDA approach for overlooking potential transformations of ideologies. Finally, Wodak (2002) conceptualizes CDA as a collection of various texts on a topic in order to illuminate the systemic interconnections between discourses coalescing around that topic. By focusing analysis on the ideologies that are implicated in a collection of discourses, Wodak's macro-level approach highlights the ways in which macro-structures of power circulate via discursive practices across various sites and texts.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis is the primary analytical framework for this study because it involves an examination of the evolving patterns of discourse traceable across multiple forms of media (e.g. websites, social media, magazines, videos) as opposed to focusing on the details of only of verbal or written texts (O'Halloran, 2011). While research on discourse often refers to written or verbal communication, MDA's approach to discourse enables me to consider how the visual (images and videos), verbal (voice-overs, interviews), and written (captions, web page posts) operate as *modes* that work in tandem to produce, circulate, and potentially transform ideologies and power (Han, 2015; Norris, 2019; O'Halloran, 2011). MDA draws from Halliday's (1978) work on semiotics because this views language as one of a multitude of semiotic resources such as images, gestures, and so on that people use to communicate, or make meaning with each other.

What is more, I do not use MDA to find a singular objective representation of female action sports athletes but rather to explore the multiple, competing, and often contradictory discourses of femininity that are being produced by Red Bull Media House. By accounting for how meaning arises from various semiotic resources deployed in multiple media, MDA enables me to chart broader trends across the different media as well as athletes. My choice in MDA aligns with the increasing agreement among language scholars that communication is inherently multimodal and that language—and the power it carries—must be studied at the integration with other semiotic resources (O’Halloran, 2011). Specific to this study, performing MDA requires an understanding of *partiality of language*: that all modes (e.g. images, text, web pages) contribute to the making of meaning of a particular ensemble (Kress, 2012). In addition to partiality of language, there is a concern for “explicit” and “implicit” meanings. A common misconception in the social world is that writing or speech offer explicit information and that other modes, such as images, provide implicit information; such a misconception functions as an ideological barrier toward transparency and discourses of power (Kress, 2012). However, *all* modes in MDA provide explicit meanings even if the vocabulary available to describe one mode, such as photos, is limited. As an example, Kress (2012) writes in relation to different storefront signs,

Instead of writing or saying (what would, at the moment at least, be unspeakable or impossible to write) ‘here in this store we appeal to a more discerning class of customers, the middle classes’ or ‘we appeal to a class of customers of coarser tastes or to people who do not care, the lower classes’, these messages are given explicitly, but in modes that, for the moment, are less subject to social policing. This ensures that power of certain kinds is much more difficult to challenge (p. 41).

I detail the steps I took with the MDA approach below after describing the subjects, online setting, and the data collection strategies.

Subjects

This dissertation examines the ways Red Bull Media House produces social media content about 23 female action sports athletes it sponsors. I selected these 23 athletes after an initial review of the 2019 Instagram posts and YouTube videos because they were the only female action sports athletes who were seen in the content. An athlete sponsorship is a partnership between an athlete and a company, where a company pays an athlete to do their sport in exchange for the company using their image to build brand awareness and gain customer loyalty through that association (Baylis, 2021). Commonly known examples of what entails a sponsorship include athletes wearing a company's logo on their clothes and using the company's gear so that any media exposure of the athlete means media exposure of the company. More contemporary examples include the athlete posting social media content about themselves while not only wearing the logoed clothes or using the company's gear but also @ tagging the company in the caption. In particular to this study, Red Bull receives ownership of all media assets related to the athletes' major achievements in exchange for funding them to train, travel, compete, or explore the geographic or conceptual boundaries of their sport (Thorpe, 2017).

Because Red Bull Media House also sponsors other individuals such as mainstream sports athletes, dancers, and musicians and, therefore, posts those types of content on its social media platforms, I selected female action sports athletes based on the characteristics described in the literature review. To restate, these are sports that are not mainstream and often include unconventional rules and techniques. They are unorganized and participant-controlled, and while they can include competitions, competing is not the primary goal of the sport. Rather, a creative engagement with risk and the environment (note, environment can be natural or urban) is the primary objective in action sports (Kotler, 2014). Fitting this description and appearing in Red

Bull Media House's social media posts and YouTube videos from 2019 (process described in more detail below) are the 23 action sports athletes. Their gender was determined by the pronouns Red Bull used in describing the athletes (in social media or web pages), and ages ranged from 18 to 51. Four were snowboarders, three were skiers, three were surfers, six were mountain bikers, two were skateboarders, two were climbers/boulderers, one was a skydiver, one was a wakeboarder, and one was a whitewater kayaker. Eleven were from the United States, one from Austria, one from Italy, three from France, four from England, two from Brazil, and one from Poland (see Table 1 for details of athletes). These features reflect a wider cultural trend of action sports being predominantly composed of and represented by those from affluent, western European and North American countries (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011).

I chose this population because of their situation as female action sports athletes with a particularly high level of media visibility by Red Bull, a company that carries important cultural weight in regards to defining gender and action sports ideas for wider audiences. Although the purpose of this qualitative research is not to make generalizations about action sports, action sports media, or female athletes, the thematic patterns I interweave through Red Bull's social media posts about its sponsored female athletes can illuminate patterns of meaning produced by this specific company. In turn, these systems could indicate how wider cultural and social patterns of postfeminist sensibilities operate in the context of action sports and society more broadly.

Social Media Setting

Unlike mainstream media, social media are “decentralized, immediate, and interactive,” which has so far provided fertile ground for feminist scholars examining how “athletes to create and circulate content with audiences globally, potentially transforming the nature of sport media”

(Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 361; see also Pegoraro, 2010, Thorpe, 2017). But what about media producers? I wanted to examine the possibilities of influence that action sports media producers might have, and for this venture I specifically chose to Instagram posts and YouTube videos as my data for analysis.

Instagram

Launched in 2010, Instagram is a mobile photo and short video sharing social media platform that grew to hit 1 billion active users worldwide in 2019 (Taher, 2019). Unlike Facebook, which centers more on text and requires rather structured profiles as a computer-based platform, Instagram's popularity stems from giving users a moderately open-ended, highly visual communication tool, "suggesting that individuals could choose to represent themselves using a range of techniques" (Marwick, 2015, p. 138, emphasis added). In reality, Instagram is designed for self-promotion by requiring users to create individual profiles and promoting visual display through the sharing of photos and video (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b). Photos take up the entire phone screen, while two tiny lines of text appear below; anything extra is hidden and must be clicked on to see the rest of the caption. People can also post quick videos, which appear in the same format as images. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018b) argued Instagram's heavy focus on user appearance has enabled it to reshape consumer culture because

it has become a notable feature of individual and corporate branding and marketing strategies, with private citizens, celebrities and businesses using Instagram to strategically merge 'intimacy, access and authenticity with promotion and branding'. (p. 300; Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016, 249)

In regards to corporate branding, I chose Red Bull's Instagram posts (images and videos) for several reasons. First, because it is a platform that is visually driven and focuses on appearance and self-promotion, Instagram is an incredibly useful space to explore how and why some bodies are highlighted and made more visible than others (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a,

2018b). Banet-Wieser (2012) argued that typically these are bodies that are more easily brandable because they represent dominant forms of femininity (white, heterosexual, young, slender, sexy) Sports scholars have increasingly documented how young athletes who frequently post “hot” body images and promote their heterosexuality attract the most attention online through likes, follows, shares, and comments (Toffoletti, 2016; Toffoletti, Thorpe, & Bruce, 2017). This research seeks to determine whether they are also the ones who might gain the most attention by corporate sponsors by examining Red Bull’s strategic selection of posts.

YouTube

I also collected YouTube videos because of its soaring popularity and the surprising lack of research about its use in the sports context. Founded in 2005, YouTube has since grown to have 2 billion logged-in users worldwide monthly, and because no account is required to use the app, the number of actual monthly viewers is estimated much higher (Newberry, 2021). As of 2019, approximately three-quarters of Americans used YouTube, which makes it the country’s most popular online platform in front of Facebook (68% of Americans) and Instagram (40% of Americans) (Kessel, 2019). Initial research has shown a few trends in the general use and effects of YouTube regarding gender. For example, work done by Maloney et al. (2017) argued that while the potential of YouTube to counteract gender stereotypes, there remained an unequal visibility of the genders on the video platform. Besides the general lack of representation of women on YouTube, when they are present, they tend to represent themselves according to heteronormative standards of femininity (Döring & Mohseni, 2018; Molyneaux, O’Donnell, S., Gibson, & Singer, 2008; Wotanis & McMillan, 2014). They also often receive more hostile comments than men and are more likely to quit posting videos as a result of such hostility (Döring & Mohseni, 2018). Possibly the most interesting—and pertinent to this study— gender-

specific differences found with YouTube is that while male YouTube producers tend to share tips, opinions, and other information, female YouTubers focus more on private matters and interact more often with their users (Molyneaux et al., 2008). Despite these important findings, the research is limited to individuals' own YouTube profiles and has not yet explored those differences in the sports context. Scholars have highlighted how postfeminist sensibilities operate through content production in—and to a lesser extent consumption of—athletes' personal Instagram profiles (Toffoletti, 2016; Toffoletti, Thorpe, & Bruce, 2017). However, ignoring other massive social media platforms such as YouTube and the content produced by major corporate brands risks overlooking other ways postfeminist sensibilities normalize the re-articulation of desirable femininity as neoliberal, apolitical, entrepreneurial, and still heteronormative.

Data Collection Strategies

For the analysis, I collected three main types of data: 1) all YouTube videos produced by Red Bull that feature female action sports athletes during 2019, 2) all Instagram posts produced by Red Bull that feature female action sports athletes during 2019, and 3) all of the biographical web pages on Red Bull Media House's website about the female action sports athletes who were featured at all in either or both the YouTube videos and Instagram posts during 2019. I selected 2019 because critical-cultural analysis focuses upon the political and power dynamics of *contemporary* culture (Du Gay et al., 2013), and I chose the entire year to make sure all major action sports, which are mostly seasonal, were included. For example, snowboarding and skiing are typically featured in winter and early spring, while surfing could be year-round and whitewater kayaking in late spring to summer. I define all of the ways I collected data.

Data Types

From November 6, 2019 to January 15, 2020, I went onto Red Bull's Instagram profile page and YouTube channel and scrolled through all of the posts and videos that were posted over the 2019 year. I catalogued all of the posts and videos that had a female action sports athlete in them, whether by herself or in addition to male athletes, in a Google spreadsheet, which served as a master map. The spreadsheet included three tabs, one for all of the Instagram posts, one for all of the Youtube posts, and profile information about the athletes as described in Red Bull's "about" bio web pages about the athletes. The profile pages Google spreadsheet tab included the following data information: 1) athlete name, 2) sport, 3) country 4) age 5) career start 6) style of sport (eg. big air vs. slopestyle snowboarding), 7) athlete's bio quote (eg. "I'm definitely a lucky girl to be living the life I live"), and 8) subhead of bio (eg. "Austrian snowboarder Anna Gasser is the shooting star of a new generation of female freestylers.")). The YouTube and Instagram tabs included the following columns of data information: the date Red Bull posted it, the link to the post, the female athlete or athletes featured in it, the caption (as well as title for YouTube videos), the number of likes and views the video or post received, and any initial thoughts I had upon viewing the post or video. As an example, I wrote the following comment during an initial review of the 2019 Instagram posts:

In looking at Lindsey Vonn's Instagram photo from February 1, I am struck by how often I see her, and she's wearing makeup. She's blonde, beautiful, seemingly always smiling, and represents the "perfect package of sexy and strong, pretty and powerful." (memo dated February 17, 2020).

The initial memo notes in my research operate under Lindloff and Taylor's (2017) conception that data analysis occurs throughout the course of the research and demonstrates the iterative nature of qualitative theorization and analysis.

Captions often included hashtags, @ tags of athletes, and emojis, which were also included in the spreadsheet. The total data collected included 132 Instagram posts, 12 YouTube videos, and 23 bio web pages. Of the 132 Instagram posts, 116 were short videos, which averaged 531,375 views per post. The remaining 15 Instagram posts were photos only and averaged 62,840 likes per post. The average length of the YouTube videos was 10 minutes and 43 seconds, and they averaged 623,308 views, 2,934 likes, and 140 dislikes.

Using NVivo

After collecting the data, I loaded them into the qualitative data analysis computer software package NVivo for analysis. NVivo provides a lot of organizational and analytical strength, particularly in its ability to collate multiple types of data (text and visual). At this time, it is important to note that data collection for CDA—and qualitative methodology more generally—does not happen at one specific phase that must be completed before analysis can begin. Rather, it is an iterative process between data collection and analysis, and more collection should happen if the results of the previous round of analysis require it. Similar to other modes of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Glaser & Straus, 1967), each round of CDA analysis works to find indicators for specific concepts and broaden those concepts into categories that may elicit more, different, or expansive questions, which may be answered only through more data collection. As such, during this process of uploading and cataloguing the data to NVivo, I performed two initial coding steps.

Step 1, I conducted and wrote up the attribute coding. Serving as a data-management tool, attribute coding was a catalog of all essential data information and contexts for interpretation and analysis for all of the cases of the entire data corpus. This included documenting generic attributes such as the post's social media platform, date of posting, whether it was a photo or video, the caption that went with the visual, the total number of engagements (views, shares, and comments), main sport, and athletes involved (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). Along with data management, attribute coding served as a useful tool for comparing the other cycles of coding and allowing for possible systematic investigation and even basic statistical analysis, if need be.

Step 2, I also generated a fourth type of data, analytic memos, following Saldaña's (2015) argument that "the best approach for analyzing visual data is a holistic, interpretive lens guided by intuitive inquiry and strategic questions" (p. 57). I carefully reflected on each image and video as I loaded it into NVivo, employing "thick-descriptive" detail through rich, dynamic words that, in turn, functioned as "language-based data that *accompany* the visual data" (p. 57). Using thick descriptions in analytic memos was key for me to be able to record and detail the degree to which postfeminism as a sensibility is reified through media practices that articulate athleticism and dominant femininity in the content produced by Red Bull. More details on analytic memos follow in the analysis section below. NVivo also enables cross linking of analytic memos and "thick descriptive" notes with each other, with themes that become developed, and with the data files themselves.

Analysis

Spencer (2011) posits that interpreting visual data requires using "sociological lens with a critical filter through 'thick description' analytic narratives: the 'craft' of visual research requires

a balance between inductive forces—allowing the collected data to speak for itself, and deductive forces—structuring, ordering, principles derived from theoretical models and concepts” (p. 132). Analytic memos are key in coding and analyzing this type of data. The first step of writing analytic memos involved a denotative reading of all of the data I had already collected and catalogued (Nash, 2018, Pauwels, 2011). Again, these are all of Red Bull Media House’s 2019 Instagram posts and YouTube videos that featured its sponsored female action sports as well as their athlete bio pages on its website. My analytic memos include an inventory of the web pages, posts, and YouTube video web pages’ features and content, and I considered how visual signifiers (e.g., photos and videos) were composed (e.g., colors used, genre of music if used, the position(s) of Red Bull’s logo). I also wrote down characteristics of the posts that were “meaningfully absent” (Pauwels, 2011, p. 576).

As an example of this process, I wrote initial reflections of the denotative aspects while coding _____ for the first time:

Skier Michelle Parker is in the right third of the bio header image, looking as though she is about to jump right out of the picture. Snow is everywhere, and she is jumping between two evergreen trees. She wears full winter gear, goggles, and a helmet, the only her long, brown hair is visible. It is an action shot. On the left bottom half of the image is her name in big, bold, and white lettering, the word freeskiing in tiny block all caps above her name, and a quote beneath her name that reads, “It’s a goal of mine to feel confident and comfortable in big-mountain terrain.” The quote on the left compositionally balances with the image of her physically moving through big-mountain terrain, jumping between the two trees.

Finally, I wrote broader reflections on the overall composition of the posts and web pages: for example, how the visual (image or video) might align with or contradict the text (caption, title, or verbal). In terms of the amount of analytic memo data, I typed 119 analytic memos—on the computer, iPad, and on my phone, synced and backed by iCloud—between December 2019 and December 2020. Coding systems for the videos, detailed below, included not only the content but also the film-making techniques (e.g. POV, voice-over, zoom, etc.) employed to assess their artistic impacts.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis in This Study

Having given an overview of multimodal discourse analysis, I now expand the process I used to adjust the framework for my analysis in this study. I developed themes from comprehensive semantic areas that are relevant to postfeminist discourses to illustrate my data coding procedure for this study (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Because discourses are composed of a variety of texts and thematic elements, using only one text or one topic to examine a discourse would diminish its complexity and scope (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). In addition, a theme does not “emerge” based on its prevalence in the dataset but rather is developed by the researcher through its connection to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, the study’s theory guides its analysis. The following paragraphs describe how I reflected on developing themes that related to the study’s research question from all of the gathered data.

Coding Process. After the first two steps (attribute coding and analytic memo writing), to determine thematic areas in Red Bull’s content from the large corpus of social media posts, YouTube videos, web pages, and analytic memos, I then distinguished *modalities* (strings of visual images and/or written and spoken text) that presented references and suggestions of dominance (*step 3*). If women being equal to men is an indicator of feminism’s success, then the

framing of female athletes as dominating in their sports is suggestive of feminism's success in these contexts. While it can be argued that most if not all of the data could portray some idea of dominance, I specifically noted instances where it was more easily identifiable because I was less concerned with discourses of dominance than with how such discourses compose part of the whole of postfeminist discourses—that tension between feminist and anti-feminist discourses (*step 4*). As part of the third step in analysis, the data comprising this type of dominance formed the initial collection of codes and included groups of data extracts, called modes or modalities (e.g., text, photos and videos, emojis, hashtags, layout/color). In multimodal analysis, there are five modes that make up a collective of semiotic resources to shape the intended meaning.

According to Kress (2012),

Each mode has a specific role: writing tells, image shows, color frames and highlights; layout and font are used in part for reasons of compositional arrangements, and, as the other modes, too, always for reasons of ‘taste’” (Kress, 2012, p.39).

As an example, in one of my analytic memos dated August 22, 2020, I wrote the following about the header image of surfer Carissa Moore on her biographical web page:

Carissa Moore is powerful AF in this image. The image is of Moore carving her surfboard at the top of the wave and away from the camera. She is in mid-turn, her tan and toned body coiled away from the camera, while her eyes remain fixed on it. The header image juxtaposes the powerful movement of a surfer on her board in the ocean with the cool stillness of Moore's eyes looking into the camera. In this way, Moore is making a powerful challenge to the male gaze.

I then established how the references and claims mobilized sensibilities of postfeminism. To continue with the example of Carissa Moore, I further developed the analytic memo upon returning to it in step four of the coding process:

But in front of this image is a quote in white text by Moore that says, “I’m a lucky girl to be alive.” The image with the quote is an example of O’Halloran (2011)’s notion of inter-semiotic expansions of meaning, which are the interactions of semiotic choices (modes) that give rise to different potential meanings based on the ways in which they are accessed and integrated, in this example, through text-image relations. Logical, textual, experiential, and interpersonal meanings interact across different modes, and the subsequent multiplication of meaning leads to “a complex multidimensional semantic space where there may be a compression of, divergent, and even conflicting meanings” (O’Halloran, 2011, p. 9; see also Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Liu & O’Halloran, 2009) In other words, here, Moore’s quote in front of her image signifies the infantilization of herself. This right here seems to be an example of where the sports media are able to shift the responsibility for sexism onto the women themselves. Look to other examples of athletes doing this through quotes and other ways (Toffoletti, 2016).

The observations about the header image and quote of Moore resulted in the development of an initial code called “self-trivialization.” After reaching saturation from coding step 4, the initial codes were then grouped into broader discursive topical categories within the context of action sports (step 5). As another example, in my analysis, I observed the commonly used hashtag #fitnesshacks, generally used in posts that featured women sharing ideas about how to exercise and what to eat to achieve certain fitness goals. I coded it by its same name and after reflecting on the codes holistically, grouped it with similar codes into a topical area I called “self-discipline.” In this fifth step, I analyzed how common meanings and values were attached to both dominance and femininity. Additionally, I addressed what was absent in the discourses about the action sports athletes. In doing so, I sought to address how my findings at the types of modes

(visual and verbal) fit “into a broader cultural and historical context” (Jette, 2006, p. 346). This part of the analysis had me asking several questions, including “what information (e.g. about the athletes, about the sports) is omitted?” and “who benefits from this?” In so doing, I determined the construction of the “ideal” Red Bull female action sports athletes “and the classed, racialized, gendered, sexualized identities they were assigned and how they were represented” (Nash, 2018, p. 284).

An instance of step 5 of the analysis was when I noted that textual references often used neoliberal discourses to describe the athletes overcoming some type of adversity. For example, I wrote an analytical memo about the details that skateboarder Leticia Bufoni was “breaking down barriers in women’s skateboarding” on her biographical page:

Red Bull gives examples of what this barrier breaking looks like: winning huge contests like the Mystic Sk8 Cup and the Street League Skateboarding, becoming the first female cover star of the Skateboard Mag, and the first woman to be on the Nike SB Team roster. By referencing her accomplishments as indicators of gaining equality for women, Red Bull is contributing to a cultural notion that feminism is an individual pursuit and responsibility, leaving hidden the structural and cultural barriers that prevent such equality. Absent from this narrative is Red Bull’s acknowledgement of the fact that it has been the media outlets, event organizations, and product companies at least up to this point actively barring women from representation. In this way, Red Bull ultimately contributes to the maintenance of women’s marginalization, to the benefit of patriarchal interests.

The end result of my analysis indicated Red Bull constructs the “ideal” female action sports athletes as neoliberal entrepreneurs who rise above adversity on their way to the top of their sport, and, once there, receive the reward of money, media visibility. The sixth and final process involved developing theoretical connections between the topical categories, which I call themes and are reflected in the heading and subheadings in the findings chapter.

Addressing Limitations and Ensuring Rigor

The word “critical” in CDA is emblematic of a paradigmatic position regarding the social world. As opposed to methodologies and theories that work to describe the social world as an objective reality that is fixed and outside of human knowledge or as otherwise, if multiple, neutral realities, the critical position problematizes taken-for-granted assumptions about the world that make it appear objective, and thus exposes dynamics of power (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Because of its grounding in the political, CDA requires the disclosure of positionality. Acknowledging one’s own positionality makes transparent the process by which power is understood and made visible, thus opening up potentially new avenues for liberation. Thus, I located myself throughout my data collection and coding process by 1) situating myself as a former sponsored action sports athlete; 2) pulling from my professional and cultural experience as an action sports journalist drawing from my work experiences for research ideas and questions; 3) drawing from my work experiences for research ideas and questions; and 4) applying an explicitly feminist analysis to my interpretations.

Because CDA is limited to the messages encoded by producers and decoded by consumers, it is unable to fully analyze the impact of media messages on audiences. No amount of CDA, when divorced from interviews, can provide adequate evidence for the thoughts and motivations in people’s heads (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Despite this limitation, CDA can still illuminate how specific actors construct ideologies and the ways those ideologies fit into wider social practices. The study will still be able to also highlight in what ways certain discourses become naturalized as common sense, and how those discourses are reinforced as well as challenged, in the communication process through engagement with social media and YouTube posts. Another criticism of CDA, as with many qualitative methodologies (Lindlof & Taylor,

2017; Tracy, 2010), is the prioritization of context over text, of choosing and using a small sample of data and leading to concerns over researcher bias in data collection and analysis. (Sriwimon & Zilli, 2017). This study aimed for ensuring rigor primarily by addressing the concern of cherry-picking data over selecting data randomly (Widdowson, 1998).

Maintaining rigor in CDA characterized by an abundance of detailed descriptions and explanations for the rich complexity of human experience. Richness is created by having “requisite variety” (Weick, 2007, p. 16), of samples, theories and frameworks, sources of data, and contexts. The term pulls from cybernetics and references the requirement for the method to be at least as complex, dynamic and flexible as the phenomenon being examined. There is no magic amount of time in data collection; however, the critical point to address to ensure proper rigor is to consider whether or not the data will provide and validate meaningful and significant claims (Tracy, 2010). Rigor is also determined by the great amount of care one takes regarding data collection and analysis practices. In this way, rigorous data collection and analysis are also noted by transparency, which includes a detailed description about the procedures used to collect, transform, and organize the raw data into the final research report. To ensure the transparency of my research, this study detailed every step in the process—including steps taken backward or sideways based on findings that require it.

Creswell and Poth (2007) also counts rigor to mean that the researcher applies one or more measures such as triangulation or crystallization, member checking, employing peer or external auditors of accounts. Tracy (2010) also refers to these procedures as a means of gaining credibility of the work. Credibility is the plausibility and transparency of the research results and discussion. While quantitative research determines credibility via replicability, reliability,

accuracy and consistency (Golafshani, 2015), qualitative credibility is accomplished by procedures such as crystallization and thick description.

Among the most essential measures for establishing credibility and demonstrating rigor in qualitative research is *thick description*, which is the thorough illustration that illuminates culturally specific meanings (Geertz, 1973) as well as a variety of distinct detail (Bochner, 2000). Because any one action, when separated from its context, could represent any and all sorts of things, thick description demands that the researcher explicate the dynamicism, specificity and circumstantial nature of their data (Geertz, 1973). Another measure of maintaining rigor and credibility is through crystallization, which is the means of using a variety of data sources and frameworks. The process posits that the goal of providing this variety is not to support a singular, external truth, but to open up to a more comprehensively developed, yet still recognized as impartial understanding of the phenomenon.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to outline the research method used to answer the research question. A discussion of philosophical assumptions regarding qualitative methodology served to justify its applicability to examining the social practices that make Red Bull Media House's female action sports athlete meaningful in action sports cultures. The chapter then outlined how postfeminist sensibility squared with critical discourse analysis. I also focused on explicating how multimodal discourse analysis was applied to examine how the circumstances that arise out of a neoliberal, late-capitalist society as laid out by postfeminist sensibility shape how the female action sports athletes become meaningful to those given cultures. The following chapter will provide the study results.

Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine Red Bull Media House's content that focuses on its sponsored female action sports athletes to interrogate the role sports media producers play in postfeminist media cultures. This chapter includes a discussion of major findings. While I feature similar representations and common themes among athletes and media platforms, I also foreground specific representative examples.

Framing the Athletes as Dominant

In reviewing my third step of analysis, I was concerned with the following question: how is the discourse of dominance realized in Red Bull's content about the female action sports athletes it sponsors? The biographical web pages of the female athletes in the dataset provide one way to answer this question. Therefore, I was particularly interested in the combination between header images and the biographical text for these biographical web pages.

22 out of the 23 of the athletes' header photos feature them actively participating in their sport. All but one of the athletes are looking away from the camera in a display of what neurologists call the "quiet eye." This type of enhanced visual perception enables the removal of distractions from the line of sight before making a move, and it considered an essential skill that elite athletes use, whether it is to win a competition or race or make a first descent or land a new trick (Kohn, 2015; Robson, 2020). For example, mountain bikers Rachel Atherton, Tahnée Seagrave, Pauline Ferrand-Prevot, Myriam Nicole, Jill Kintner, Rebecca Rusch, and Kate Courtney are all have their eyes fixed on the trail as they jump their bikes in the air, cut tight corners, and descend technical, rock-and-root filled terrain. Snowboarders Anna Gasser, Hailey Langland, and Maddie Mastro have their gaze fixed on their landings as the header photos capture them airborne mid-trick.

While the viewer does not know the specific details of what is happening in these header shots, their display alongside the biographical text of the athletes' accolades by Red Bull produce the idea that these athletes dominate their sport. As an example, the header image of freeskier Arianna Tricomi is composed of her mid-carve on a steep snow-covered slope. The background is simple; half of it is a light blue sky, and the other half white. Tricomi's angled figure cuts through the middle of the image, surrounded by the glistening powder her skis just flung into the air. Snow goggles, a helmet, and a neck gaiter hide any feminine markers that Tricomi might otherwise display. Her gaze is angled just down from the center and directly in front of her skis, giving the impression that Tricomi is less interested in challenging the male gaze than in skiing.

Beneath the header image were the words that composed her athlete biography, starting with the following sentence in big bolded letters: "This Italian skier is a dominant force on the freeride scene." The remaining biography highlights Tricomi's accomplishments in slopestyle skiing, placing third in 2016 and 2017 in the European Tour and first in 2018. This focus on wins exemplifies a general sentiment woven throughout the coverage Red Bull gives its female action sports athletes: they are elite. Other illustrative examples include Kate Courtney as the "the current Elite XCO World Champion," (March 16, 2019 Instagram post), while downhill mountain biker Rachel Atherton "dominates the highland hills" when she wins the World Cup championships (Instagram post, June 5, 2019). In addition, big-wave surfer Justine Dupont "makes headline-grabbing performances" (bio page, para. 10), and Katie Omerod's command of big-air tricks marked her "as one of the brightest talents in world snowboarding" (bio page, par. 6). In fact, throughout the dataset, I found no mention of the loss of competitions, which was an important finding that led to the development of the following themes on Red Bull's media content when analyzed in the context of postfeminism as a sensibility.

Girls Just Have to Have Fun

While it can be argued that domination also is a standard narrative in posts about male athletes, it is this particular narrative operating *in combination* with the discourses of postfeminism that is noteworthy for this analysis. As such, I returned to the data for step four of the analysis to determine how different modes might provide explicit information on the ways in which postfeminist discourses exist simultaneously with discourses of dominance in the Instagram posts, YouTube videos, and bio web pages of the athletes. In doing so, I noticed the postfeminist tension between feminist and anti-feminist discourses was particularly prominent in many Instagram posts through the interrelationship between captions (text modality) that suggested elite athleticism and videos that displayed goofy and fun (visual modality). Below are a few illustrative examples of what this interrelationship looks like.

One Instagram post marked February 9, 2019, has a video of Shauna Coxsey climbing a particularly challenging boulder problem without using her feet, seemingly for fun and play. For those who have never climbed before, the most critical aspect of performance is using one's feet and legs because they are far stronger than the arms and hands (Claassen et al., 2019). That the video shows Coxsey using only her hands signifies her raw strength and skill. She hangs for a second before swinging her legs back and forth to build sideways momentum toward the next blue hold. She swings and makes a dramatic thrust in the air to the left higher hold, catching it with her left arm as the momentum rotates her body counterclockwise away from the wall. Deftly and with a smile, she uses the turn to her advantage and continues the rotation until her body again faces the wall. Another blue hold sits approximately two feet above her, difficult to reach for many even if they could use their feet. With a forceful pull of her arms and thrusting of her body, she lunges upward and grabs the third hold with her left hand, making one final push

off the second one with her right hand then bringing it up to meet her left. One last hold to go, again about two and a half feet above and slightly to the left of Coxsey's current hold. She hangs only a second before gently swinging her left leg out for momentum. Coxsey then makes a slight pullup off the third hold, reaches her left hand up—and falls. The camera lags a moment before catching Coxsey's final drop to the floor. After an initial landing on her feet, she falls backward and onto her back, right leg swung across her body and arms sprawled outward with a laugh. Red Bull's caption accompanying the Instagram video is shown in Figure 4.1. In the caption, the emoji of the brain explosion is called “exploding head” and serves as the visual form of the expression “mind blown” ( *Shocked Face with Exploding Head Emoji*, 2017). In semiotics, the  is a sign between the words “mind blown” and the definition, which is to be astounding. The combination of this sign with the text “imagine how she'd do if she used her feet, too” and hashtags #strength and #skill further signifies Coxsey as powerful and skilled athlete.

Returning to Kress's (2012) argument, all modes carry explicit meaning even if little or no vocabulary exists to describe them. As such, the caption and video of Coxsey attempting a difficult boulder problem with only her hands could only suggest that what Red Bull posted was empowering. Fortunately, Gill's (2017) articulation of postfeminist sensibilities provides such a vocabulary to explore the other explicit meanings embedded in the post. For example, the video also features multiple shots of Coxsey smiling, suggesting friendliness, and her jumping around, which conveys fun and energy (Machin & Mayr, 2012). While she has a high fall onto the landing pad from her last jump, the impressiveness of the shot is weakened by the silliness of her landing on her back with her legs and arms all splayed out like a fallen puppy and giggling. The concept that Coxsey is *having fun* as she performs feats of astounding skill and strength is further signified using the hashtag #fun in between #skill and #strength (Chandler, 2017).



redbull  Imagine how she'd do if she used her feet too. 
: @shaunacoxsey
#footless #climbing #bouldering #indoor
#strength #fun #skill #redbull

121w

Figure 4.1 Instagram Post, dated February 9, 2019

Red Bull's Instagram post of Shauna Coxsey, date February 9, 2019

Fun was used as a hashtag in various other forms across Instagram posts—#keepitfun in a training video of cross-country mountain biker Kate Courtney, #fastisfun in photo series, also of Courtney, during a mountain biking race, #skateboardingisfun of skateboarder Yndiara Asp, and #fun in other climbing and bouldering videos of Coxsey. In all of these posts but the video of Raasp, the athletes are similarly smiling or laughing. These posts depicting training and competition as fun collide powerfully with a lack of engagement by Red Bull with the unpleasant aspects of sports participation among its female athletes. The path toward elite athleticism, whether that be measured in Olympic medals, prize money, podium placements, or other appraisals, is fraught with injuries, frustrations, doubt, losses, and other forms of adversity. Yet, similar to the absence of mentions regarding any losses Red Bull's female action sports athletes had, I also noted how the less-than-fun aspects of sports and training were meaningfully absent from the dataset. The most notable use of fun in a hashtag was in regards to a post of cross-country mountain biking champion Kate Courtney, shown in Figure 4.2.

In another example of fun Instagram post is marked March 16, 2019. Courtney (23 years old at the time of the post), “shares her Fitness Hacks @kateplusfate,” according to Red Bull Media House. Except for few second-long shots of her pedaling her bike while wearing a racing uniform, most of the video itself has Kate standing in a gym. Over the course of 1 minute, and 20 seconds, Kate answers three “this-or-that” types of questions related to training and fitness: 1) “On the bike, what is the best source of fuel? Carbs or fat?”, 2) “When is the best time to have caffeine in a race? Before race or right before the end?”, and 3) “Is muscle best built on the bike or in the gym?” The video juxtaposes Kate's elite-level answers to training questions with a production that is fun and lighthearted. Graphics abound such as white question marks and squiggles, giving a cartoonish effect. Upbeat music plays over all of the B-roll, including when



redbull  World Champ Racer Kate Courtney shares her Fitness Hacks @kateplusfate

Fitness Hacks from professional mountain bike racer and the current Elite XCO World Champion, Kate Courtney.

@kateplusfate #FitnessHacks #Fitness #Train #MTB #Workout

Figure 4.2 Instagram post, March 16, 2019

Red Bull's Instagram post of cross-country mountain biker Kate Courtney, date March 16, 2019.

white text appears and displays each question over two images—representing the two options—stitched together. For example, the question “Carbs or fat?” cuts across images of whole wheat bread on the top of the video screen and bacon sizzling in a cast-iron. The question-and-answer format of the video evokes the feeling of empowerment through guidance on how to take control of one’s athletic performance, from the foods eaten to the disciplines/events chosen, to the workouts done, and more. Courtney’s mannerisms are more pronounced than the workout routines, diet recommendations, and race tips she provides in the video. She smiles, uses her hands a lot, and cocks her head to the side as if in thought, which transforms information about the rigors of grueling training and macronutrient counting into a fun and engaging video.

While this particular post was a bigger production project, the rest of the Instagram posts about Courtney were candid videos of her at the gym. An illustrative example, shown in Figure 4.3 from April 8, shows Courtney standing on a balance board and flipping a 25-pound weight disk, catching each time with the alternate hand. This unusual exercise strengthens arms, shoulders, and back using the disc, while the balance board builds muscle strength from the core down to the feet; more importantly, the combination of disc flip and balance board also train the visual, vestibular, and proprioceptive systems, which play pivotal roles in athletic performance in sports, such as mountain biking (Cross, 2020; Lindberg, 2021).

#Fitspo is an abbreviated portmanteau that merges fitness with inspiration. A wide array of photos, videos, and texts are among the 73.5 million posts on Instagram that use this hashtag, but a repeated motif of thin and toned yet also curvy (large, defined buttocks and breasts) women wearing tight leggings and bralettes, bikinis, and dominate. Another hashtag in the April 8 post, #progressnotperfection, has 5.3 million posts on Instagram of largely the same type of content as #fitspo. While #trainhard is also included, the overall tone of the April 8 post, akin to the other



redbull 🌀 Balance ✅ Focus ✅
Strength ✅

Kate Courtney can do it all 🙌

🏃 @kateplusfate

#trainhard #keepitfun #newtricks

#noshortcuts #progressnotperfection

#fitspo #redbull #givesyouwings

101w

Figure 4.3 Instagram post, dated August 8, 2019

Red Bull's Instagram post of cross-country mountain biker Kate Courtney, date August 8, 2019

ones of Courtney in the dataset (such as the Fitness Hacks post), is more suggestive of fitness than training. This distinction is important for the cultural assumptions that undergird them; while training is thought of as a practice to build strength and skill in a specialized area, fitness is generally associated with weight loss to achieve or maintain “a good shape and size,” supposedly to feel good in one’s body (Holland, 2016; Nidetch, 2017).

Who is Granted Visibility?

My analysis showed that, while the athletes’ femininity may not have been the central focus of Red Bull’s posts, they were still noticeably showcased in various ways: the posts overall highlighted athletes who were young, white, slim and toned, with long, flowing hair. Red Bull sponsored 345 action sports athletes in 2019, based on the parameters of what constituted action sports outlined in the methodology chapter (*Red Bull Athletes - Overview*, 2019). Of those, 77 were women, as denoted by the use of the *she/her* pronouns in the Red Bull sponsored athlete web pages. Additionally, while I analyzed 23 female action sports athletes at length for this study, there were 16 additional athletes who were either briefly caught on camera, were identifiable as female action sports athletes through their profile @tagged on Red Bull’s Instagram posts or being named directly in the YouTube videos. In that way, I argue that only 23 female action sports athletes were made *discursively* visible on Red Bull’s social media platforms over 2019. A few of them were featured several times. For example, cross country mountain biker Kate Courtney (13%) featured more than anyone else in Red Bull’s Instagram account. These were the details I noted on who received visibility in Red Bull’s social media platforms over 2019. After documenting who was featured, I took analytic memos regarding any visual or textual cues toward postfeminist sentiments they had. The following are sample excerpts from my analytic memos about the visual details of the athletes noted in the data:

....The video opens with Shauna Coxsey flicking her long, blonde hair behind her shoulders, leaving it to cascade down her back as she jumps up to the first blue hold of the climb....(Instagram post, January 7, 2019)

....Michelle Parker's long, honey brown hair is streaked with blonde highlights that give it a sun-soaked beach look, and she has it tied loosely into a French braid under a hunter green beanie, which adorns with the Red Bull logo....(Instagram post, April 18, 2019).

....surfer Caroline Marks is wearing a full-length wetsuit, similar to what the guys wear, while Carissa Moore is adhering more to the traditional "sexy surfer babe" vibe with a cheeky bottom black bikini (April 7, 2019).

....Other instances where sports bras [in addition to the few of mountain biker Kate Courtney]....were on display include skateboarder Leticia Bufoni performing a trick out of a swimming pool....(Instagram post, January 18, 2019). For example, that mountain biker Kate Courtney was featured more than any other female action sports athlete on Instagram, with over half of those posts (8 of 17) displaying her in black sports bra and tight dark leggings at the gym.

And the following passages are examples of text found in the biographical web pages, YouTube video captions, and Instagram post captions:

....As ever, [surfer] Carissa's biggest supporters are her family, including her longtime love Luke Untermann. The couple married in 2017. "Getting married hasn't made day-to-day life that much different, but there's another level of commitment and content. It's been awesome." (Carissa Moore, biographical web page)

....In 2013, [mountain biker Jill] Kintner married Australian downhiller Bryn Atkinson, one of the top downhill mountain bikers in the world. The two support each other at races and are always looking out for one another. (Jill Kintner, biographical web page)

Lifestyle as an Expression of Choice and Individualism

In reflecting on the different ways in which postfeminism can be seen to operate in Red Bull's social media and web page content, I found myself increasingly turning to the idea of *lifestyle*. I came up with the idea of using the word lifestyle based on my summer days spent kayaking the Green River Narrows, a Class V, steep river canyon deep in the woods, with friends when I lived in Asheville, North Carolina. We would spend hours paddling kayaks that cost \$900-1,200 with paddles that averaged \$200 and in gear that collectively averaged \$500. We'd bring food and IPA beers with us and soak up the sun on boulders by the river, snacking, drinking, and just laughing and having fun. After making it to the takeout, we'd spend another hour or so hanging out by our cars—often Subaru Outbacks, Toyota Tacomas with camper shells, and Mercedes sprinter vans, with the occasional other. My friends and I were not just paddling during these days, we were *lifestyling*. Specific to this study, *lifestyling* in action sports contexts functions as “an order of discourse,” a conceptual terrain where knowledge is formed and produced using discourses, in this instance discourses of lifestyle (Fairclough, 1992). According to Budgeon (2011), “by asserting that equality has been achieved postfeminist discourse focuses on female achievement, encouraging women to embark on projects of individualized self-definition and privatized self-expression exemplified in the celebration of lifestyle and consumption choices” (p. 281). So I wanted to examine how personal aspects of these athletes' lives were used to show their ability to freely choose how they present themselves and what they're willing to show us as viewers.

While many Instagram posts were of the athletes performing their sport, with elements of femininity interwoven in, there was a surprising number of other posts that seemed to focus on the athletes' personal lives. For example, Red Bull posted an extensive Instagram video on March 3, 2019 of champion snowboarder Maddie Maestro (19 years old at the time of the post) "playing" a game of "This or That." Besides a few shots of Mastro throwing tricks on her snowboard toward the beginning of the clip, the majority of the 2 minutes, 22 second-video displays her standing in snowboarding gear at the bottom of a hill at a ski resort. Despite being fully loaded in gear with a jacket, helmet and ski goggles, two long soft blonde strands hang down around her face and land on her shoulders. The first 3 seconds have Mastro standing and introducing the post, "Hey guys, Maddie Mastro here. We're at the Burton US Open, and we're going to play This or That."

Mastro is at *the* core snowboarding event (Leonhart, 2018), and throughout the video we viewers learn that between "surfing or photography" she would prefer "maybe somebody taking photos of me surfing." And, if she had to choose between starting her day with yoga or *The Office* (TV show), she would "open my laptop, watch *The Office*, and then I get ready for my day." As she answers each question, doodles flash across the screen, such as surfboard, camera, and the iconic *The Office* Logo. Intermixed with lifestyle questions are ones related to the actual sport, such as her preference for Double cripplers over McTwists and landing big tricks first in a run vs. last.

A similar Instagram post from June 17, 2019 features snowboarder Hailey Langland (19 years old at the time of the post) playing a game Red Bull called "Show or Snow?" Red Bull does say in the caption that Langland is

a regular top-ten competitor in the World Cup standings and an Olympian in 2018, her rail game is every bit as good as her air skills and she does both with impeccable style and flow. She earned silver at the 2019 X Games in Slopestyle to prove that point that she's versatile as heck.

Immediately beneath the text that details her status are words that summarize what this particular post actually is about, what the viewer can expect to see in the video to the left of the caption:

It's time for a round of 'Show or Snow' with professional snowboarder Hailey Langland. Off the bat, Hailey is asked: "Can you show us the last photo you took on your phone?", talk about a start!

This caption is paired with a video edited similarly to Mastro's "This or That?" post. Three seconds of action are followed by unrelated questions about Langland's latest Google, Spotify shuffle result, last text sent, and newest photo taken. If she refuses to show, snow gets hit in her face.

MDA is concerned with multiple interactions between spoken and written language and kinetic features (including body posture, gaze, gestures, and cinematography effects, such as camera angles and graphics). The interaction of these semiotic choices is called inter-semiotic expansion and demonstrates the potential meanings that arise from their integration and interaction (O'Halloran, 2011). From this understanding, I was interested in exploring the application of motion graphics and upbeat music into these videos. Motion graphics is a type of animation where text is the primary element (*Motion Graphics Video Template (Editable)*, 2020). Web graphics turn the information a brand thinks we need to know into a feeling it wants us to have. So in the example of these two videos, both of the titles "This or That" and "Show or Snow?" flash across the screen above Mastro and Langland, signaling that these two athletes have choices as to what aspects of their personal lives they can share with Red Bull's audiences.

That Langland answers all but one question suggests that she is okay showing Red Bull and its followers various aspects of her personal life. Throughout the videos, upbeat music plays, which produces the idea that these games are quick and fun activities. In addition, white graphics and doodles pop up on the screen throughout the videos as Langland and Mastro laugh, dance, and smile during and between answering questions, eliciting a fun and lighthearted vibe and suggesting that both of these athletes are enjoying themselves as they show the us that they are more than simply snowboarding champions whom Red Bull sponsors. They have hobbies and likes outside of sports, that at least during these posts, are more important to know about than the sports themselves. In that way, these videos position snowboarding as part of the whole lifestyle package that Langland and Mastro enjoy.

Supporting this notion of lifestyle discourse was the repeated use of a hashtag series, #skatelifelife #surfinglife #bikelife #lakelife #climbinglife, and #mtblife across Instagram posts. These hashtags are spin-offs of the original “salt life” idea, which is defined as “an authentic, aspirational and lifestyle brand that embraces those that love the ocean and everything associated with living the ‘Salt Life’” (*Salt Life::Delta Apparel, Inc. (DLA)*, n.d.). Such an association indicates these athletes live the good life and do what they love with respect to their sports. They are not just competing or performing sports; they are living all of the aspects associated with, for example, climbing, or surfing, or skateboarding. For example, an October 19, 2019, Instagram post shows mountain biker Tahnée Seagrave clearing high jumps on the Utah desert trails with a caption, shown in Figure 4.4. The most illustrative example of this lifestyle discourse is the April 18, 2019 Instagram post of skier Michelle Parker as she gives a tour of her truck she has converted to use as a camper. A 3-minute, 7-second video accompanies the caption, shown in Figure 4.5.



redbull  @tahneeseagrave just stylin'
it out 

.
@redbullbike #redbull #mtb #bike
#bikelife #mountainbike #utah
#fromwhereiride #dh

89w

Figure 4.4 Instagram post, dated October 19, 2019

Red Bull's Instagram post of downhill mountain biker Tahnée Seagrave, date October 19, 2019



redbull  Pro-skier [@myshellparker](#)
gives us a tour of her off-season
adventure maker

Take a look inside [@myshellparker](#)'s
fully loaded camper that she hits the
road in while she's not in powder mode.



Figure 4.5 Instagram post, dated April 18, 2019

Red Bull's Instagram post of big mountain skier Michelle Parker, date April 18, 2019

After a quick few seconds of her skiing, the video transitions with Parker in the kitchenette space of her sprinter van pulling out two kazoos and a toy whistle from a metal-weave basket and saying, “We have a couple of kazoos for the campfire, and this whistle which is fun.” She pulls on the whistle to make a sound and laughs, concluding, “that’s a good one.” Parker goes back into the metal basket and grabs a pair of gag glasses with the large nose and thick black eyebrows, saying “I also always like to have funny glasses on me. I don’t know why; I just like them.” The camera jumps to Parker wearing a pair of sunglasses rimmed with “okay” symbols, and she laughs while holding up the same gesture with her own hands. As Parker is putting away glasses, the camera zooms out to show a fuller first-look of the truck camper’s insides behind her: pine wood walls, a Western-style baby blue throw blanket with white tassels on top of a wooden platform bed, oversized white comforter and pillows that complement the throw blanket. The space has a cohesive Southwest-boho look. Parker laughs one more time before the screen splits into a shot of the earth in space with jazz rock playing. The camera zooms into the earth and onto a side-view sketch of a white van emblazoned with the words, “Red Bull VAN LIFE.”

The remainder of the video is Parker walking through all of the features of her truck camper setup, which include a semi-custom Capri 8-foot Retreat model camper top (MSRP starting at \$16,495) on a long-bed, four-door cab Toyota Tundra (MSRP starting at \$41,000), and a Specialized Stumpjumper mountain bike inside (MSRP starting at \$4,200). No skis, the gear for which Red Bull sponsors her, are found in the video, supporting the notion that this is a lifestyle video, not a sports video. In addition, she shows all sorts of little things similar to the glasses and kazoo that seem to provide an inside look into Parker’s life beyond skiing. We see her essential oils, books, camera, and ukulele, items she calls “essential.” As she puts it,

One of our goals was to keep it [camper design] really simple, more time to play music and read your book and take photos or whatever it is....this camper opened up the opportunity to travel more and have more adventures and opportunities that are suitable to my *lifestyle*....being outside and exercising is something that I need to maintain my *personal happiness*, and so this vehicle has made it much more accessible, and that's a beautiful thing.

The Formation of Empowered Sisterhood

The cornerstone of postfeminist sensibility's success in postmodern societies is the perception that feminism as a movement has succeeded and equality achieved (Gill, 2007; Harrison, 2019, Toffoletti, 2016). While the findings from this study were broadly consistent with that notion, there were still media references to lingering inequities that female action sports athletes faced. However, these instances are undermined by neoliberal discourses by positioning the athletes as overcoming adversity by themselves through being rational, calculating, and entrepreneurial agents. For instance, Brazilian skateboarder Leticia Bufoni was described several times in both her bio web page and YouTube video (March 11, 2019), as "breaking down barriers for women," apparently through mere participation in the sport at an elite level. In addition, the bio page headlines with an image of her hitting a trick, bright pink hair flying, and a quote saying "Chase your dream and never give up!" The exclamation point suggests powerful emotional, discursively pushing viewers to pursue this idea, which demonstrates Gill's (2007) argument that in postfeminism, "the individual must bear the full responsibility for their life biography, no matter how severe the constraints upon their actions, (p.163). This idea is supported by a success story in paragraph 5 of the biography, which details Bufoni's decision (read, ability) to move from São Paulo to Los Angeles to pursue skateboarding full time, while in high school, and officially achieve (financial) success once she earned the \$25,000 prize in the Maloof Money Cup.

Once achieving financial success, many of the seasoned athletes in Red Bull's roster began efforts at teaching other girls or women how to do the same sport as a means of empowering them. For example, pro surfer Carissa Moore was quoted in her bio page as having starred in a documentary, *Riss*, which was centered around issues of body image:

I want to leave a message that I love surfing and I get to do what I love, but I've also gone through a lot of challenges. I want other girls to know I understand what they're going through. I want to empower women to believe in themselves and do what they love. (par. 16)

Recently, Carissa founded a charity that offers girls opportunities to learn about surfing and much more.

We're starting with a small mentorship program at home. The goal is to give back and encourage them to be strong, beautiful, confident young women—and also to give back in turn. Eventually we hope to do it on a bigger scale, like an exchange program with girls coming from all over. I think that's how you can really make the world better, by sharing your stories. (par. 18)

Other examples of bringing up other girls through their success include Olympic mountain biker Jill Kitner coaching women's bike camps (bio page), and freeride skier Michelle Parker launching a women's avalanche clinic (bio page). Cross country mountain biker Rebecca Rusch launched a series of female rider initiatives that she calls the SRAM Gold Rusch Tour (bio page). The series includes an all-girls mountain bike camp, race and training clinics at Sea Otter Classic, and other events for women. According to Rusch on her Red Bull bio page, the aim of these events is simple: "It's about getting more women on bikes and also building a network and giving them a voice" (par. 2).

The most notable example of women bearing the full responsibility for achieving equality is the YouTube video that was posted November 25, 2019, titled "Meet the Women Pushing Freeride MTB Boundaries | Originate With Michelle Parker." The 10 minute, 23 second video is about Red Bull skier Michelle Parker connecting with mountain biking's "top female riders [at]

Virgin, Utah—the birthplace of Red Bull Rampage, the biggest show in free ride mountain biking...” (video caption).

The screen opens with an aerial view of Parker cutting through the dense temperate rainforests of the Pacific Northwest. The next 30 seconds show a mix of aerial views, close-ups and zoom outs of Parker grinding around berms, clearing jumps, and down the steep trails before soft music begins and she starts talking.

“My interest in mountain biking started as a way to rehab injuries to be honest. It’s a place of happiness. And once I get started on something I get really really fired up on it.” At :57, the camera pans one last time across the lush green trees of PNW before cutting over to the vast brown Utah desert landscape, home to the Red Bull Rampage.

“I think when I heard that formation was happening it became a no-brainer that I was going to be part of it,” Parker says as she pops up onto the screen, cast in black and white. “It became an opportunity for me to contribute to women progressing in their sport.”

“It’s just a style of something that will hopefully widen the opportunity for female freeriding in the future,” This time Red Bull mountain biker Tahnee Seagrave is talking. The screen cuts to a profile shot of her, also in black and white.

“Formation is really that forming the future and figuring out what it can look like,” now it is Rebecca Rusch, the Queen of Pain and Red Bull endurance rider, speaking.

The camera shifts to a white screen with what looks like black ash falling. The words “ORIGINATE | FORMATION | SEASON TWO | EPISODE THREE” appear in black bold letters as a voiceover says “The gathering of the best female mountain bikers in the industry. There were six of them that were invited. You know at the end of the day it was giving these girls the opportunity to ride on a resurrected Rampage site.” By the end of this quote at 1:40, an

aerial shot scans over an old Rampage site in Utah. The camera moves again to a side view shot of one of the female riders—Red Bull’s Tahnee Seagrave—sitting on the cliff’s edge looking out as a female voiceover says, “Tahnee Seagrave is one of the top female mountain bikers in the world she’s consistently on the podium if not winning the world cups.”

Another rider in a ponytail with earrings visible is pushing her bike uphill as another voiceover announces her: “Veronique Sandler has been one of these people that girls can look up to and feel like I want to do that I mean she’s definitely a pioneer.” Another quick cut shows a mountain biker standing and facing the camera, her eyes barely visible beneath the black full-face riding helmet. “I chose Micayla Gatto because I’ve known her for a long time,” the screen finally reveals the owner of the voice, Katie Holden. Holden is a world-renown mountain bike racer and freeride champion and the founder of Formation, a week-long women’s freeride mountain biking camp. Holden started it in the hopes of “elevating women’s freeriding and to clear the path for the next generation of female freeriders” (“About Holden”, n.d., para. 2).

“I know that she is an unreal rider. She’s good; she’s really good,” Holden continues. Then the camera moves to another rider, in all black with her full-face covering her head and face. Holden says, “Hannah Bergeman’s kinda like the dark horse; no one knows who she is. She’s confident, and she’s strong. I mean, I think Hannah’s the future.

Another transition to a slow-motion adjustment of a red full-face: “Vaea Verbeek, she’s an incredible rider. She’s got an insane style, and she’s really motivated.”

The camera jumps to another rider adjusting her bike goggles as Holden continues, “Vinny’s [Armstrong] got insane style, and all the girls really respect her, and she just charges on a big bike.”

The video moves back to a black-and-white profile of Holden looking into the camera and talking: “I feel like Casey [Brown] is this person that makes everything seem possible.” Another rider pops up on the screen, looking out over a massive, coniferous-tree horizon as a different voice begins talking:

“From a young age, there was no way to prove yourself as a chick you weren’t gonna get into any movies, there was no place for you unless you had proved yourself previously in racing.” The camera rests closeup on her face, also cast in black and white, as she stares point-blank back at it, as if challenging those on the other side of the lens. The next two seconds (2:52-:53) carry those words into the next scene, the beginning of a race lineup. The starting line has the words “Proving Grounds” and a wooden 10-foot jump off ramp. The following minute details Brown riding and jumping off the jump track during the competition. During her ride, she crashes on the landing of a “sizable” jump. The video first shows a POV shot of her handlebars slamming into the dirt and bucking her over them. The blue sky and red bike sail across the screen as Brown crashes shoulder and head first into the ground. POV switches into the side view of a spectator who captured Brown’s impact.

“Broke my collar bone and bruised my liver,” Brown voices over the video of her clutching her arm tightly to her chest as people sprint over to her. “It’s just part of the equation when you’re riding in an event like this. That was the first time I’d been seen equally, like, as just a rider,” the screen cuts back to Brown talking into the camera in black and white, “not like ‘okay you’re a chick on a bike;’ you’re just one of the riders. That was really insane for me to see that and be part of that.”

The screen transitions back to the Utah desert, where a supermoon floats in the upper left-hand corner of the sky as the setting sun deepens the ochre shadows along a plateau's ridgelines. Brown's voice comes back.

"Even though I'm injured here I'm so stoked to see everyone here, and I just want to do as much as I can to this event. There's been so many opportunities for the racing world, but for the freeride world for women, this [Formation] is the first thing that's really come up that's serious and is gonna have traction in the industry."

The video continues in a similar fashion with the invited riders talking about the opportunity to contribute to creating the Formation event means to them. The camera cuts back and forth between profiles of the women talking and scenes of them surveying the buttes for competition route lines as Gatto remarks, "we're all pros, we've been doing this for quite a while, but many of us have never picked up a shovel and started digging our own lines" (4:45).

"The whole time I've been here, I couldn't stop but think, like, the most comparable place is Alaska for me. It's the same mindset. You're dropping into this steep exposed face, and you really don't want to fall," Michelle Parker, the Red Bull's pro skier, is talking again as the video transitions to a snow-covered ridgeline, where a tiny figure assumed to be her stands facing down the mountain, presumably about to drop down the mountain side. Quickly, the camera moves back to a rider sitting on her bike on top of a desert ridgeline.

"Until you get into the terrain and become more intimate with it, it's really intimidating, and I think that's what these girls experienced."

"It's definitely nerve-wracking, but at the same time I'm feeling pretty confident in what we've built and that it'll work well," says Hannah Bergemann as the camera moves between her and the other riders shoveling trail lines. Shots of the riders digging into the mountain with

shovels, surveying the aretes for routes, and sitting on their bikes looking out are intermixed with words like “intimidated,” “super scared, but” “really intimidating, but” “nerve-wracking,” “pretty scary,” “don’t know what to do, but”, among others. Bergemann continues,

“It’s been sick dialing it in with the other girls, and everyone’s hyping each other up to send stuff so it’s pretty good vibes.”

Michelle Parker says, “I think that Formation is a pivotal turning point for these girls. The world is super interested and I think the world is super hungry like I am to see more women ripping; we want more women out there doing that. We want to see that. We want to experience that with them.” Her words suggest that the only thing holding women back up to this point in mountain biking has been the women themselves, not a lack of funding, media visibility, corporation sponsorship, and so on. The Red Bull Rampage is not the only event where women are excluded from competition. Storm Chase, Red Bull Hixpania Hard Enduro, Red Bull Airborne, and Erzbergrodeo Red Bull Hare Scramble are others.

It is not until 6:55, over two-thirds of the way through the video, that a rider finally descends down the steep newly built trail. From now until 9:15, it finally is just mountain bikers jumping off building-sized boulders, balancing along foot-wide ridgelines, descending a 50-60-degree trail and clearing 10-foot gaps. The camera moves quickly back and forth between wide-angle lens, slow-motion zoom view, and POV footage as fast-paced world music plays in the background. This two+ minutes of video produced nothing short of impressive.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the specific ways Red Bull aids in articulating the female action sports athlete as a postfeminist cultural product through various production practices. The analysis featured indicative examples from the dataset that highlight these points. Approaching

media as critical objects of postfeminism allows for the disentangling of contradictions between feminist and anti-feminist narratives in media messages, which may manifest differently across media outlets and types of sports (Thorpe et al., 2017; Toffoletti, 2016). For example, Red Bull Media House produces content about action sports in ways that uphold values such as individualism, creativity, pushing boundaries, risk-taking in the pursuit of personal reward, and in that way it provides a space where those aspects of empowerment are enacted and performed (Baker & Simon, 2002; Fletcher, 2008). Red Bull's female action sports athletes do get to participate in parts of the message of empowerment, for example, by pushing the boundaries of what (these specific, sponsored) women are capable of. While this may appear to be a message of empowerment, women are largely constrained to only those messages. By constraining its sponsored female action sports athletes to postfeminist elements, Red Bull Media House articulates gender in ways that do not give women space to participate in what is empowering about action sports. The chapter details the really important contradictions found in the data that are the hallmarks of postfeminist sensibility. Findings show that although Red Bull attempts to represent its athletes as elite, its content still reproduces postfeminist ideas. As a result, these athletes are discursively constructed to perform a specific embodiment of athletic empowerment that still adheres to heteronormative criteria, such as long hair and feminine mannerisms, underscores their "otherness" in a space where these athletes already are tokens.

Chapter V: Discussion

In a context where traditional sports have been criticized for ignoring or trivializing female athletes, it has been suggested that action sports harbor the opportunity to challenge hegemonic representational routines by offering discursive spaces to disrupt normative understandings of gender (Thorpe, 2008; Wheaton, 2015). Because Red Bull Media House is a highly visual and prominent representation of action sports cultures, it is critical to examine where Red Bull's media content aligns with and constrains that potential. In this chapter, I discuss the constitution of the female athletes in mediated action sports contexts as empowered agents, grounding this definition in postfeminist and related ideas, such as popular feminism. Ultimately, findings suggest that while action sports can provide spaces for counter-narratives to postfeminist sensibilities, at least in the context of Red Bull's social media content, action sports ultimately served as a repackaging of postfeminist discourses into different but still supporting narratives. I conclude by arguing that investigating Gill's (2007) dimensions in specific contexts is critical to understanding how in an age that appears to be postgender, difference is reproduced in a way that upholds media sexism and patriarchal interests.

Expressions of Dominance

Red Bull's digital and social media content about the female action sports athletes it sponsors often portrayed them as dominant sportswomen in ways that can be considered liberatory. For example, the biographical header photos of its athletes where they are actively participating in their sports are in stark contrast to the common visuals of women in passive poses, which have been criticized for framing female athletes as passive objects for the male gaze (Fink, 2015; Bruce, 2016). In addition, there were references throughout the dataset to these athletes as dominant forces in their sports, such as Katie Omerod being described as "one of the

brightest talents in world snowboarding.” These verbal accolades largely exclude gender markers, accompanied by images that showcase feats of athleticism such as big-air snowboarding tricks and powerful turns on waves. Such renderings counter the tendency in mainstream sports media to represent female athletes with a visible fragility and a sort of “conventional feminine vulnerability” that ensures they stay sexually desirable to men (McRobbie, 2008, p. 79). Red Bull produces content about action sports in ways that uphold these niche sports’ values such as individualism, creativity, pushing boundaries, risk-taking in the pursuit of personal reward, and in that way it provides a space where those aspects of empowerment are enacted and performed (Baker & Simon, 2002; Fletcher, 2008). The female action sports athletes do get to participate in parts of the message of empowerment, for example, by pushing the boundaries of what (these specific, sponsored) women are capable of.

While some of the findings from this study demonstrate the potential of major action sports media to represent female athletes in liberatory ways, what marks Red Bull’s social media and website content as objects of postfeminism as a sensibility is “the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them” (Gill, 2007, p.149). Gill and the sports feminist scholars informed by her work have sought to respond to the increasingly complex framing practices by media that can no longer be defined simply as “good” or “bad” (Toffoletti et al., 2019). In that same vein, I argue that we must look beyond even individual images, an approach that enabled me to determine that even though Red Bull did produce some powerfully athletic content, these depictions were destabilized overall with postfeminist sensibilities of individualism, consumerism, and heteronormative femininity.

Femininity is More Than Sexy

I sought to identify how Red Bull's social media and web page content included a range of modalities that expand on postfeminism's emphasis that femininity is inscribed solely from the body. One aim of this study was to explore any possible new or alternative narratives for female athletes in sports media, which is important to understand given that individual athletes may be constrained to appear in certain ways they think will earn them sponsors (Thorpe et al., 2017; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, 2018b).

That Red Bull sponsored 77 female action sports athletes over 2019 but only highlighted 23 of them gives an insight into the kinds of qualities women athletes must possess to gain visibility by the action sports media mogul. Many of the athletes who were featured in the social media posts have long blonde or honey brown, sun-kissed hair. They have lean, lightly tanned (white) bodies that are in bikinis while surfing and sports bras and form-fitting tights while working out. Such physical attributes have been remarked as signifiers of idealized youthful, white, western femininity (Gill, 2007; Thorpe et al., 2017; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, 2018b). Red Bull's social media and YouTube content over the course of 2019 functions to produce an image of a female action sports athlete worthy of sponsorship and visibility according to athletic prowess, for sure, but more importantly a prowess that is coupled with heteronormative standards of femininity, which represents a pattern that aligns with previous scholars' observation that sportswomen are granted visibility in digital spaces based primarily upon their ability to meet white, heteronormative standards of beauty (Banet-Weiser, 2012, 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b). Ultimately, these findings suggest that despite its potential to produce new and alternative representations about its female action sports athletes, Red Bull's Instagram posts and YouTube videos indicate little to no challenge to current discourses of dominant femininity

that benefit constructs of whiteness, heterosexuality, and youth, among other characteristics (Bruce, 2016).

I understand that a growing number of scholars critique postfeminist sensibility's common application for centralizing whiteness, youth, heterosexuality, and middle-class into the primary focus of research (Butler, 2013; Dobson, 2015; Dosekun, 2015; Ferreday, 2008; McCann, 2015; Pilcher, 2016). Yet, I think it is important to still consider this nexus as it provides a way for exploring how white supremacy is maintained in the institutions of western societies. For example, that this analysis found that white, young, heteronormative female athletes were the ones most often represented by Red Bull social media content demonstrates the usefulness of action sports media as a site for a postcolonial analysis of postfeminist media culture and sports (Gill, 2017).

Lifestyle as “Evidence” of Empowerment Through Choice

Lifestyle has been defined as

individuality, self-expression, and stylistic self-consciousness. One's body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays, etc., are to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer (Featherstone, 1987, 55).

Lifestyles both affirm a sense of identity or self and differentiate individuals from each other, solidifying a power hierarchy among social groups (Binkley, 2007). In modern, capitalist societies, the focus on lifestyles have been gaining prominence as everyday choices become seemingly unconstrained. This growth has been attributed to the decline of mass production and consumer uniformity and the increasing cultural desire for personalized consumption (Binkley, 2007). This combination has resulted in what Binkley refers to as “consumer lifestyles, which render personal identity a project of personal choosing” (p. 112). Lifestyles serve as the expressions of choice and agency that a self-aware individual adopts for her body, happiness, and

life as a point of creativity or aesthetic investment. However, underneath this appearance of choice are the “inscriptions of social power and reproductions of social structures through which hierarchical symbolic boundaries are maintained, and through which the stratification of social groups is reproduced and naturalized (Binkley, 2007, p. 114).

In this way, lifestyles can join several courses of critical analysis together through examining individuals’ subject positions while also considering the structural constraints that ultimately limit those positions. The concept of lifestyle provides a key entry point in critical discourse analysis research by providing a link between “macro level considerations of social structural and micro level considerations of creativity, choice, and identity” (Binkley 2007, p. 114). In particular to this research, the female action sports athletes are often positioned as neoliberal citizens who “choose” “adventure” and define their success in accordance with neoliberalism and capitalism. Success is measured in sponsorships and souped-up adventure rigs. Red Bull as a brand typifies an “adventurous” ideal that, while seemingly effortless and carefree, actually requires class privilege to achieve and maintain, while its social media and web page content contribute to the making of the ideal female action sports athlete as postfeminist through “adventurist” discourses. For example, the Instagram posts and YouTube videos with #vanlife and similar #life hashtags suggest a self-expression that is privatized, which gives the impression that these athletes are in control and can make personal choices in how they live. In showing us aspects of their personal lives, such as Parker’s vans, Langland’s texting habits, and Mastro’s favorite people to hit the slopes with, these posts display a carefree lifestyle, full of adventure, travel, and friends essential to these athletes’ personal happiness, as Parker put it. Such content suggests that structural, institutional, and cultural barriers to sportswomen have largely been eradicated. Life is now open and exciting, and these athletes are free to do and be as they like,

look as they want to, and go wherever they want. And yet, problematically, that these athletes gain media visibility only when it is carefree, fun, and easy highlights an emphasis on consumerism that is reconstituted according to action sports lifestyle discourses. The cultural notion that a carefree lifestyle is indicative of feminism's success is significant considering the growing expectations and pressure for girls and women to be agentic, personally accountable, and self-directed in a postfeminist media culture, which as Toffoletti et al., (2017) argue, "intersects with the demands under neoliberalism and late-capitalism for individuals to demonstrate entrepreneurial, flexible, adaptable forms of subjecthood" (p. 371).

For example, #vanlife as a concept may not mean much for mainstream sports media producers or audiences, yet it is an important signifier of class and status among core action and outdoor sports enthusiasts and has been increasingly appealing to the sensibilities of the white middle-class (Bowles, 2020). This highly produced appeal works by creating the adventurous yet aesthetic lifestyle, such as through videos of gorgeous mountain locations, beautiful beaches, and the ability to travel freely in expensive campers doing expensive sports. Such social media posts are relevant for critical analysis because while they appear against mainstream values, they simply reconstruct those values through adventure discourse that makes them knowable—and desirable—to a new generation of consumers, my generation. Because while Parker's experience looks natural, significant consumptive effort would be needed to experience an ostensibly adventurous lifestyle "that appeals to contemporary middle-class sensibilities of appropriate class and taste" (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b). The house with the white picket fence is being replaced as the symbol of ideal middle-class with the custom-built camper truck on the never-ending road trip. In this way, Red Bull does not simply represent its action sports athletes on its social media platforms but also acts as a sort of field guide to the newly emerging cultural symbols of

economic success in postmodern societies. (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b). What is more, that Parker gives viewers a tour of her adventure rig through detailing things such as her essential oils, throw blanket, ukulele, and goofy glasses highlights how an emphasis on consumption is seen as a form of female empowerment. Parker seemingly freely chooses to promote her highly personalized consumer lifestyle practices as exemplars of empowered and inspirational femininity, as part of maintaining her sponsorship with Red Bull.

Fun and Goofy as Self-Policing

Much of the research to date has argued that either sportswomen post self-sexualizing content on social media platforms or sports media validate such subjectification (Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce; Toffoletti, 2016; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, b; Toffoletti et al., 2019). Yet, the findings from my study suggest a need for feminists to look beyond sexiness and self-objectification as the only counterpart to athleticism in a postfeminist media culture. What alerted me to this need were the poses many of the athletes were striking throughout videos and images. Poses are an important connotative feature in images because they signify broader ideas, values, and identities (Barthes, 1973; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Poses such as Mastro's head cocked to the side when she's thinking of an answer to This or That and Coxsey splayed out all over the ground after a bouldering fall prompt viewers to see the posts as playful and humorous in addition to inspirational. Such posts indicate the postfeminist discourses that ostensibly frame these athletes as taking pleasure in displaying a hetero-cute appearance, and more importantly, they have the freedom to do so because patriarchy is no longer a concern. However, these athletes gain media visibility only when having fun, being goofy, or winning still highlights a focus on self-surveillance that underscores the increasing expectations and pressure for young women in a postfeminist media culture to be agentic and self-managing (Thorpe et al., 2017).

Thus, if one focuses solely on aspects of objectification then one misses the other expressions of femininity in which women may be subjected to self-policing. Additionally, even if it is not hot or sexy, the appearance of cute and playful girls nevertheless looks the same: small or petite, white, thin but toned, young.

What I call “powerful yet playful,” these discourses that display sports and training as fun and goofy align with some of Gill’s (2007) observations about patterns in postfeminist media culture that stress the importance of “working on the self” appearing “effortless.” In this way, it seems #fun posts and videos where they are being silly and goofy obscure the raw effort and work that go into being an elite athlete. That kind of effort and practice is not “feminine” in the least. It is ugly. It can be brutal. You get bruises and end your session with ice bags around your knees. Your body breaks. There are failures, and there are also successes achieved through brute strength. But what Red Bull often shows is elite athletes who are just kind of “goofing around.” Because discourse not only produces knowledge but also renders other ways of knowing as unintelligible, ignoring their experiences with such fundamental elements of sports as injuries, disappointment, exhaustion, and even failure produces a vision of an effortless type of athleticism that, is also fundamentally unique to women in action sports. This uniqueness is in some ways situated as empowered. As indicated through many of the bio pages, for instance, the women of Red Bull are dominant, fierce and committed. Yet, when opportunities to witness those characteristics are undermined by a kind of “silliness”—as reflected in the Coxsey climbing video, for example—the expressions of feminist notions of empowerment become redirected in ways that do not challenge the existing hierarchy organized around patriarchy and the gender binary that undergirds it. In contrast, we are left to understand the female action sports athlete as both fierce and determined, but also “just goofing around.” Ultimately, such discourses

produce a subject position that is non-threatening in a context (sports and athleticism) in which ideas of male dominance govern everything from organizational practices to everyday social interactions.

Self-monitoring has been a requirement to perform successful femininity for a long time (Gill, 2007). Women's magazines, shows, and other media have "offered" instructions on which clothes, grooming, behaviors, and mannerisms will enable women to emulate society's "upper class white ideal" (p. 155). However, what makes this call for self-surveillance uniquely postfeminist is the intensification of self-surveillance (along with the disavowal of doing so) as well as its spread into new areas of life, such as at the bouldering gym or on the ski slopes. If, as Gill (2007) argues, the work on the self must be understood as "fun" and "effortless," then I argue that the fun and effortless discourses function to hide the related aspects of compulsory femininity that are the impetus for self-surveillance. On one hand, women are having fun on their own terms. Yet that discourse of fun belies the work that goes into achieving elite status, so that while these athletes may not be framed as passive neither are they depicted as hard-working athletes. The exception is cross-country mountain biker Kate Courtney, who was regularly featured at the gym working out. However, the inclusion of hashtags such as #fitspo discursively locates such posts about Courtney within the "transformation imperative," a type of self-policing discourse "understood as part of a postfeminist sensibility because it represents an agentic self that produces itself into its most desired self" (Riley & Evans, 2018, p. 208). Moreover, such training Instagram posts were composed as fitness endeavors rather than athletic efforts discursively align with the wider cultural emphasis on self-care as an act of empowerment (Nash, 2018).

Focus on Empowered Sisters Detracts from Oppressive Structures

These findings show how feminism can still be considered an ongoing project without curtailing the sensibilities of postfeminism that undermine it. They provide a context for understanding how a focus on *inclusion* makes it particularly commodifiable, a notion in postfeminism's interrelated concept popular feminism. As evidenced in this data, Red Bull is among the many corporations that have capitalized on “decades of neoliberal commodity activism” by taking up women's issues as a key marketing strategy (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenburg, 2020, p. 14; see also Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). These findings illuminate that landscape through discursively urging consumers

to pay closer attention to girls and women and the obstacles they face in the world (and not surprisingly, these companies also imply that overcoming these obstacles depends on individual girls and women's energies and ambitions, rather than examining the ways capitalism depends on gendered divisions of labor) (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenburg, 2020, p. 14).

The idea that athletes such as Bufoni are “pushing the boundaries of sports” through merely existing and competing serves as an ideological-discursive formation maintaining the present postfeminist media culture wherein athletes must be “autonomous agent(s) who [are] responsible for making the self and who [are] prepared to be entrepreneurial and adaptable in achieving [their] goal” (Toffoletti, 2016, p. 205; see also Fairclough, 2013). This goal is achieved through monetary compensation and status recognition, articulating neoliberal capitalism, where successful female athletes encourage other girls and women to overcome personal adversities such as imposter syndrome. Thus, in describing any challenges its female action sports athletes face in their biographical web pages, Instagram posts, or YouTube videos, Red Bull frames their success as the outcomes of a steadfast and individual determination to overcome.

As part of popular feminism, gender equality is framed as “smarter economics” by girl empowerment organizations and events teaching girls skills to address marginalization in different spaces, such as Formation (Banet-Weiser, Rottenburg, & Gill, 2017). The Formation YouTube video avoids approaching feminism as a political movement unified against structural inequalities and instead evokes popular feminist ideas that determination, individual resilience, and confidence can beat disenfranchisement. On one hand, these accomplishments are worth celebrating and Red Bull does just that by centering them on their bio pages. But lauding the efforts of women to “break barriers” without attention given to existing structures of injustice shifts the responsibility of change to women’s shoulders. Thus, when Gatto explains that until now, she has yet to “pick up a shovel” and dig her own lines—she is speaking both literally and metaphorically. She may be describing how to actively build a trail from the dirt and rocks in the Utah desert, but she is also articulating a neoliberal narrative of responsibility for women to jump in and dig out their own path to success. No matter the structural and discursive injustices these women might face in an action sport dominated by men, then they will be rewarded with gender equality as long as they act entrepreneurial.

The title of the Formation video demonstrates how discursal practice contributes to the reproduction of underlying and ongoing causes of sexism even as it attempts to transform the existing order of discourse—in this instance Red Bull’s female riders attempting to carve out space in the top arena for mountain biking by creating their own different and separate version of the Red Bull Rampage (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). By producing a video of women empowering other women to create their own—and distinctly separate—version of the Red Bull Rampage, which is dubbed “the biggest show in free ride mountain biking,” Red Bull ultimately contributes to “the promulgation of neoliberal rhetoric of women’s empowerment

while denying the underlying and ongoing causes of sexism” (caption from YouTube video; Toffoletti, 2016, p. 203; see also Gill, 2007, McRobbie, 2004).

In addition, this lack of women’s invitation to several of Red Bull’s signature action sports events is a noteworthy example of how sexual difference operates in Red Bull Media House’s reproduction of postfeminist action sports media culture. The absence of women in events that are “the standard” coupled with the YouTube video above where women are included so long as the focus rests on women’s empowerment marks sexual difference as natural and inevitable. This idea is reinforced in the end of the “Women Pushing Freeride MTB Boundaries” by longtime rider and Red Bull athlete, Rebecca Rusch:

The first time I went to a Red Bull Rampage to watch it was a few years ago, and my very first question was why aren’t women competing here. Now another year later, we are here with kind of the evolution of that first question that I asked. There may never be women competing at the Rampage in the way that it looks now, but there may be something *more incredible than that*. (9:45-10:06, emphasis added)

To be clear, Red Bull Rampage is a competition; Formation is a camp (Johnsson, 2020; See, 2021). The combination of women’s empowerment as their responsibility as well as something totally and easily achievable actually deflects attention away from the fact that Red Bull is in charge of this structural inequity by limiting its invites to its sponsored male athletes. Examining Red Bull Media House’s posts as the critical objects of postfeminist inquiry creates space for describing and theorizing events such as the Red Bull Rampage, the context within which they take place, and how those events become part of the context.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the specific ways in which Red Bull aids in the articulation of the female action sports athlete as a postfeminist cultural product through various production practices. The analysis featured indicative examples from the dataset that highlight these points.

Approaching action sports media as critical objects of postfeminism allows for the disentangling of contradictions between feminist and anti-feminist narratives in media messages, which may manifest differently across media outlets and types of sports (Thorpe et al., 2017; Toffoletti, 2016). While this may appear to be a message of empowerment, women are largely constrained to only those messages. By constraining its sponsored female action sports athletes within postfeminist elements, Red Bull Media House articulates gender in ways that don't give women space to actually participate in what's empowering about action sports.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

This chapter explores the implications for how postfeminism as a sensibility operates in action sports contexts. In the summary of my findings, I first will summarize major media representations that contributed to the neoliberal discourses that define female action sports athletes as postfeminist subjects who ostensibly represent empowerment that is at the same time constrained to heteronormative feminine standards. Then, I will recap how Red Bull's framing process of its female action sports athletes contributes to the increasingly hegemonic hold postfeminism as a sensibility has on women in and beyond sports (Gill, 2016). The chapter then moves onto a discussion of the findings' implications for conceptualizations of gender, action sports, and discourse. In doing so, I advocate for the expansion of what constitutes femininity and empowerment in future research that theorizes sportswomen's low status in digital and social media representations. In addition, I will detail implications for training media producers, by specifically examining how Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenburg's (2017) tenets of assemblies can be deployed in the context of sports and how the narratives of feminism can be reinvested with critical meaning.

Revisiting the Research Question

This study explored the ways Red Bull contributes to the construction of female action sports athletes as products of a postfeminist media culture. To do this, I examined how Red Bull represented the female action sports athletes it sponsored in its biographical web pages, Instagram posts, and YouTube videos; how these representations were gendered, the ways in which this gendering was manifest discursively, and how discourses of empowerment (re)circulated postfeminist ideologies. In studying social media content of athletes produced by Red Bull, my aim was to explore

how the ambiguities that manifest in attempts to reconcile sexuality and sporting prowess in the body of the ‘empowered’ female athlete might operate not only as representative of a new feminine sporting subjectivity but as a new form of sports media sexism that is increasingly difficult to identify, name and rebut (Toffoletti, 2016, p. 201).

This study sought to answer the following research question:

RQ1: What postfeminist discourses are expressed about the action sports athletes in Red Bull Media House’s social media content?

Expanding the Definition of the Postfeminist Subject

To respond to the question of how postfeminism as a sensibility was mobilized in Red Bull’s social media platforms and website, I collected Instagram posts, YouTube videos, and biographical web pages to trace the construction of Red Bull’s female action sports athletes as dominant and to show how this dominance was gendered through several types of postfeminist sensibilities. I moved through the data with an eye toward the relationship between the meanings of dominance and the sensibilities of postfeminism. The coding process revealed that Red Bull discursively defined empowerment in a mix of nongendered and gendered terms for the female action sports athletes. That is, while there seemed to be an attempt at naming empowered in a “neutral way” ostensibly, it nevertheless often held value-laden connotations related to the athletes’ appearances and lifestyles. A closer examination of each theme using the devices of multimodal discourse analysis (Han, 2015; Norris, 2019), I determined that, for the most part, the themes that were developed revealed sensibilities of postfeminism that perpetuated sportswomen’s marginal status. As I underwent analysis and reflection on the commercial motivations for these meanings, I determined Red Bull attempted to move past historical media framings of sportswomen by recasting them as superior athletes. However, my multimodal discourse analysis revealed that this very process of branding these athletes as empowered

actually contributed postfeminist sentiments that frame feminism as an apolitical lifestyle that can be achieved through individual acts such as consumption and self-monitoring.

I also found that Red Bull seemed keen to engage with the inequities remaining for girls in sports, particularly how those inequalities affected the athletes the company sponsors. Several web pages, Instagram posts, and one YouTube video demonstrated Red Bull's awareness of barriers that its female action sports athletes faced as a product of their gender, going so far as sponsor the all-women's downhill mountain bike event Formation. However, this was a highly produced video of an event sponsored by Red Bull that was about female mountain bikers empowering other female mountain bikers to work together, build a space to push themselves and encourage each other in performance, and in engage in zero critical dialogue about why such a space separate from men needed to be carved out for them. In the process of engaging with feminism, Red Bull produced a topography of "neoliberal commodity activism" that, when read through multimodal discourse analysis, ultimately serves to "deflect attention away from the wider structural and cultural conditions that sustain gender inequalities" (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 370; see also Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenburg, 2020). Athletes were either individually responsible for rising above the all-male terrain of sports, such as Leticia Bufoni in skateboarding or Carissa Moore in surfing. Once at the top, the female athletes were positioned *as personally responsible* for elevating other girls and women. Leticia Bufoni was congratulated for "breaking down barriers for women." Downhill mountain biker Jill Kitner was praised for her role in coaching at all-girls riding camps while Rebecca Rusch was saluted in her bio page for founding all-women's bike races.

Ultimately, the findings of the previous chapter demonstrated how major media producers such as Red Bull can be powerful institutions of cultural reproduction. By including

high-action images and videos and celebratory text of its female action sports athletes, Red Bull as a highly visible media producer does contribute to the counter-hegemonic potential of action sports cultures to reimagine gender identities and relations. What is more, Red Bull refrained from posting any sexualized images of its athletes, which is particularly notable in light of postfeminist sensibility's rebranding of sexualization as an act of empowerment that sportswomen freely choose. However, my findings also illustrated that Red Bull also often incorporated postfeminist sensibilities into its posts despite their framings of its sponsored athletes as dominant forces in their respective sports. The multimodal realizations of Red Bull's posts enable viewers to make sense of the action sports world and sportswomen's place within it via fun, lifestyle, and consumption, which are demonstrated through various social practices (travel, fitness, attractiveness). A company that sponsors female athletes and posts about them in its social media platforms and YouTube channels, Red Bull signifies a system of values and attitudes that are realized and performed by merging lifestyle messages with "empowering" images, making it useful for understanding how postfeminism as a sensibility is applied in action sports contexts.

Limitations of Research and Future Directions

This study was limited to what media producers did and misses how that representation is interpreted and internalized by audience members. Understanding how various conditions contribute to a postfeminist media culture should include the reciprocal nature of producer-consumer and how that, in turn, frames female action sports athletes as complicit or active in their own marginalization in postmodern societies. An analysis of the comments, which was part of my original research goal, could address some of the audience analysis questions needed to

gain a fuller understanding of how various conditions operate in tandem to produce a postfeminist media culture.

Similar to other analyses of postfeminist media culture, this one was limited to examining social media. Despite its ability to explore text as social practice, this study did not capture the meaning-making process of individuals navigating a postfeminist media culture. Further, no amount of data for a critical discourse analysis, which focuses only on the text (visual and verbal) can elucidate the motivations the media producers with Red Bull had when it created the videos. Conducting interviews, focus groups, and field studies are just a few examples of ways to do that.

Contributions

Over recent years, feminist research has been moving away from theorizing women's marginalization in sports as a product of hegemonic masculinity to a complex consequence of "cultural conditions in which changing formations of female subjectivity reorient the responsibility for sportswomen's sexualization away from media institutions toward female athletes themselves" (Toffoletti, 2016, p. 201; see also Thorpe et al., 2017; Toffoletti et al., 2019). However, such research has limited itself in two distinct ways, which I attempted to address in this study. First is the focus on sportswomen's self-representation via their personal social media accounts as a means of exploring the wider cultural and structural conditions that sustain gender inequalities. Second is the rather limited range of heteronormative expressions of femininity that have been identified as constituting of postfeminist sensibility. The following paragraphs detail each of these contributions.

Other Forms of Feminine Expression

In order to understand how postfeminist sensibilities reorient the responsibility from major media institutions and toward the athletes, it helps to understand the ways in which major media producers have historically framed female athletes. Bruce (2016) and Fink (2015) outline the specific ways major media producers historically trivialized female athletes, including which ones are still prevalent today, which are subsiding, and which are newly emerging. What the findings from this study suggest is that, rather than simply disappearing, some of the themes, such as infantilization, are merely being shifted over to the athletes themselves. When female athletes refer to each other as girls in YouTube videos created by Red Bull and share other aspects of their “private” lives unrelated to their sports in Instagram video posts produced by Red Bull are just two examples.

Media Producers

Feminist sports scholars have been increasingly interested in the

distinct mechanisms by which new forms of sexism operate in a postfeminist media culture rest on crafting the female subject as an autonomous agent who is responsible for making the self and who is prepared to be entrepreneurial and adaptable in achieving her goal. (Toffoletti, 2016, p. 205)

In seeing female athletes as personally responsible for their success or failings to get the “right” attention from media (one that leads to sponsorship deals, for example), sexist representations of these athletes by the media are viewed as the results of how women choose to present themselves and not the products of media’s values, operations, and structures. But this line of growing research has focused on the self-representation of female athletes, which maintains a gap that my study sought to address. I agree with Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenburg (2020) that feminist scholars must conceptualize the “popular” of popular feminism as a space where meaning is contested, and this is where I see the most opportunity for constructive discussions for media institutions. If media institutions, similarly to other institutions, serve as mechanisms by which

meaning becomes constituted in a given society, then it serves feminist scholars to consider in what ways they specifically carry out postfeminist attitudes in their messaging. For example, if “female athletes are expected to be ‘empowered’ and resourceful enough to promote themselves and their sport through whatever means possible” (Toffoletti, 2016, pp. 205-206), my findings demonstrated one exact way this expectation is carried out. Red Bull included examples of what successful entrepreneurship as a female athlete looks like through its bio pages of athletes such as skateboarder Leticia Bufoni and surfer Carissa Moore, among others. One type of success in this postfeminist media culture is a major corporate sponsorship, such as that of Red Bull itself. Once these athletes have achieved it for themselves, they then instruct other girls and women—through camps, events, sponsorships—how to obtain the same level of empowerment in a late-capitalist society.

The idea of “empowerment” to bring a sense of legitimacy for women athletes has become a commonsense tenet across sports and media, particularly social media. One finding from this study showed how empowerment was imbued with neoliberal assumptions shaped by capitalism. In other words, Red Bull’s process of representing its female action sports athletes was invested with neoliberal logics and disinvested of critical feminism that would take structural and cultural conditions of media sexism (historical and present) into consideration. Based my data analysis on Red Bull’s social media platforms and website, the results suggest the need for stories about empowerment to be told through a lens of critical political meaning in sports. This need for political understanding is confirmed in the instances where Red Bull made mention of remaining inequalities in its social media posts and biographical pages. Although feminism has been gaining public visibility in recent years and is facilitating discussion on topics such as representation and inclusion, the use of sportswomen’s experiences as a means for action

needs to be specified at length in journalism education. Otherwise, media institutions risk continuing to highlight the versions of feminism—the predominantly heteronormative, white, and neoliberal corporate-friendly versions—that maintain feminism as a lifestyle of the privileged (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenburg, 2020). This is where race, class, sexuality, age, and disability—in combination with capitalism—must be part of the larger conversation in sports. During the current era of popular, neoliberal, and postfeminism, sports media must take on a more critical, intersectional approach to frame feminist struggles as interconnected with other liberation struggles as well as to a broader agenda that questions capitalism, which largely remain unheard. All that being said, I understand the inherent difficulty such a calling poses for institutions that currently benefit from the influencing relationship between capitalism and neoliberalism on feminism. For these reasons, it is important to understand that no total rejection of sexist discourse may exist, at least in the way that sports feminists think or want to achieve. I also understand and am avoidant of suggesting a specific path to liberation, which could only generate different, if new, criteria with similar borders against other ways of knowing, particularly from my position as white, cisgender, (visibly) able-bodied, and heterosexual. In accordance with McWhorter (1999, p. 181), I argue that “to know where we are going would be, at the outset, to have already failed.”

What is more, action sports and the gender dynamics within them do not operate in a vacuum, and media producers would do well to contextualize experiences of multifarious women with broader historical and cultural contexts. For example, during the year of collected data (2019), thousands of women marched in Argentina to protest anti-abortion laws, and South Korean feminists built the #NoMarriage movement against the increased pressures to marry and have children (Gordon, 2019). The Women’s March reached approximately 735,000 in the

United States in its third year (Chenoweth & Pressman, 2019). These are just a few events that underscore the need to think in terms of what Mason-Deece (2018) calls “assemblies,” where “feminists think of connections and intersections between different realms of life, rather than reducing gender issues to a single realm” (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenburg, 2020, pp. 30-31). While I agree with Mason-Deece and others regarding a reconceptualization of feminism in research, I also push for media producers, particularly ones such as Red Bull with international athletes and audiences, to reframe their position from one that limits its efforts on media visibility into one that can potentially challenge the primary elements of gender inequity and sexism. This study’s findings suggest that while discourses serve as practices of social (re)production, they are neither fixed nor complete, and they can be transformed in sports and via social practices in sports. Identifying the potential of critical feminism and political feminist movements become important elements of this discursive process, and this has significant consequences for women who have historically faced media sexism in contexts such as sports.

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Appendix 1

Table 1. Female Action Sports Athletes Sponsored by Red Bull

Athlete	Sport	Country	Age	Career Start	Style
Anna Gasser	Snowboarding	Austria	28	2013	Slopestyle and big air
Arianna Tricomi	Skiing	Italy	27	2014	Big mountain
Carissa Moore	Surfing	USA	27	2004	Competition
Caroline Marks	Surfing	USA	18	2011	Competition
Hailey Langland	Snowboarding	USA	19	2016	Slopestyle and big air
Jill Kintner	Mountain Biking	USA	38	1995	Downhill
Justine Dupont	Surfing	France	28	-	Big wave
Kate Courtney	Mountain Biking	USA	24	2013	Cross country
Katie Omerod	Snowboarding	England	22	-	Big air
Leticia Bufoni	Skateboarding	Brazil	27	2007	Street
Lindsey Vonn	Skiing	USA	35	2002	Downhill and giant slalom
Maddie Mastro	Skiing	USA	20	2016	Halfpipe
Maja Kuczyńska	Skydiving	Poland	20	2012	Skydiving
Meagan Ethell	Wakeboarding	USA	23	2012	Boat and cable
Michelle Parker	Snowboarding	USA	32	2006	Big mountain
Nouria Newman	Kayaking	France	28	2010	whitewater
Pauline Ferrand-Prevot	Mountain Biking	France	27	2012	Cross country
Rachel Atherton	Mountain Biking	England	32	2007	Downhill
Rebecca Rusch	Mountain Biking	USA	51	1986	Cross country
Sasha Diguilian	Climbing	USA	28	2010	Lead climb and ice
Shauna Coxsey	Bouldering	England	27	2012	Gym
Tahnée Seagrave	Mountain biking	England	24	2013	Downhill
Yndiara Asp	Skateboarding	Brazil	22	2018	Skateboard street

Vita

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