

Breaking the mold or reinforcing norms? The digital construction of female athletes' bodies on TikTok

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Abstract

This article examines the digital construction of female athletes' bodies on TikTok, analyzing whether the platform serves as a site of disruption or whether it reinforces long-standing societal expectations. The analysis identifies three dominant narratives that shape the digital reception of female athletes: sexualization, empowerment, and defeminization. The first, sexualization, reveals the persistent reduction of female athletes' accomplishments to their physical appearance, perpetuating their objectification rather than recognizing their athletic skill. This phenomenon is also racialized and cisgendered, manifesting in distinct ways depending on athletes' intersections with racial and gender identities. The second narrative, empowerment, highlights the ways in which female athletes are celebrated for their strength, skill, and resilience. However, this empowerment is conditional, dependent on athletes' alignment with hegemonic standards of femininity, desirability, and marketability. The third narrative, defeminization, disproportionately affects transgender athletes, positioning them as outsiders within women's sports. They are subjected to intense scrutiny, misgendering, and biologically essentialist arguments that seek to invalidate their identity and exclude them from competition. This study concludes that TikTok functions as a paradoxical space, offering the potential for empowerment and visibility while simultaneously reinforcing restrictive, cisnormative, and racialized gender hierarchies.

Keywords

TikTok, female athletes, marketability, social media, transgender

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Introduction

Women's sport is reshaping the landscape of the global sports industry, rewriting the playbook for growth, visibility, and commercial success (Jackson and Andrews, 2025). Deloitte (2025) projects that global revenues from elite women's sports will reach at least US\$2.35 billion in 2025, a significant rise from the updated 2024 estimate of US \$1.88 billion. Despite increasing recognition, female athletes continue to operate within a sporting culture shaped by longstanding gendered assumptions and power structures (McClearn, 2023). Consequently, they must navigate a complex and often contradictory environment in which their success and resilience are praised, yet their gender expression, personal identity, and biological characteristics are examined, regulated, and, at times, challenged (Knott-Fayle et al., 2023). This tension forces them to balance societal expectations with their own authenticity, highlighting the persistent struggles women face in achieving true equality in sports. This paradox is further amplified in the digital age, where social media plays a central role in shaping public discourse and intensifying the regulation and representation of female athletes (Litchfield et al., 2018). Unlike traditional media platforms, which are typically governed by formal regulations and editorial oversight designed to limit discriminatory content, social media offers a largely unregulated and anonymous space for interaction (Kavanagh et al., 2019). TikTok, in particular, has emerged as a central platform within this digital environment, offering a space where conversations about gender, representation, and embodiment are both amplified and contested (Kennedy, 2020). Its algorithm-driven visibility not only accelerates the spread of content but also plays an active role in shaping real-time cultural trends, making it a powerful space where individual expression and algorithmic influence converge (Klug et al., 2021).

Against this backdrop, the present study interrogates whether TikTok functions as a platform that empowers female athletes by affording them greater visibility and expressive agency or whether it perpetuates gendered modes of surveillance. Based on a close reading of 900 comments from 90 videos featuring nine female athletes, we identify three dominant narratives that shape the platform's digital landscape: sexualization, empowerment, and defeminization. The first, sexualization, underscores the persistent objectification of female athletes, reflecting entrenched societal norms that prioritize aesthetic appeal over athletic capability. Conversely, empowerment narratives challenge restrictive gender norms by celebrating female strength, skill, and resilience in sports. However, these narratives often remain contingent on hegemonic femininity, where athleticism is deemed acceptable only when aligned with conventional beauty standards and heteronormative ideals (Krane, 2001). This selective empowerment feeds into the third narrative, defeminization, which disproportionately targets transgender athletes, framing them as "invaders" in women's sports, and reinforcing exclusionary, transphobic rhetoric (Sharrow, 2021: 62). Our major findings collectively highlight a paradoxical dynamic in the regulation and surveillance of gendered bodies on TikTok, offering a critical contribution to gender studies and sports policy discourse. On the one hand, female athletes who align with hegemonic ideals of femininity, particularly those conforming to white hegemonic standards, are celebrated and idealized. On the other hand, transgender athletes experience persistent defeminization, as their participation in sports is frequently

framed as unnatural, illegitimate, or even fraudulent. Addressing these dynamics is crucial, as online discourses do not remain confined to digital spaces; they actively influence offline perceptions, shape institutional policies, and contribute to the broader cultural construction of gender norms in sports and beyond (DiGrazia et al., 2013).

Literature review

Gender norms and sporting bodies

Historically, athleticism has been closely tied to dominant ideals of masculinity, marginalizing female participation in sports (English, 2017). Women who engaged in competitive sports often faced societal resistance, as their participation was perceived as a challenge to traditional gender norms that equated physical strength, endurance, and aggression with masculinity. These gendered restrictions were not merely cultural but also embedded within the governance structures of sports, where policies regulating women's participation were framed as protective rather than exclusionary. The notion of "female frailty" has long been used to justify exclusionary policies, while male competition remains largely unrestricted, reinforcing a gendered hierarchy in the sporting world (Posbergh and Jette, 2025: 7). These narratives not only shaped early justifications for excluding women from sports but also continue to influence contemporary debates around inclusion and fairness. One of the most striking manifestations of these exclusionary frameworks is the evolving discourse surrounding transgender athletes. Initially, such narratives were used to prevent cisgender women from participating in sports, but they have since been repurposed to justify restrictions on transgender athletes' participation. In particular, biocentric protectionist narratives frame sports as an inherently contested and exclusionary space, selectively determining which bodies are deemed legitimate participants (Sharrow, 2021). This regulation reinforces gendered restrictions and reflects the deeply entrenched binaries of gender, race, and sexuality that shape the very structure of sports. Although women's achievements in sports are frequently celebrated nowadays, their bodies remain subjects of debate and contestation (Krane, 2001).

Bodies are gendered, racialized, and embedded within hierarchical structures; they are more than merely biological entities but sites where socio-political meanings are inscribed and contested (Foucault, 1977). Representations of bodies thus reflect broader social structures and power relations (Hall, 1985). Within this framework, Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity becomes essential to our examination of how gendered identities are produced, enacted, and sustained. Rather than viewing gender as innate or stable, Butler posits that gender is constituted through repeated performances in the form of acts, gestures, and expressions that conform to socially sanctioned norms. Departures from these normative gender performances may provoke social sanctions, exclusion, and regulatory control, highlighting the disciplinary mechanisms that sustain gender hierarchies (Leonard, 2014). Continuing this line of thought, gender performance establishes rigid conceptualizations of male and female identities, positioning gender as a physical performance enacted in opposition. Masculinity is often associated with strength, aggression, and physical prowess, while femininity is linked to delicacy, aesthetic appeal, and emotional expressiveness (Coffey, 2016). As a

result, athletes' bodies become sites onto which racialized, heteronormative, and gendered stereotypes are projected and reinforced, subjecting them to complex and often oppressive power dynamics.

Contested femininities and regulated bodies

Female athletes, especially those with muscular physiques, are caught in a gendered paradox: their athletic achievements often depend on traits culturally associated with masculinity, yet they remain subject to societal pressures to embody conventional standards of femininity (Bordo, 1993). This tension is particularly evident among female track-and-field athletes, who have voiced concerns that their muscularity is often perceived as overly masculine, reflecting broader cultural anxieties around body-shaming and social exclusion (Mosewich et al., 2009). Recent trends, however, point to a growing acceptance of muscular female bodies, especially within fitness subcultures that celebrate strength and empowerment (George, 2005). These evolving attitudes suggest that gender performance in sports participation is subject to negotiation and debate. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature continues to overgeneralize the experiences of female athletes, often treating them as a homogeneous group. This tendency frequently positions whiteness as central to the construction of hegemonic femininity, thereby marginalizing the experiences of athletes who do not conform to white, cisgender, and heteronormative ideals (Krane, 2001). To capture these structural dynamics, McClearen (2023: 1362) introduces the concept of the Cis-White Supremacist Patriarchy (CWSP), which frames sports as a protected domain for "vulnerable white cisgender women" while simultaneously constructing Black and transgender female athletes as aggressive and threatening.

Existing literature suggests that exclusionary sports policies reinforce both cisgenderism and white supremacy in athletic spaces by positioning transgender women as outside the category of "real women" (Posbergh and Jette, 2025: 19). This structural exclusion is mirrored in mainstream feminist advertising and media, where empowerment narratives in sport overwhelmingly center cisgender girls, effectively rendering transgender athletes invisible. Popular brands such as Nike often frame sport as a transformative space that challenges gender inequalities, yet the empowerment they market is largely reserved for cisgender, white girls (Posbergh et al., 2023). This commodified form of empowerment aligns with dominant socio-political discourses and synchronizes with legislative rhetoric, reinforcing the dual narratives that underpin the CWSP paradigm. Within this framework, transgender bodies are constructed as inherently masculine and, consequently, as physical threats to cisgender women's sporting success (McClearen, 2023). Drawing on Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, McClearen's (2023) analysis argues that deviations from normative expectations of gender performance, particularly in the highly regulated context of sport, are subject to intense scrutiny. Athletic gender performance, therefore, becomes another arena where the "stylization of the body" is policed through binary logics (Butler, 1990: 45). For transgender women, divergence from the normative regulatory ideals of female gender performance is framed as a failure of femininity. This exclusion reflects broader structures of power that determine

who counts as a woman and who is permitted to represent womanhood in public and commercial domains.

Social media and athletic bodies

Social media plays a pivotal role in shaping, reinforcing, and contesting these gendered discourses in the realm of sports (Filo et al., 2015). Platforms like Facebook and YouTube offer female athletes opportunities to construct and assert their identities. Content that aligns with conventional beauty standards and gender norms is more likely to gain positive engagement, while deviations from these norms can provoke backlash, trolling, and exclusion (Litchfield et al., 2018). This dynamic reflects broader societal anxieties surrounding female athleticism and the ways in which women's bodies in sports are scrutinized and disciplined. Moreover, social media does not operate in isolation but is entangled with the commercial structures that govern sports (Jackson and Andrews, 2025). The increasing reliance on digital visibility for sponsorship and branding reinforces gendered expectations, as corporate partnerships favor athletes who embody marketable forms of femininity. This trend can be linked to the growing influence of social media, which prioritizes content visibility and frames the body as a spectacle for public consumption (Banet-Weiser, 2015). Consequently, athletes who fail to conform to these ideals may face barriers to financial support and career progression, exacerbating existing inequities in the sports industry. Within these representations, white cisgender athletes are often privileged by being portrayed as both physically strong and conventionally attractive, embodying a dual ideal that upholds dominant cultural norms. In contrast, athletes who embody racial diversity or gender non-conformity are denied access to this dual representation, facing exclusion from sponsorship opportunities and empowering media portrayals. This marginalization extends beyond traditional sports marketing to digital platforms, where the visibility and celebration of non-white or transgender athletes remain limited (Fischer and McClearen, 2020).

Our research builds on prior literature by examining how TikTok functions as a digital space where gender performance is continuously negotiated. Our framework draws upon a well-established body of literature that critically examines white hegemonic power, intersectionality, and the representation of athletes within social media contexts (Parsons et al., 2025). Although previous research has examined these themes in isolation, our study is among the first to bring them together within the specific context of TikTok's algorithmic dynamics. In so doing, we explore how TikTok's unique content recommendation systems interact with issues of race, gender, and athletic representation, revealing the complex ways in which algorithms can challenge or reinforce existing social biases.

Research method

Data source

A key feature of TikTok is its algorithm-driven content curation system (Klug et al., 2021). Unlike traditional social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube,

which prioritize user-to-user interactions through direct connections and follower-based feeds, TikTok's recommendation algorithm plays a dominant role in shaping user engagement, content curation, and, in turn, wider discourse. The platform's capacity to rapidly amplify content makes it a powerful engine for shaping cultural conversations and social dynamics in real time (Schellewald, 2023). Supporting this competitive edge is TikTok's distinctive interface design, which centers on short-form video content and a suite of creative in-app tools, such as video editing features, filters, and an expansive music library. These affordances, which include technological features and design possibilities, not only encourage user-generated creativity but also enhance the platform's appeal to marketers, advertisers, and influencers, offering lucrative opportunities for commercial engagement (Entrena-Serrano, 2025). Furthermore, these same affordances are central to the platform's compelling, and often described as addictive, user experience. As users engage with the platform, they simultaneously consume content and produce algorithmic data with every view, like, and creation, fueling a powerful feedback loop (Schellewald, 2023). Crucially, these affordances are not just technical; they are deeply grounded in social dimensions, designed to facilitate interaction, collaboration, and community formation, thus shaping how trends emerge and circulate within the platform's ecosystem (Entrena-Serrano, 2025). Beyond these functions, TikTok has also emerged as a key arena for socio-political expression and contestation. Political activists have strategically used the platform to engage younger audiences through creative, informal modes of engagement (Cervi et al., 2023). As such, TikTok now stands at the forefront of the intersection of technology, culture, and politics.

From a functional perspective, the platform's "For You Page" is particularly influential, offering users content based on their prior interactions, including watched videos, likes, comments, and shares. This dynamic system ensures that content discovery is not solely dependent on explicit user choices but is also shaped by the platform's automated learning processes. Existing research suggests that TikTok users function as both content producers and consumers, a phenomenon known as "mpa#ldquo;prosumption" (Yamamoto et al., 2020: 1885). Through their digital activities, users inadvertently influence algorithmic patterns, either reinforcing or disrupting specific narratives (Schellewald, 2023). In addition to shaping content circulation, TikTok's algorithm also functions as a powerful search engine. This feature transforms the platform from a passive content consumption space into an active site of inquiry, making it valuable not only as a subject of study but also as a methodological tool. The platform's search bar operates as an algorithm-driven query interface, enabling access to a wide array of keyword-specific content, including videos, captions, hashtags, and user-generated comments (Entrena-Serrano, 2025). This search functionality serves as a dynamic data discovery mechanism, enabling researchers to identify and extract relevant digital artifacts for qualitative analysis.

Nonetheless, this data source and its associated methodological approach present challenges. One limitation arises from TikTok's evolving algorithmic structures, which may impact the replicability of research findings (Klug et al., 2021). Despite efforts to customize outputs using TikTok's search functions and interactive affordances, prior usage of the platform by both study contributors and researchers can shape the content that appears in their digital environments. Content visibility is also subject to temporal and

geographical variations (Zeng and Kaye, 2022). Trends on TikTok emerge and dissipate rapidly, and the discoverability of specific content may vary depending on regional policies, cultural contexts, and real-time platform updates. Given that the internal workings of TikTok's algorithm remain opaque, these factors introduce a level of subjectivity and potential bias into data collection. Lastly, the platform's user base is predominantly young and from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Kanthawala et al., 2022). This demographic concentration suggests that the perspectives reflected in our dataset may be skewed toward the experiences, values, and behaviors of a relatively privileged and youthful population. These aspects were considered when interpreting the major findings of our research, given TikTok's role as a primary data source.

Sampling strategy

Given the vast amount of data available on TikTok, we first employed a purposive sampling method to curate our dataset. To begin, we designed a codebook to include female athletes who have garnered media attention due to their experiences with body-shaming and racialized representations. Specifically, we incorporated Serena Williams (an African American tennis player), drawing on her documentary *Serena* (2016), and Simone Biles (an African American gymnast), referencing her interview with *Glamour* magazine, where both athletes discuss the scrutiny they have faced regarding their bodies (Stone, 2016). We also included Sunisa Lee (an Asian American gymnast), based on her feature in *Vogue Singapore*'s 2021 article "Amid Anti-Asian Racism, We Pay Tribute to 7 Asian Females Who Impressed at the Tokyo Olympics" (Zhao, 2021). Lee's selection allowed us to explore how race and ethnicity factor into the discourse surrounding female athletes' bodies, particularly in the context of the growing visibility of Asian American athletes in Western media. Additionally, to incorporate a perspective that accounts for the evolving nature of digital fame, we included Olivia Dunne, a White American artistic gymnast and internet personality, whose athleticism is often discussed in tandem with her online presence and marketability. What further distinguishes Dunne is her central role in ongoing debates surrounding name, image, and likeness (NIL) rights in collegiate athletics. Widely acknowledged as one of the most marketable and profitable college athletes in the United States, she exemplifies how female athletes can leverage social media to gain financial and cultural capital.

While our selection process introduced some degree of bias, particularly by relying on established media narratives, we mitigated this by applying an inductive sampling approach when relevant. Through algorithmic recommendations on TikTok, we identified additional athletes whose digital presence aligns with our thematic focus. This process resulted in the inclusion of Camila Giorgi (a White Italian cisgender tennis player) and Valentina Petrillo (a transgender Italian sprinter). Another key source guiding our selection process was the CBS News article "25 Transgender Athletes You Should Know," which highlighted transgender athletes who have made an impact in both the sports industry and public discourse (Morton, 2022). The selection process began with a targeted Google search using the query "transgender female athletes" and involved comparing multiple curated lists for both relevance and representativeness. The CBS article was chosen for its breadth, international scope, and diversity of sports

represented. In engaging with this list, we employed a process of elimination structured around several guiding criteria. First, we restricted our focus to transgender female athletes who have competed within the past decade. Second, we sought to include athletes representing different sporting domains. Finally, we prioritized individuals whose athletic achievements were accompanied by heightened media visibility, public controversy, and evolving policy debates. Through the application of these criteria, we identified three athletes whose careers exemplify these intersections: Lia Thomas (a White American swimmer), Laurel Hubbard (a White New Zealand weightlifter), and Fallon Fox (a biracial American mixed martial artist). Their inclusion provides a valuable lens through which to examine how TikTok mediates gender, athleticism, and online discourse in relation to transgender visibility.

Analytical plan

From our initial purposive sampling strategy, we developed a structured codebook of search queries centered around the names of our selected female athletes. To enhance the relevance of our data collection, we refined these queries by pairing each athlete's name with the keyword "body." For example, we used search terms such as "Lia Thomas" and "Lia Thomas body." This dual-query strategy provided a systematic method for navigating TikTok's search function and supported a balanced, comparative analysis across our dataset, which included nine female athletes: five cisgender athletes (two African American, two White, and one Asian American) and four transgender athletes (three White, including one who is disabled, and one of biracial background). Using TikTok's search bar, we entered each query to observe how the platform's algorithm curated and ranked content related to these athletes. Our approach followed digital ethnographic practices, focusing on the observation and analysis of publicly accessible archival content (Kavanagh et al., 2019). Importantly, we did not engage with or manipulate the platform's content; our role was strictly observational. To mitigate algorithmic bias and maintain consistency across queries, we applied a structured sampling protocol. For each search query, we selected the top five videos from TikTok's results page, which are considered the most relevant according to TikTok's algorithm. In addition to video content, we analyzed associated user-generated commentary, purposively sampling the ten most visible and relevant comments. To uphold ethical research standards, particularly regarding privacy and consent in digital spaces, we anonymized all usernames and tokenized direct quotes from comments to prevent identification.

In total, our dataset comprised 90 videos and 900 comments, with 10 videos and 100 comments analyzed per athlete. To systematically explore the underlying patterns and meanings within this digital discourse, we employed thematic analysis, guided by the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021). To ensure the reliability and consistency of our coding process, two researchers independently coded a subset of the data, and intercoder reliability was assessed and discussed to resolve discrepancies (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020). It is important to highlight that a significant portion of the comments analyzed were explicitly sexualized, predominantly appearing in discussions related to athletes such as Olivia Dunne, Camila Giorgi, and Sunisa Lee. There was also a markedly negative attitude toward transgender bodies on TikTok, especially

through narratives of defeminization. While transgender weightlifter Laurel Hubbard attracted a few positive comments, the majority of empowering discourse was directed at cisgender athletes. This trend includes Black female athletes such as Simone Biles and Serena Williams, whose portrayals on TikTok reflected more affirming and empowering racial narratives than those documented on other social media platforms (Litchfield et al., 2018). We also observed that most posts and comments were generated and engaged with by everyday users rather than the athletes themselves. Only a small number of posts, including three by Sunisa Lee and one by Simone Biles, were created by the athletes, with three of these four posts primarily focused on self-promotion and commercialization. This highlights that the bulk of TikTok discourse around female athletes' bodies is shaped by broader public engagement rather than direct athlete participation.

Major findings

Sexualization

Our findings highlight how TikTok's discourse frequently sexualizes female athletes, diminishing their athletic accomplishments by reducing them to their physical appearance and perceived desirability. This pattern aligns with Krane's (2001) argument that female athletes are often trivialized through sexualization, reinforcing entrenched gender norms that prioritize aesthetics over athleticism. Building on this, Litchfield and colleagues (2018) demonstrate how social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter perpetuate these dynamics by replicating sexualized and trivializing discourses that undermine the legitimacy and achievements of female athletes, even those as accomplished as Serena Williams. This pattern is evident in our study as well, where a TikTok video posted by Olivia Dunne consists of a compilation of images from her gymnastics competitions. Rather than acknowledging her athletic skill, technique, or competitive achievements, the top comments overwhelmingly fixate on her physicality, particularly her glutes, using the slang term "gyatt" alongside fire emojis and adjectives such as "hot" to signal sexual attraction. Some commenters also draw comparisons between her athletic imagery and content associated with adult platforms like OnlyFans, suggesting that her presence in sports is interpreted through a hypersexualized lens rather than a professional one. One particularly objectifying comment states, "I'd let her do anything to me," framing Dunne not as a skilled gymnast but as a sexual object for male desire. A similar pattern emerges in the discourse surrounding tennis player Camila Giorgi, whose videos exhibit a comparable focus on her physical appearance rather than her athletic expertise. A slow-motion edit of Giorgi's match highlights her body in a manner evocative of sexualized cinematic techniques, shifting the audience's gaze from her athletic prowess to her perceived sensuality. Comments on these videos center on her attractiveness, with users debating her desirability rather than assessing her performance.

Our findings also suggest that sexualization in sports discourse is deeply racialized, shaping how female athletes are perceived and engaged with in digital spaces. A video of Sunisa Lee in her college locker room exemplifies this intersection, drawing attention to the ways race, gender, and sexuality converge on TikTok. One comment, which offers

to “have kids with her,” reflects longstanding racialized stereotypes that hypersexualize Asian women, positioning them as both desirable and exoticized (Ham, 2025). Additionally, our analysis of comments on a TikTok video featuring Lee, who appears wearing glam makeup and a dress at an F1 movie premiere, reveals a pattern of appearance-focused and hypersexualized responses. Many users fixate on her physical appearance, with terms like “baddie” used to signal sexual desirability. Some comments are also explicitly graphic, describing desires for “raw and passionate sexual encounters” with her, and expressing a perceived “need” to engage in sexual relations. These hypersexualized attitudes are further compounded by racist commentary, including remarks such as “simping for a Filipina waitress,” which not only demean her attractiveness but also weaponize racial stereotypes to belittle her identity as an Asian woman. These intersecting forms of sexualization and racialization underscore the ways in which female athletes are subjected to intensified gendered surveillance and bodily regulation in both sporting and lifestyle contexts. However, such responses are not uniformly directed at all female athletes. Notably, Black and transgender female athletes receive fewer sexualized comments, revealing a racialized hierarchy of desirability on TikTok (Leonard, 2014). This suggests not only a lack of inclusion in mainstream beauty ideals but also broader social erasure (Krane, 2001).

Empowerment

Our analysis reveals that TikTok fosters an empowerment narrative for selective female athletes, particularly those who align with dominant gender and racial norms. While female athletes have historically been constrained by gendered expectations that prioritize aesthetics over athleticism, the platform increasingly celebrates women’s strength and skill, although this recognition remains contingent on their adherence to normative ideals of femininity (Krane, 2001). For example, a TikTok video of Serena Williams playing mixed doubles features overwhelmingly positive comments, describing her as a “powerful” and “beautiful woman.” This marks a shift in discourse surrounding Black women’s athleticism, one that acknowledges their dominance in elite sports while celebrating their resilience and physicality, traits historically denied to women of color (Leonard, 2014). This reflects a distinct form of treatment experienced by Williams on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter during her participation in the 2015 Wimbledon Championships (Litchfield et al., 2018). In that context, the abuse of Williams was widespread and centered on several interrelated themes, including the questioning of her gender identity, allegations of performance-enhancing drug use, and overtly racist commentary. As another illustration of the empowerment narrative, Sunisa Lee’s Olympic gymnastics routine received celebratory comments such as “she is so gorgeous and amazing at literally everything.” This discourse not only recognizes her athletic excellence but also reinforces an idealized image of her athletic body and grace. Rather than being subject to the racialized hypersexualization often imposed on Asian women in digital spaces, Lee is framed within a hybrid discourse of empowerment and admiration, where her talent and beauty are mutually reinforcing. This representation reflects a shift in media portrayals of Asian female athletes, positioning them as both exceptional and commercially valuable within a neoliberal framework of “girl power”

(Zaslow, 2009: 2). However, when further analyzing the use of the term “gorgeous” to describe Lee, it becomes evident that this form of empowerment is still closely tied to conventional standards of attractiveness and the sexualization of female athletes: while the language may appear celebratory, it reinforces the notion that strong femininity is only acceptable when aligned with aesthetic and sexualized appeal (Kavanagh et al., 2019).

This dynamic is echoed in existing scholarship, which finds that sexualized and conventionally attractive athletes tend to gain more commercial opportunities (Fischer and McClearn, 2020). In accordance with this observation, the commercialization of female athleticism on TikTok mirrors broader trends in sports advertising and representation dynamics: female athletes are frequently regulated through sex appeal, a process underpinned by Eurocentric beauty ideals that valorize thinness, fitness, and whiteness (Krane, 2001). As a result, athletic legitimacy and marketability are often tied not only to performance but also to visual alignment with dominant cultural ideals of desirability. At the same time, as Wallace (2025: 143) observes, contemporary “moral marketing” increasingly intersects with the spectacle of social betterment, leveraging narratives of diversity and empowerment to enhance commercial appeal. Brands such as Fenty and Team USA’s Skims kit feature Sunisa Lee, reinforcing an idealized image of female athleticism that seamlessly integrates with corporate branding strategies. These endorsements highlight the marketability of “acceptable” femininity in sports, where certain athletes, particularly those who fit within hegemonic ideals of beauty and respectability, are positioned as aspirational figures. In contrast, transgender athletes receive little to no brand endorsements, further excluding them from the digital landscape of empowered femininity.

Our findings also indicate some shifts in the representation of Black female athletes within commercial sports branding. For instance, Simone Biles collaborates with K18 Hair, highlighting the intersection of racial empowerment and digital commercialization. This trend supports the continued presence of “race-transcending” on TikTok, where Black female athletes are increasingly integrated into mainstream narratives of empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 1999: 126). Reflecting broader trends in the commercialization of Black female athletes, Biles has secured sponsorships from a range of high-profile companies, such as Nike, Visa, and United Airlines. These endorsements not only signify her athletic excellence but also highlight the increasing market recognition of Black women’s visibility and influence in elite sports. While this incorporation of racial and gender identities into commodification signals progress in visibility, it also raises questions about the extent to which this visibility translates into meaningful inclusion or remains confined to corporate-driven branding strategies.

Defeminization

Our analysis highlights how defeminization narratives on TikTok overwhelmingly target transgender female athletes, reinforcing a regulatory gender discourse that polices the boundaries of womanhood (Butler, 1990). Transgender athletes, especially those who achieve competitive success, are often framed as illegitimate participants in women’s sports. A particularly defeminizing discourse emerges in content related to Lia

Thomas, a transgender swimmer whose victories in the 2022 Ivy League Women's Championships sparked widespread controversy. An analysis of videos reveals a persistent pattern of misgendering, with repetitive comments referring to Thomas as "he" and categorizing her gender as "male." This misgendering is not incidental but rather a deliberate reinforcement of a cisnormative framing intended to delegitimize her identity. Beyond misgendering, TikTok users actively reinforce biological essentialist arguments, mocking Thomas's physical attributes and making transphobic remarks about her supposed "male advantage." For instance, in a video featuring Thomas post-race, users joke about her "extra leg" or "propeller," a euphemism for male genitalia, implying that her body inherently grants her a competitive edge over cisgender women. Such comments reflect a deeply entrenched transphobic discourse that not only reduces transgender identities to genitalia but also portrays transgender athletes as invaders of women's sports.

A similar defeminising rhetoric is observed in the discourse surrounding Valentina Petrillo, the first transgender Paralympian. One comment undermines Petrillo's performance by portraying it as unnatural, likening her participation to merely dressing up in "his wife's knickers." This narrative continues in a *Daily Mail Sport* video, which introduces Petrillo as a "transgender father-of-two" before acknowledging her status as a Paralympian. By foregrounding her past identity, the video masculinizes her prior to recognizing her athletic achievements. Similarly, a *GB News* segment frames Petrillo's participation as a "ridiculous controversy," stating that she competed "as a male only six years ago." Such narratives imply that her transition is superficial or fraudulent, reinforcing a reductive biomedical perspective that views gender as both biologically determined and inseparable from one's birth-assigned sex. The comment sections on these videos further exemplify the intensification of transphobic discourse in digital spaces: users consistently misgender Petrillo, echoing the same dehumanizing rhetoric applied to Thomas, with frequent fixations on her "visible penis," reducing her gender identity to bodily markers that allegedly disqualify her from womanhood (Butler, 1990). A particularly dehumanizing comment under a *Daily Mail Sport* post states, "neuter him," likening transgender athletes to animals and implying that forced bodily modifications should be a prerequisite for their participation in sports. Petrillo's media portrayal also illustrates the intersection of transphobia and ableism in sports narratives, highlighting discourses that pathologize transgender bodies.

Additionally, our content analysis highlights a video that underscores Fallon Fox's transgender status and her perceived physical dominance, framing her as an athlete who "beats opponent in 39 s fracturing her skull." This portrayal aligns with McClearn's (2023) biomedical concerns regarding the supposed natural advantages of male physiology over cisgender women in competitive sports. Conversely, in another video, this narrative is reversed to trivialize transgender athletes' failures. Specifically, Laurel Hubbard's inability to secure a medal at the Tokyo Olympics is dismissed as "embarrassing" and reduced to comments such as "losing to girls." These contrasting portrayals reflect a broader pattern in which transgender athletes are either depicted as overwhelmingly dominant and unfair competitors or, when they do not succeed, as inadequate and undeserving of recognition. This "damned-if-she-wins, damned-if-she-loses" paradox illustrates a no-win scenario in which transgender women are positioned to

fail regardless of their athletic performance (Fischer and McClearen, 2020: 161). This contradictory framing not only denies transgender athletes full recognition in either category but also reinforces rigid gender binaries by regulating what constitutes “acceptable” dominance in sport. Underpinned by cisnormative and exclusionary rhetoric on TikTok, these narratives further intensify the erasure and marginalization of transgender athletes across sports, public policy, and broader gender discourse (Knott-Fayle et al., 2023). Our findings also extend Butler’s (1990) theorization of gender performativity, showing how sporting arenas become sites where gender hierarchies are both navigated and reinforced through embodied performance.

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that TikTok’s interactive, algorithm-driven architecture facilitates the amplification of alternative narratives that celebrate female strength, resilience, and power. Nevertheless, TikTok also serves as a powerful vehicle for reproducing dominant gendered and racialized norms, shaping how female athletes are perceived, celebrated, or commodified in digital spaces. Underpinning the contributions of this article is our integration of McClearen’s (2023) work with an intersectional reading of Butler’s (1990) concept of gender performance. These theoretical tools are applied to a content analysis of athlete discourse on TikTok. Informed by both frameworks, we conceptualize athletic gender performance as a discursive practice that materializes through social media, one that not only reflects but also actively constitutes notions of who counts as a legitimate female athlete. This process involves both the celebration and the regulation of bodies, elevating certain forms of femininity while marginalizing others. The ideal of athletic femininity is therefore still tightly regulated through normative frameworks of whiteness, cisnormativity, and heteronormativity (Krane, 2001). While the presence of transgender athletes disrupts these frameworks, it does not necessarily dismantle the gendered dichotomies upheld in dominant feminist sports discourses (McClearen, 2023). As a result, deviations from this ideal are often met with scrutiny, ridicule, or outright erasure, perpetuating what Leonard (2014: 221) refers to as “traditional gender hierarchies.”

Our study also highlights a dual narrative surrounding athletic gender performance, one which encompasses both the reinforcement of dominant gender norms and the emergence of resistance and counter-narratives. Black female athletes, for instance, increasingly assert their identities and achievements, challenging both the erasure of their womanhood and the constraints placed on their athletic success. This duality is evident in the discourse surrounding Serena Williams, whose representation on TikTok reflects both resistance to and reinforcement of racialized norms. Comments describing Williams as a “powerful” and “beautiful woman” highlight a growing cultural recognition of female athletic dominance, particularly within the context of Black women’s physical strength and sporting excellence (Leonard, 2014). However, this recognition remains entangled with traditional gendered representations, wherein female athleticism is celebrated only when it aligns with hegemonic standards of beauty and desirability (Krane, 2001). As Litchfield and colleagues (2018) argue, Black femininity is systematically undermined in sporting contexts, while white femininity is more readily aligned

with ideals of beauty, grace, and empowerment. Their analysis of Williams demonstrates how her body and performance have been the subject of intense scrutiny, particularly regarding her sexuality, appearance, and perceived aggression. They highlight how the intersecting dimensions of race, gender, and sexuality continue to shape and restrict the ways Black female athletes are represented and perceived in online spaces. However, by situating our analysis within the recent digital landscape of TikTok, following the global social movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, we observe a noticeable shift in how figures like Williams are framed. While racialized narratives persist, our findings indicate a growing discourse of empowerment surrounding Williams, who is increasingly celebrated for her excellence, resilience, and legacy. Similarly, our analysis of Simone Biles points to a trend toward greater affirmation of Black female athletic success, signaling some progress in the representational politics of sport. Nevertheless, while TikTok enables moments of resistance, these are often circumscribed by the very systems of power they aim to dispute, ultimately reinforcing the normative ideals they briefly disrupt (Leonard, 2014).

Beyond media representation, this dynamic also extends to the commercial marketability of female athletes. Sponsorship and branding opportunities remain unevenly distributed and are shaped by longstanding gendered and racialized hierarchies that dictate which athletes are deemed commercially viable (Jackson and Andrews, 2025). Athletic bodies are thus valued through “economies of visibility,” reflecting a broader commercialized white sporting paradigm (Banet-Weiser, 2015: 57). Drawing on the work of Krane (2001) and McClearn (2023), our study analyzes this paradigm as one that is hypersexualized and shaped by white, cisgender, and hegemonic ideals that construct the notion of the ideal female athlete. In this context, female athletes are not simply evaluated on their sporting achievements but are simultaneously judged through the lens of sex appeal and cultural palatability. For example, Sunisa Lee’s promotion of brands such as Fenty and Team USA’s Skims kit exemplifies how digital visibility not only amplifies gendered athletic performance but also commodifies it. Her marketability is structured in proximity to whiteness, where commercial success is often contingent on how well a non-white athlete conforms to predominantly white aesthetic and cultural norms. Our analysis of Simone Biles’s collaborations with brands such as K18 Hair also points to an emerging trend in which racialized empowerment is strategically folded into the logic of commodification (Banet-Weiser, 1999). These branding partnerships suggest that empowerment narratives can be marketable, particularly when embodied by exceptional figures like Biles, who, like Serena Williams, occupies a singular position as one of the most decorated Black female athletes in U.S. history. However, their celebrated status is often framed as exceptional rather than representative. This exceptionalism enables the sports and commercial industries to present a surface-level commitment to diversity, while continuing to uphold dominant norms.

By establishing athletic identity and bodies as commodified brands, gendered expectations continue to exclude particular bodies according to a cisnormative hierarchy (Wallace, 2025). A significant pattern in our analysis reveals a discourse of defeminization concerning transgender athletic performance on TikTok. This narrative is embedded in historical and contemporary anxieties surrounding gender authenticity, wherein the legitimacy of transgender women’s participation in sports is persistently questioned,

scrutinized, and invalidated (Martino and Kuhl, 2024). Unlike cisgender female athletes, whose bodies are often subjected to hyperfeminine and hypersexualized portrayals, transgender women in sports experience a contrasting phenomenon: they are repeatedly portrayed as a threat to the integrity of female competition, with their identities erased through discursive acts of violence (Butler, 1990). This erasure operates at multiple levels, as algorithmic amplification and user-driven commentary work in tandem to construct transgender athletes as disruptive, illegitimate, and even predatory participants in women's sports (Fischer and McClearen, 2020). The comments sections of TikTok videos featuring Lia Thomas, Valentina Petrillo, Fallon Fox, and Laurel Hubbard are frequently populated with misgendering language, biological essentialist arguments, and overt hostility. Misgendering, in particular, functions as a tool of social regulation, denying transgender athletes' gender identities while reinforcing rigid binary understandings of sex and athletic performance (Butler, 1990). Sustaining dominant cisgenderist narratives on TikTok, biological essentialism legitimizes exclusionary discourses by framing transgender women's participation as inherently unfair due to a so-called "male-like advantage" (Posbergh and Jette, 2025: 16). Moreover, the defeminization of transgender athletes on TikTok aligns with broader ideological efforts to police and regulate bodies that challenge hegemonic gender norms (McClearen, 2023): Whiteness and cis-normativity are not only privileged but actively protected through the systematic devaluation of bodies that do not conform. By situating these dynamics within the framework of the CWSP, our findings build upon and extend Butler's (1990) theorization of gender performativity and McClearen's (2023) critique of mediated sporting discourses. We argue that athletic gender performance is regulated not in abstract terms but in proximity to, and often through, the reinforcement of cis-white gender norms. In this sense, TikTok functions as both a platform of amplification and a site of disciplinary regulation, where social media logics intersect with sporting cultures to reproduce hierarchies of gender, race, and embodiment.

Conclusion

By examining how TikTok mediates representations of female athletes, our study underscores the intersection of sports and digital culture, algorithmically driven visibility, and contested boundaries of inclusion in athletics. Future research should further explore the intersection of online discourse, socio-political regulation, and legislative rhetoric on transgender women in sports, especially amid ongoing policy debates (Martino and Kuhl, 2024). As digital media increasingly shapes public opinion and political decisions, it is vital to examine how platforms like TikTok construct narratives that marginalize transgender athletes. While this study centers on TikTok's role in shaping perceptions of gender performance, it does not capture athletes' lived experiences. Ethnographic methods, interviews, or longitudinal studies could provide deeper insight into how digital representations affect athletes' personal and professional lives and how they navigate gendered narratives online.

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Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request.

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