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More Than a Kick: A Liberal Feminist Analysis of Instagram Commentary on Sarah Fuller's Historic Kick-off

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In November 2020, Sarah Fuller became the first woman to compete in a Power Five football game as she kicked off for Vanderbilt University. Fuller's kick-off was widely covered across the country. However, her decision to enter into one of the last male-only sanctums was met with much scrutiny and criticism. Using liberal feminist theory this paper analyzes social media commentary about Fuller on Vanderbilt's Instagram accounts on the day of her first game. Instagram posts related to Fuller were collected from Vanderbilt's football ($n = 9$), women's soccer ($n = 12$), and general athletics ($n = 6$) accounts. Results indicate that of the total 3,052 collected comments, 50.9 percent were negative, 39.6 percent positive, and 9.5 percent were unrelated to Fuller. Of the unsupportive remarks the majority objectified Fuller or were related to her appearance. This category was followed by oppressive, stereotypical, patriarchal, and negative comments not fitting into the feminist codes. Supportive comments on Vanderbilt's social media focused on countering oppressive language, challenging patriarchy, countering stereotypes, countering female objectification, and other remarks not matching the codes. Implications and recommendations for athletics scholars and practitioners are discussed.

Keywords: female athletes, liberal feminist theory, social media, college sports, gender

On November 28th, 2020, the college athletics world experienced a historic moment. Sarah Fuller, a senior goalkeeper for Vanderbilt University's (VU) women's soccer team became the first woman to compete in a Power Five football game. Two weeks later, she became the first woman to kick extra points in this upper echelon of college sports. Fuller was called upon to kick for VU's football team as members of the kicking squad were unavailable to compete due to COVID-19 exposure. As she kicked, she wore a sticker on her helmet championing "play like a girl," the name of the nonprofit that encourages girls to play sports and get involved in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields—all predominantly male areas of study. Her kick inundated social media.

Fuller's kick-off and subsequent commentary matter for two reasons. First, in an athletics culture many consider to be male dominated and filled with toxic masculinity and the suppression of women, her decision to combat these notions and play is important. Second, American society values sports, particularly football and men's basketball (Clotfelter, 2019), and Fuller broke into one of these fields, challenging notions that women cannot compete with men. Thus, more women competing in predominantly male college sports may have important implications for athletics culture and the value of female athletes (Cooky & LaVoi, 2012).

Through the lens of liberal feminist theory (Birrell, 2000; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013), the purpose of this research study is to examine reactions to Fuller's kick through the nexus of social media and sport culture by investigating VU's Instagram posts about her on the day of her historic kick-off and the subsequent public commentary on these posts. Instagram, unlike Twitter and Facebook, offers more visual and less text content, and research demonstrates that visual content is more appealing, memorable, and engaging for consumers (Adobe Digital Index, 2014; Jaakonmaki et al., 2017). Visuals are also more likely to attract follows, likes, and comments (Jaakonmaki et al., 2017), which has helped place Instagram ahead of Facebook and Twitter in average engagement rate (Hughes, 2021). Thus, with the highest fan and user involvement, VU Instagram posts are a prominent source in examining commentary about Fuller's kick-off.

Using Instagram to explore this historic moment is critical. First, Fuller's kick-off occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic in which much of the world became virtual. For intercollegiate sport, fans could not attend games, thus viewership was limited to at-home media platforms from television to streaming to social media. Thus, it is likely that Fuller's actions received increased attention and promotion from various outlets. Second, Instagram has become an increasingly important medium for promotion of athletics and athletes (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). With impending name, image, and likeness (NIL) opportunities expanding for college athletes, examining such commentary may allow practitioners to find better ways to support athletes as they continue to engage more with Instagram and other platforms (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Maestas & Belzer, n.d.).

Historically, media coverage for women in sports has bolstered stereotypical views of female athletes' roles and capabilities (Fink, 2015) and thus, has allowed male athletes to continue to dominate media narratives. Researchers also contend that the use of media and those engaging with it structures how the public perceives and understands women in sport (Cooky & LaVoi, 2012; Fink, 2015). Such perceptions have ramifications that may strengthen patriarchal systems in athletics and further oppress female athletes (Fink, 2015). Additionally, most of the literature about women in sports media has focused on coverage, not commentary. Thus, this research adds a new contribution to the literature. Finally, Fuller's actions offer an opportunity to

better understand the influence of social media on the value of female athletes and their experiences.

Literature Review

The first section of this literature review provides context of women's participation in intercollegiate sport in general and in historically male-dominated sports specifically. Next, social media and marketing of women in athletics are discussed. Finally, context for Fuller's kick-off is offered, noting other women who competed in collegiate football before her. This background situates women in intercollegiate athletics through a liberal feminist lens, while bolstering the significance of this research in understanding the nexus of female college athletes' experiences and social media.

Women's Participation in Sport

Most of the research concerning female athletes pertains to Title IX as scholars contend it is one of the most critical steps toward women's equality in education and sport (Lough, 2015; Weight & Harry, 2019). Title IX passed in 1972 as a section of the education amendments and mandated: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance" (20 U.S.C. § 1681). Today, Title IX is used to ensure equitable experiences for women in college athletics (Lough, 2015).

Women's athletics emerged in the mid to late 1900s but mostly consisted of play days put on by physical activity educators (Lough, 2015). While women's sports were seen as exercise and educational, men's athletics were commercialized and seen as a way to generate revenue. Once Title IX was passed, schools had to accommodate and provide equal educational and athletics avenues for women (Weight & Harry, 2019). The Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) began managing intercollegiate athletic competition for female athletes. However, the AIAW quickly clashed with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) on oversight and governance. In 1981, the NCAA started championships for women's teams forcing the AIAW to disband in 1983 (Lough, 2015).

Since 1972, women's athletics has played a growing role in intercollegiate athletics programs. Athletics programs must follow the legislation's three-part test, meeting at least one of the following prongs: (1) participation in college athletics is proportionate to the undergraduate enrollment of men and women on campus, (2) history of continued expansion in response to interest and abilities of the underrepresented sex, and (3) demonstrating that the current sport profiles accommodate the interests and abilities of the underrepresented sex (Lough, 2015). Under the three-part test, in conjunction with feminists elevating their voices to demand athletics equality, many women's programs (i.e., basketball, softball, and gymnastics) have witnessed jumps in interest and commercialization due to wide and loyal fanbases (SI Staff, 2020; Weight & Harry, 2019).

Title IX's has resulted in an increase in interest and participation of women in intercollegiate athletics. From 1972 to 2012, women's sport opportunities expanded six-fold (Cooky & LaVoi, 2012; Jenkins, 2019). Additionally, NCAA demographic data shows that since 1983, the earliest the Association began tracking women's participation, to 2020, there has been an increase in the number of women's teams sponsored from 4,279 to 10,682. Women's

participation numbers have grown in that same timeframe from 64,390 to 221,212 (NCAA Demographic Database, n.d.). However, women still only make up 44 percent of NCAA athletes (NCAA Demographic Database, n.d.).

Despite increasing interest and opportunities, the legislation has experienced much backlash and most schools have yet to fully comply (Jenkins, 2019). Opposition to the law has never ceased, as anti-feminists claim it limits athletics opportunities for men outside of football and men's basketball, and results in men's teams being eliminated in favor of women's teams. This is a faulty understanding of the law, and such actions are more a result of improper financial management (Lough, 2015). Still, feminists and women in sport continue to battle for equal rights when it comes to having equitable opportunities compared to their male counterparts (Lough, 2015).

Fuller's ability to participate in football would not have come to fruition without Title IX, however, a critical battle still being fought by women in sport involves the contact sport exemption within Title IX which allows private institutions to deny athletes from trying out and participating in single sex contact sports solely on the basis of sex (Fields, 2005). This long prevented women from gaining access to football; however, under the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, many women attending public schools have filed suit against their colleges for access to contact sports and have won (Fields, 2005; Greene, 2005). Still, there are issues with this Equal Protection Clause and Title IX when it comes to women accessing contact sports like football. Caggiano (2010) notes:

Title IX's regulations technically apply to any institution that accepts federal dollars because the Supreme Court has never found the contact sport exemption to be unconstitutional. Thus, the contact sport exemption still governs the conduct of public institutions; the burden is then on the female athlete to enforce her rights under the equal protection clause by filing suit (p. 126).

Despite these obstacles, girls continue to compete in football, making up approximately 0.2 percent of the total high school participants (McKinney, 2019). Data collected on football participation shows that from 2018-2019, the number of high school girls competing in football increased roughly 7.5 percent to almost 2,500 participants nationwide (McKinney, 2019). This increase in participation is not demonstrated at the collegiate level, potentially due to issues with the aforementioned obstacles spurred by the contact sport exemption, limited interest, or a lack of knowledge about the opportunities to participate in male sports. There is a dearth of research examining the experiences of women in traditionally male-dominated sports, an area this study explores further. Much of the literature regarding female athletes explores the nexus of media and female athletes.

Media & Female Athletes

Title IX and the subsequent growth in women's athletics has brought about more media coverage of women's sport. However, most feminists note that the coverage has not kept pace with participation: The Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport at the University of Minnesota notes that 40 percent of all sport participants are women, yet they receive 4 percent of sports media coverage. Media highlighting female athletes provides a chance to either challenge ideologies of women, or bolster traditional notions of feminism. Krane et al.

(2010) note that “such representations can be interpreted as an expression of power, agency and resistance as well as constrained by the patriarchal construction of women’s sport” (p. 175). Fink (2015) explored coverage of male and female athletes in newspapers, online media, and advertisements. Results indicated different coverage for male and female athletes: Men received significantly more air time on television along with more press in printed and online media.

When female athletes are covered on television, email listservs, or social media, Cooky and colleagues (2021) noted coverage of female athletes was gender-bland in nature, meaning stories were presented with less enthusiasm than stories about male athletes. The researchers cited that the coverage of female athletes was “routinely delivered in a dull monotone” (Cooky et al., 2021, p. 13). This gender-bland coverage centered around community service, parochialism, and nationalism. Additionally, coverage received is often sexual or provocative in nature (Darvin & Sagas, 2017), with Fink (2015) finding media focused on female athletes’ femininity, heterosexuality, and sex appeal rather than athletic success.

The research described above provides great insight into the linkages between coverage and women’s athletics. However, with the rise of social media in American college sport culture, it is important to discuss the role of these platforms. Coche (2017) examined Twitter accounts of 198 female athletes, finding that athletes both challenged and preserved traditional feminized roles of women in sport. For example, the women in this sample tended to highlight their roles as athletes in their profile biographies. Simultaneously, they expressed femininity using professional headshots rather than active sport pictures and wore revealing clothing in their profiles. The ways in which athletes express and frame themselves through social media is significant because this is often one important way fans, commenters, and others are introduced to athletes, and this first impression is critical in the creation of perceptions (Coche, 2017).

Like Twitter, Instagram has also grown in popularity as a source for data (Li et al., 2020; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Li and colleagues (2020) examined the ways in which 50 elite professional female athletes used Instagram as a form of self-expression. While the researchers did not employ a feminist lens, they did find that this athlete sample used Instagram to express opinions, interact with followers, demonstrate their athleticism, showcase their personal lives, and promote their individual brands (Li et al., 2020). Similarly, using a feminist critique, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) examined the ways in which five high-profile professional female athletes across a host of sports engaged with social media, including Instagram. Findings suggest that these women used self-empowerment, self-disclosure, and self-love to combat traditional feminine ideals (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

The aforementioned research on women in social media is critical in expanding scholars’ and practitioners’ understanding of this nexus between media and women in sport. However, this work and other scholarship has focused predominantly on professional and international athletes and largely excludes public commentary (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Daniels et al., 2021). One study focusing on college athletes and commentary comes from Browning and Sanderson (2012). Through interviews with 20 college athletes who used Twitter, Browning and Sanderson (2012) explored how athletes reacted to critical tweets. The researchers found that reactions to critical tweets ranged from ignoring negativity to using comments as motivation. Still, some athletes greatly struggled with the criticisms, noting feelings of anxiety, being overwhelmed, and challenges to their identity. However, the authors of this study did not specifically focus on the experiences of female athletes as only three participants competed on women’s teams. Thus, there is potential to expand this area of research.

While social media can be beneficial for athletes to stay connected with fans and gather information, there are also difficulties associated with these platforms (Browning and Sanderson, 2012). Issues with these platforms are intertwined with general media coverage of athletics. The media has played a critical role in the commercialization of intercollegiate athletics (Clotfelter, 2019), particularly in men's basketball and football. This attention and proclivity toward football, could be why Fuller's kick-off received so much attention. Television companies shell out billions for contracts with big-time athletics conferences for the right to air games, however, women's sports do not receive similar coverage with claims that the public is uninterested serving as justifications for this lack of air time (Clotfelter, 2019). However, there is public interest in women's athletics. In fact, the most recent Women's College World Series (WCWS) had an average viewership of over two million people (ESPN PR, 2021), the highest viewership the event has ever seen. Additionally, the WCWS often brings in more viewers than the men's college world series (Weight & Harry, 2019).

Institutionally, football and men's basketball are also the main focus of athletics departments due to their ability to draw large crowds, create fan interest and engagement, and generate revenue (Clotfelter, 2019). Institutionally-based media also focuses on men's teams, as seen in campus newspapers, posters, media guides, and social media accounts. In a study of Division I general athletics social media accounts and team-specific accounts, results indicated that general athletics Instagram accounts post content 6.8 times per week. However, team-specific accounts for football and men's basketball post 9.8 and 9.2 times per week, respectively. The only women's specific account that approaches similar numerics is women's basketball with 6.9 posts per week (Boettger, n.d.). Thus, it appears athletics marketers still favor men's athletics, despite a growing interest and demand for women's sports (ESPN PR, 2021; Weight & Harry, 2019). Such interest and demand was, however, witnessed online and on Instagram outside of VU for Fuller's kick-off as the video of her kick was the top video on ESPN's digital platforms and the second-ranked college football video on ESPN in the 2020 season (Brooks, 2020). Similarly, the Southeastern Conference's (SEC) Instagram post of Fuller was the most-liked post in the conference's Instagram history (Brooks, 2020).

Female Kickers Before Fuller

Female kickers at other levels of competition came before Fuller, setting the stage for her success, and potentially the success of future female athletes. Fuller competed in the SEC, one of the Power Five conferences, which are regarded as the most elite athletic conferences due to athletic acclaim, massive budgets and revenue streams, and overall media attention and commercialization (Clotfelter, 2019). This term—Power Five—is only a few years old, thus, the women who competed before Fuller, were outside of it and are considered to have played at lower levels athletically (McManus, 2020). Katie Hnida was one of the first female football players. She began her collegiate career at the University of Colorado where she was raped by a teammate (McManus, 2020). Subsequently, Hnida transferred to the University of New Mexico, where in 2003, she was the first woman to kick points in a Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) game.

Hnida's success story cannot be separated from her experiences as the sole woman on football teams, or her rape. She came forward about her assault a few years later, when Colorado was experiencing other allegations that members of the football team had raped other women (Griego, 2014). The team and members of the media dismissed Hnida's claims. The coach noted,

"It was obvious Katie was not very good. She was awful. Katie was not only a girl, she was terrible." (Associated Press, 2004, para. 10). Others labeled her a liar (Griego, 2014). This is another example, complementing the research throughout this literature review, of how media and social media play important roles in perpetuating men's hegemonic power. This is done by the way women's sports are presented and discussed. The quote from Hnida's former coach objectified Hnida, equated her worth to her athletic capabilities, and failed to acknowledge that this was not about football, but about women's rights, sexual assault, and justice. This quote, only furthers toxic masculinity, harm, and violence associated with sport (Birrell, 2000; Burke, 2010). This influences how fans and social media users perceive and interpret events (i.e., as threats to patriarchy or advances in society), such as Hnida's rape or Fuller's decision to play football.

The rape accusations did not stop other female athletes from joining football teams, such as April Goss who scored for Kent State University in 2015 (McManus, 2020), or Fuller in 2020. However, unlike Fuller, Hnida and Goss were members of their football teams for years—not called upon to kick at the last minute. Additionally, portraying Fuller as "the first woman" in collegiate football to make history diminishes the experiences of those before her who endured intense scrutiny, pressure, stereotypes, and in the case of Hnida, assault. It is clear that women have historically not been welcomed on the football field. McManus (2020) argues that it is simpler "to hail Fuller's accomplishment as the 'first woman' rather than looking at the complexity that is the history of women in kicking" (para. 6). The above context is relevant in understanding social dynamics (Levitt et al., 2018), but should not take away from Fuller's accomplishments.

The research in this paper expands upon this prior scholarship by examining social media and its role in highlighting or degrading female college athletes. Thus, sport can challenge norms relating to objectification, oppression, dominant patriarchal narratives, and stereotypical ideas and gender roles for women. This research contributes to existing literature by exploring women in social media through the lens of liberal feminist theory.

Theoretical Framework

Liberal feminism emerged during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s and 1970s and remains the most dominant form of feminist thought (McAfee, 2018; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). This lens rests in the ontological perspective that women and men are more alike than different, and therefore, should have equal treatment, access, and opportunity in all aspects of society (Birrell, 2000; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). Advocates of liberal feminism today work to advance a strengths-based rather than deficits-based perspective of women that has perpetuated patriarchal structures, objectification, and stereotypical views and oppression of women (McAfee, 2018). When these systemic obstacles are removed, women are more likely to achieve equality with men (Hoeber, 2008; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). Through liberal feminism, women have sought to change society's barriers to equality, including through sport.

Sport scholarship employing liberal feminism assumes that athletics serve as a positive experience and one in which women need and deserve increased access (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). However, access to athletics is often predetermined by patriarchal structures, socialization, and gender stereotypes about the capabilities and interests of women. While men are socialized into more masculine sports like football, women are more often encouraged to participate in feminine activities like gymnastics or dance (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). Liberal

feminism directly challenges these stereotypes and ways in which such stereotypes perpetuate patriarchal powers in sport and further oppress female athletes (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). Thus, Fuller's decision to challenge these norms can be viewed through a liberal feminist perspective.

Most extant literature contends that examining phenomena, like sport, through a feminist critique can bring to light conspicuous and obvious gender power relations influencing belief systems and knowledge production (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). Thus, the goal of liberal feminist theory is to center women in research, which can result in more equitable experiences (Hoeber, 2008; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). From liberal feminist literature (Birrell, 2000; Burke, 2010; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013) the following themes and barriers to women's equality in sport emerge: objectification of women (particularly sexually), oppression, patriarchy, and stereotyping and gender roles. It is through these four main areas that VU's Instagram posts and commentary are examined. These barriers often prevent the main goals of liberal feminism—equal treatment, access, and opportunity—from being realized.

Objectification involves the sociocultural context that equates a woman's worth with sexuality and her appearance (Szymanski et al., 2011). The objectification of women is particularly prominent in media platforms. Daniels et al. (2021) selected images of female athletes in four categories: non-sexualized, sport performance, sexualized-performance, and sexualized. College students were then asked to express their attitudes about these pictures and rate the women's sexual appeal, esteem, and competence (Daniels et al., 2021). Results demonstrated that athletes in sport performance photos were rated most positively, while women presented in sexual-performance and sexualized photos were rated less positively and received lower esteem and competency ratings. Such findings support the idea that women should receive coverage that appreciates their athleticism over their sexuality.

Oppression is the inequitable use of authority and involves the deprivation of rights for women that are simultaneously provided to men (McAfee, 2018). It also includes physical force or verbal communication to actively condescend or control women (Burke, 2010). The oppression of women in sport can be more covert discrimination or more "subtle, insidious ideologically based oppression" that continues to keep women down in representation in intercollegiate athletics (Norman, 2010, p. 100). An example of subtle oppression could be a micro-aggression, such as a male competitor not shaking a female competitor's hand at the end of a game while shaking those of the male athletes. A more obvious form of oppression could be media commentary that is specifically anti-feminist (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Additionally, previous literature notes that men in sport have limited experiences with oppression, and thus, the intersectionality of oppression and equality in athletics does not often cross their minds (Hoeber, 2008). Using liberal feminist thought, scholars can better understand women's subordination in athletics participation and access and avenues toward liberation (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013).

Patriarchy is a societal system in which men maintain power and dominance over women (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). Burke (2010) notes that one main area in sport where patriarchy continues to remain strong is in exclusively male sports such as football because women are seen as incapable of competing or understanding the game and thus cannot bring value to this arena. This is a faulty perception, as many women are well-versed in football. Fuller challenged these misconceptions and demonstrated that women are capable of competing and understanding a historically male-centric sport. Liberal feminists contend that women "take their equal place alongside men," (Birrell, 2000, p. 102), which Fuller accomplished.

Finally, stereotypes and gender roles are two of the main areas liberal feminist theory seeks to dismantle (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). Stereotyping involves maintaining a widely held thought about groups of people. Similarly, gender roles govern how each gender is expected to dress, speak, and act. Women are expected to dress femininely, be accommodating, and nurture others (Fink, 2015; McAfee, 2018). However, research also shows that women in sport are often labeled as lesbian or hyper-masculine (Fink, 2015; Kane et al., 2013). Kauer and Krane (2006) used a feminist perspective to interview 15 female college athletes about their encounters with stereotypes. The participants noted that they were seen as jocks and assumed to be lesbians, largely because their attire and self-expressions challenged feminine norms. Most athletes in this sample struggled with these stereotypes, but worked to make sport an accepting space (Kauer & Krane, 2006). While this research did not investigate the direct role of media or social media and the experiences of this sample of athletes, Fink (2015) notes that the ways in which the media portray athletes can reinforce stereotypes and gender roles, which can be examined through liberal feminism (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013).

Liberal feminist theory is an appropriate lens through which to view Fuller's kick-off and the subsequent social media coverage and commentary for a host of reasons. First, liberal feminism is often considered the "grandmother" category of feminism and the most prevalent form of feminism in American thought and action (Birrell, 2000, p. 102). Second, other scholarship in college athletics has employed this feminist perspective (Burke, 2010; Hoeber, 2008; 2015; Kane et al., 2013; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Third, use of liberal feminist theory provides a more critical ontological perspective (Birrell, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994), which is becoming increasingly popular in the sports literature as scholars continue to study athletics. Additionally, such ontology is rooted in historical realism, which is reflected in the aforementioned codes as women in sports continue to experience objectification, oppression, patriarchy, and stereotypes and gender roles (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). More research is needed to examine marketing, social media, and support (or lack thereof) for women in athletics.

Method

Research Design

This research analyzed social media commentary about Sarah Fuller's kick-off from the following Instagram accounts: Vanderbilt Athletics (vucommodores), Vanderbilt Football (vandyfootball), and Vanderbilt Soccer (vandysoccer). Posts and comments examined were only from the day of her kick-off on November 28th, 2020, resulting in a total of 27 posts: six from the general athletics account with 358 comments, nine from the football account with 2,342 comments, and 12 from the women's soccer account with 352 comments. Fuller's account was not including in this analysis as she did not make a post on Instagram the day of the kick-off. There were 3,052 comments from the accounts when data was collected the week following Fuller's kick. The content was almost evenly split with 14 being videos of/about Fuller and 13 being pictures of Fuller.

Data Collection

Data collection was limited to these three accounts as the Vanderbilt Athletics account frequently showcases various athletes such as Fuller, and because Fuller was a member of both soccer and football squads. Additionally, comments collected only pertained to posts from game day as Fuller received the most attention and coverage from social media on this day compared to days leading up to the kick-off and days after. Collection on the day of is likely to capture commenters' true feelings and thoughts about the event, rather than collecting data before or after the fact when there is time for reflection. Twitter and Facebook were not used in this research as the former limits the number of words a commenter can use, while the latter is an increasingly less popular platform (Li et al., 2020). Despite increases from the pandemic in internet and social media usage, Facebook could not keep pace with Instagram. The former platform experienced a 4 percent increase in users' time spent on their accounts, while the latter saw growth of 14 percent (Southern, 2020), supporting previous literature noting higher levels of user engagement with Instagram (Hughes, 2021; Jaakonmaki et al., 2017).

Data Analysis

A deductive analytical approach was used to examine the Instagram commentary (Miles et al., 2020), and codes in the following four areas from liberal feminist theory were applied: objectification, oppression, patriarchy, and stereotyping and gender roles. A fifth code, "other," was provided for comments that did not fit into the four areas. Deduction involves a set of assumptions and the use of a predetermined theory, which epistemologically, ties the researcher directly to the data and may influence the inquiry and results obtained (Levitt et al., 2018). Guba and Lincoln (1994) note that a critical ontology, such as feminism, is subjectivist. This is considered a downfall of qualitative work, however, the opportunity to better understand attitudes and beliefs of a group of people are benefits of this research (Levitt et al., 2018).

To establish trustworthiness of this study, the researcher employed the five phases of thematic analysis suggested by Nowell and colleagues (2017). First, the researcher documented theoretical notes about codes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Next, the researcher utilized a deductive approach based on liberal feminist theory and the aforementioned codes based on prior literature (Miles et al., 2020). To bolster reliability and consistency within the data analysis, another researcher familiar with sports and media analyzed 25 percent of the comments (McMillan, 2016). Similar liberal feminist codes were found for 95 percent of this sample. The secondary researcher knew of the five codes, but did not come up with new codes, demonstrating strong interrater reliability in the coding and theming process. Additionally, there was a Krippendorff's Alpha of $\alpha = 0.940$ indicating high agreement between researchers (Lavrakas, 2008; McMillan, 2016; Miles et al., 2020).

Coding, theming, reviewing and finalizing the themes were performed, completing Nowell et al.'s (2017) five phases. Based on liberal feminist theory, a priori coding was used to categorize and understand the comments on the Instagram posts (Miles et al., 2020). This first cycle a priori coding led to second cycle pattern coding (Miles et al., 2020) resulting in three broad themes of comments: negative comments, positive comments, and comments unrelated to Fuller. Negative comments were unsupportive of Fuller and largely anti-feminist, while positive comments were supportive of Fuller's decision to compete and demonstrated advocacy for liberal feminist ideals. Such methods enable commenters' narratives to be themed, while still

maintaining their voices (Miles et al., 2020) which is crucial when using both a critical lens and taking a deductive and subjective approach to the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Results

Analysis of Vanderbilt's three Instagram accounts resulted in a total of 3,449 codes from 3,052 comments. These numbers do not directly match as some comments matched multiple tenets of liberal feminist theory: objectification and aesthetics, oppression, patriarchy, stereotyping and gender roles, and other (see Table 1). From these codes the following three themes emerged: negative commentary rejecting Fuller and the feminist view ($n = 1,757$, 50.9%), positive commentary uplifting Fuller and the feminist vantage ($n = 1,365$, 39.6%), and other comments unrelated to Fuller ($n = 327$, 9.5%).

Table 1
Instagram Comments

	Number of Codes (n)	%
Unsupportive Comments	1757	57.6%*
Objectification/Aesthetics	1077	61.3%
Oppression	232	13.2%
Stereotyping/Gender Roles	215	12.2%
Patriarchy	73	4.6%
Other Unsupportive	160	9.1%
Supportive Comments	1365	44.7%*
Counter Objectification/Aesthetics	121	8.9%
Counter Oppression	712	52.2%
Counter Stereotyping/Gender Roles	203	14.9%
Counter Patriarchy	278	20.4%
Other Supportive	51	3.7%
Other Non-Related to Fuller	505	11.8%
Total codes	3449	

Note. Total exceeds the number of comments in the posts and 100% as many comments contained statements that fell into multiple categories.

*Percentages shown below asterisk are in relation to their specific category (i.e., unsupportive or supportive).

Negative Comments

Objectification Comments. Unsupportive comments largely related to Fuller's athletic performance, appearance, and sex appeal, thus falling into the objectification category ($n = 1,077$, 61.3%). Commenters noted Fuller's poor performance and the lack of power on her second-half kick-off. One commenter stated, "congrats on the worst kickoff in college football history," while others chimed in that it was "embarrassing." Many noted that Fuller's kick did not go far and that they, children, or someone maimed could have kicked it better than her. Still more objectifying comments pertained to Fuller's appearance and sex appeal. Two commenters added "Omg I'd stick her sh*t" and "she thic af."

Oppressive Comments. Objectification was followed by oppressive commentary ($n = 232$, 13.2%) in which commenters used verbal force to maliciously exercise power to keep Fuller down. One user said, "Wow I guess the rest of the team doesn't mean sh*t anymore... it's just gonna be about this girl? Sad." Another noted that Fuller was being treated "like a circus animal." Two oppressive users offered "Let's talk about women's rights. NOT!" and:

This whole comment section is cringe. No, nothing was accomplished just cause a female played in a P5 game means nothing... there's literally nothing to celebrate. Yeah cool she plays D1 football, a sh*t load of people have and will in the future.

Stereotype, Gender Role, & Patriarchal Comments. The next most common negative remarks related to stereotypes and gender roles ($n = 215$, 12.2%) about women with many commenters stating opinions such as "women should stick to women sports." Another argued "Girls belong in the kitchen not a football field." Other comments were categorized under patriarchy ($n = 73$, 4.2%) and continuing the privilege and power of men and men in sport. One commenter stated, "females these days think they invincible or some sh*t." Another user, expressing patriarchal and objectifying sentiments said, "I hope she gets trucked so we can finally end this women thing."

Other Negative Comments. Finally, some comments, while negative, did not fit within the above categories and were labeled as "other" ($n = 160$, 9.1%). Many users argued that Vanderbilt was only using Fuller as a "publicity stunt," with one comment reading "they only did this cause they 0-7 there shouldn't be females playing football in college."

Positive Comments

Counter-Oppressive Comments. Of supportive commentary on the Instagram posts, the majority contained counter oppressive statements ($n = 712$, 52.2%). The most common responses included expressions of encouragement such as "Go Sarah!," "You got this!," and "this is awesome." Other prominent comments in this category included users stating how she was "making history" and hoping that she would continue to kick for the team in future games. Two commenters added "the first, but not the last" and "Yes! Thank you Fuller, who's next?"

Counter-Patriarchal Comments. The next most popular comments included those that challenged patriarchal thoughts and attitudes ($n = 278$, 20.4%). For example, many commenters

called Fuller the “GOAT” (an acronym for the phrase “greatest of all time”) or used goat emojis, while others referred to her as a “beast.” Still, some commenters called others out for being demeaning and condescending: “The same salty a** guys who are mocking her kick are the same ones who didn't even make the JV football team.” Another stated,

If it were a guy who did the kick: Hm, fair kick, maybe a lil short but oh well—ya live & learn. Society when it's a girl who goes on for 3.6 seconds: Ahaha this is just pathetic—who in their right mind would let a woman on their team?! Puh-lease it went like 2 feet in front of her—she gonna end up in the hospital, she doesn't know what she's doing. Call the football police and arrest her.

Other commenters used the slogan on the back of Fuller's helmet, “Play like a girl.”

Counter-Stereotype & Gender Role Comments. Remarks countering stereotypes and gender roles were the next most popular comments across the posts ($n = 203$, 14.9%), with one user noting that she was a “trailblazer for all women.” Another user added,

She is already breaking stereotypes in college football. Support your athlete better. Fuller being on the team's roster and in uniform is making history. When she scores today that will also be part of history or Herstory. WFLA football players are in full support of fuller [sic]. Looking forward to a great game.

Similarly, commenters aiming to counter stereotypes and traditional feminized gender roles noted that she broke through barriers and that “many will look to [her] for years to come.” One user stated that Fuller “... changed the way girls think about what they can do.” Fuller's kick-off also received attention and support from those outside of the Vanderbilt network:

I'm an Alabama grad and we watched the entire game just to watch Sarah...three kids (two are girls...and one is a soccer player). Congrats to Sarah. Love the mic drop when she said she was more nervous in the SEC Championship game. Thank you for being an awesome role model @sarah_f27, hoping you play in another game and the Vandy offense can move the ball so you can kick a field goal or extra point.

Such comments highlight the ways in which Fuller and commenters both challenged and defied traditional views on women and female athletes.

Counter-Objectification Comments. Other commenters offered statements against objectification ($n = 121$, 8.9%), with most of the remarks noting Fuller's athletic competence as she executed the kick-off exactly how it was supposed to be completed. While those commenting negatively noted that the kick was “sh*tty” and that “there were probably multiple dudes able to kick twice as good as her on the team lmao,” they failed to realize or accept that Fuller's kick was designed to be a squib kick. Squib kicks are those that are low and short and bounce multiple times on the field before being received by a member of the opposing team. This style of kick tends to be harder for the receiving team to catch and pick up as the football bounces and can go in multiple directions whereas a standard parabola-like kick is one-directional and easier to catch and contain. One user strongly advocated for Fuller's athleticism saying, “the kick was

literally designed to be done exactly how she did it... she's playing on an SEC football team for a reason." Still, other commenters were appalled by statements made about Fuller's sex appeal and appearance with many challenging those users mentioned above to "stop being pigs" and "have respect for women."

Other Positive Comments. The remaining supportive comments did not fall into the above topical areas and were categorized as 'other' ($n = 51$, 3.7%). Items in this category included statements such as "I'm a proud alum" and "this gives me all the feels."

Other Comments

Finally, the remaining comments on these posts did not relate to liberal feminist theory or Fuller and largely pertained to the team's overall poor performance during the game and throughout the season ($n = 327$, 9.5%), with particular focus aimed at terminating the head coach. Some remarks noted the team's record, "0-7" and the score of the game, "41-0," while others read "try winning," "our offense sucks," "fire Mason!," and "FIRE EVERYONE." Others added Vanderbilt's mantra, "Anchor Down," or left comments that tagged other Instagram users.

Discussion

This study examined 27 posts and 3,052 comments from three of VU's Instagram accounts with the purpose of exploring the intersection of social media, college athletics culture and fandom, and the value of female athletes through Sarah Fuller's kick-off. The remainder of this section discusses the commentary arising from the Instagram posts and presents theoretical and practical implications and for the field.

Theoretical Implications

Liberal feminist theory was employed to provide scholars and practitioners with an enhanced understanding of this novel case in college sports history, while offering insight that can be used should similar instances occur in the future. Positive comments help reinforce the goals of liberal feminism and the use of this theory in this research and future studies. Importantly, these positive comments are a part of a growing trend in American sports in which there is an increase in interest, support, and advocacy of women's athletics (SI Staff, 2020). It is critical to note, however, that these comments alone will not result in structural change needed to bolster women's positions in athletics, particularly in areas that are historically male-dominated. Thus, despite the increase in attention surrounding women's sports and the positive visibility Fuller received in the media (Forde, 2020), most of the comments on the Instagram posts were unsupportive, perpetuating women's inequality in athletics. Because equality is the ultimate purpose behind liberal feminism (Birrell, 2000; McAfee, 2018), the negative remarks directly opposed ideals of the liberal feminist perspective.

Objectification. The majority of negative remarks objectified Fuller in relation to both her athletic performance and appearance, adding to literature on female athlete objectification (Burke, 2010; Daniels et al., 2021; Darvin & Sagas, 2017; Fink, 2015). Objectification was likely the most common form of negativity because, as suggested by liberal feminism (Scruton &

Flintoff, 2013), it is considered one of the easiest ways to keep women down by making them feel worthless in areas related to their appearance or performance (Daniels et al., 2021; Szymanski et al., 2011).

However, objectifying comments failed to recognize that Fuller executed the squib kick exactly how it is supposed to be done and that the opposing team was unable to return the football. Thus, while these comments assumed a lack of ability on the part of Fuller—because she was a woman—they are inaccurate. The liberal feminist lens argues that women and men are more similar than different in their abilities (Birrell, 2000; Burke, 2010) and Fuller's accurate execution of the squib kick confirms this idea and the use of liberal feminism in this work.

Additionally, Fuller was considered a leader by the coaching staff: Despite only being on the football squad for less than one week coaches encouraged her to give a halftime speech to the team. This supports the use of liberal feminism, which contends that women should be viewed from a strengths-based perspective, and be placed equally amongst male peers. Thus, scholars continuing to use liberal feminism to examine women in college athletics should consider how understanding women's leadership capabilities can be bolstered through this lens. Other objectifying statements hoped Fuller would get injured and such comments were likely designed to prevent Fuller and other women from being interested in male-centric sports, like football.

However, scholarship employing liberal feminism can raise awareness of this perpetuation of male dominance in sport and further challenge objectification of female athletes and notions that some sports are only for men. Some of the positive commentary disputed Fuller's objectification with some users taking a liberal feminist approach in elevating Fuller's worth to that of a leader and barrier breaker. More research is needed to examine how feminist-centered images can limit objectification of women in sport, while also improving marketing and user perceptions of female athletes in the media (Coche, 2017; Fink, 2015; Kane et al., 2013). Thus, this research supports the use of liberal feminist lenses in future research exploring the nexus of women in sport, social media, and objectification.

Oppression. Verbal force in the form of oppressive comments was a popular form of degradation by anti-feminist users, supporting literature noting how social media can facilitate “darker behaviors” from fans and further oppress female athletes (Cole, 2015; Kavanagh et al., 2019, p. 557). Cole (2015) notes this is a form of anti-feminist backlash aimed at athletically successful women. Similarly, some users were surprised by the celebration surrounding Fuller. However, oppressively commenting about Fuller feeds into the idea that this was a big enough deal to comment and express negative emotions at all. Burke (2010) contends that “participation in these male sporting competitions by women may challenge some of the discourses that reproduce the wider oppressions that women feel” (p. 21). Thus, commenters, particularly men, might feel the need to express anti-feminist views to maintain power over historically male-only sports arenas.

In advocating for women in historically male-dominated fields, scholars can use liberal feminist lenses to examine intercollegiate athletics, the media, and fandom. Through such lenses, women's oppression in sport can be disputed and more feminist perspectives in sport can be advanced. Many commenters advanced liberal feminism through counter-oppressive statements, posting that Fuller was “making ‘HERstory.’” Using “HERstory” instead of history may be viewed as one way to further center women in this moment, challenge oppressive commenters, and lift Fuller up. Antunovic and Whiteside (2018) find that male expressions of power continuously find ways to “reinvent themselves to produce new logics for women's oppression”

(p. 112). Thus, as women in sport continue to make strides toward equality, anti-feminists will find ways to create new barriers. To counter these anti-feminist attitudes, the presence of feminist perspectives in the literature are necessary as they break down barriers, foster improved understanding of women's experiences in sport, and catalyze changes toward women's equality (Birrell, 2000; Hoeber, 2008).

Stereotypes & Gender Roles. Other negative comments attempted to perpetuate traditional stereotypes and gender roles, buttressing previous scholarship noting that the public wants female athletes to remain feminized (Daniels, 2012; Fink, 2015; Kane et al., 2013; Kauer & Krane, 2006). It is likely that many of these commenters are not used to seeing women suit up in football gear and play with the guys, which could make them uncomfortable (Burke, 2010). Additionally, images of women playing football may contribute to men feeling threatened that one of their male-dominated areas is no longer theirs. When sport is “contextualized within a male-dominated structure, conventional expectations of femininity rule the day” (Kane et al., 2013, p. 273). Liberal feminist theory can dispute this male-dominated structure and expectations of femininity.

Positive commentary denounced stereotypes and gender roles related to women in general and Fuller in particular. Because prior literature notes that stereotypes can play a role in directing women's behaviors (Szymanski et al., 2011), research using liberal feminism can help break down obstacles like stereotypes and gender roles and advance this lens in further support of women in athletics (Birrell, 2000; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013).

Patriarchy. A liberal feminist lens is beneficial in highlighting how patriarchy cultivates and maintains a male-centered world, especially in sport (Burke, 2010). One user discussed how the women playing football before Fuller had poor experiences, even adding that Hnida had been raped by a teammate (McManus, 2020). By bringing in the negative experiences of prior women in football, this user could have seen their comments as a way to prevent other women from entering the sport, therefore maintaining men's power and privilege in football. In a feminist analysis of Twitter users' rape threats against women, Cole (2015) argued that these commenters sought to “discipline feminists into silence while simultaneously proclaiming that their version of rape is somehow funny, somehow safe, and somehow different” (p. 357). Such comments trivialize the experiences of female athletes. However, as scholars continue to use liberal feminism to explore commentary about women in college athletics, women's experiences will be elevated, potentially replacing patriarchal thoughts and systems that currently have a stronghold in the literature and in American intercollegiate athletics (Burke, 2010; Scraton & Flintoff, 2013).

Some positive comments did challenge patriarchal attitudes. For example, many commenters called Fuller the “GOAT” or a “beast.” Such statements are generally saved for male athletes. Thus, it can be inferred that many saw Fuller as an equal to, or higher than, the men on her team, advancing the ideals of liberal feminism that women and men are equals. Similarly, it is possible that women competing in men's sports will eventually provide evidence that many women can athletically outperform men (Burke, 2010). Furthermore, Hoeber (2008) argues that when women are supported and compete in traditionally men's only sports, they are able to alter the game and potentially shift the patriarchal nature of sports. Through a liberal feminist perspective—in scholarship and practice—these actions help barriers to equality come down (Birrell, 2000).

Other. Finally, some comments did not fall into the above categories related to liberal feminist theory and were classified as “other.” Future scholarship using liberal feminism to examine similar cases should look at ways to further extend this theory to other tenets beyond objectification, oppression, patriarchy, and stereotypes and gender roles. Much of the negative comments related to VU using Fuller as a publicity stunt and commenting that she was enjoying the glory. It is probable that negativity found in commenter remarks stems from the ability of these users to “hide” behind social media accounts, expressing negative or demeaning comments without fear of serious repercussions (Cole, 2015). Positive comments in the “other” category consisted of users being proud, emotional, and excited about witnessing this moment in college sports. It is probable that users with comments categorized in this area, especially alums, were happy that their institution was the first to empower a woman to compete in Power Five football. Additionally, those who noted being emotional and excited maybe did not anticipate seeing something this eventful during their lifetime.

Using liberal feminist theory it is clear that female athletes encounter objectification, oppression, stereotypes and gender roles, and patriarchal attitudes on social media. However, it is also clear that fans and users can employ liberal feminist theory to directly counter such anti-feminist attitudes and beliefs. Thus, this research supports the use of liberal feminism theory in sport studies, particularly those examining the experiences of female athletes and social media. Scholars should continue to use liberal feminism as this theory can promote women in sport and elevate their voices (McAfee, 2018). Additionally, this perspective, as with other critical lenses, can center historically marginalized groups and enable scholars and their audiences (i.e., practitioners) to have a more well-rounded understanding of female athletes and the environment in which they compete.

Practical Implications

This research offers practitioners in athletics the opportunity to better understand a contributing factor—social media—to the athlete experience. One recommendation is for continued or increased education and training for both athletes and administrators on how to manage social media. Scholars have noted that social media brings with it benefits, but also risks for college athletes (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson, 2018). For example, social media provides opportunities for athletes to engage with fans and one another, gather support and information, and engage in advocacy efforts for causes important to them, such as social justice (Li et al., 2020; Sanderson, 2018). However, social media also opens doors for critical fans. Browning and Sanderson (2012) note that “the fact that student-athletes are amateurs and students appears to be lost on some fans, who feel the need to lambaste” this group via social media when they do not perform to expectations (p. 513). Such attacks were brought into the spotlight during the 2021 March Madness tournament when athletes such as Ohio State University’s E. J. Liddell received threats on social media from fans after his team lost (Eisenberg, 2021).

Similarly, with Fuller’s case, much of the commentary was negative, degrading, and anti-feminist, thus, social media education programs could hone in particularly on unsupportive or challenging content or pressure. This may be increasingly important in order to cultivate holistic identity development of athletes. Browning and Sanderson (2012) found that athletes responded to critical tweets and attacks on their identity in a variety of ways from ignoring fans to actively engaging with fans on social media. This highlights the importance of athlete development

administrators in ensuring that such unsupportive commentary does not come to influence how athletes see themselves. Similarly, Krane and colleagues (2010) find that female athletes are aware of their contradictory identities as athletes and women and the negativity this can spark from others, so preparing them for this potential is important.

Many athletics departments already train athletes on how to handle social media as these platforms grow in importance, prevalence, and immediacy for the age range athletes fall into (Sanderson, 2018). With the addition of athlete benefits from the use of NIL it seems probable that athletes will spend even more time on social media to endorse brands or promote themselves (Maestas & Belzer, n.d.). In fact, in evaluating the worth of some of the top college athletes based on Instagram followers, Maestas and Belzer (n.d.) found that athletes' yearly endorsement potential was quite high. Unsurprisingly, the most lucrative deals were those with athletes in football and men's basketball, with some athletes reaching upwards of \$700,000. However, next on the list were high profile female athletes competing in gymnastics and women's basketball who they estimated could bring in almost \$500,000.

Based on athletics culture and the data presented above, athletes might experience heightened pressure to post on or engage with social media and encounter more negative users and fans. Thus, administrators can better prepare them to handle such comments and experiences. This could be particularly relevant for women in sport as women are most often the victims of abuse on social media platforms (Cole, 2015). For example, previous research notes that showcasing the athleticism of women in sport rather than sexualizing them results in more positive perceptions from viewers and fans (Daniels et al., 2021; Fink, 2015). Thus, educators helping athletes manage their social media should use this information, promoted by liberal feminism, and encourage athletes to post videos and action shots. This may decrease negative commentary and also highlight women's athleticism. This extends liberal feminism into the culture of the athletics department and can promote a more supportive experience for women in sport.

In a similar vein, Fuller's case demonstrates the significance of promoting athletes, and athletics departments should continue to advocate and support their athletes in all their endeavors whether that be athletically or socially, or in the case of Fuller, both. Administrators in marketing and athlete development should consider how to use social media to cultivate a community of support for athletes and their programs. Barnett and Hardin (2011) argue that a sense of community is critical to women's participation and success in sport and a valued component to liberal feminism. With the rise in popularity and use of social media, this community is extended beyond those athletes meet in person to those they engage with on social media. Thus, this commentary from the online community could be significant for female athletes competing, especially those seeking access to traditionally male-dominated sports and breaking gender barriers. While some social media users might say positive communities are already present, the majority of comments in this analysis challenge this idea. Administrators and athletes could come together to discuss ways to use social media that allow for free speech, while supporting various perspectives and experiences without being exclusive.

Finally, much of the literature concerning marketing and women in athletics highlights the importance of the ways in which female athletes are framed on media platforms (Daniels et al., 2021; Darvin & Sagas, 2017; Fink, 2015). Thus, administrators should pay close attention to how they promote their women's sports and athletes (Coche, 2017; Darvin & Sagas, 2017). Darvin and Sagas (2017) explored how sexist language toward and images of women influenced consumers' behaviors, motives, and interests in a fictional women's athletics event. The

researchers found that when promotional material contained sexist language and imagery, the potential consumers expressed lower expectations about the event. The potential consumers also noted a lesser likelihood that they would want to watch the event if sexism was present in the promotion (Darvin & Sagas, 2017).

The findings of this work highlight the importance of showing active imagery of women in college athletics. Such active imagery and promotion is more likely to spark interest in the athletes and the event (Daniels, 2009; Daniels et al., 2021) and can even lead to improved event attendance and fan engagement. Such positive promotion and engagement bolsters the use of liberal feminism in sport research and practice. In a time where most women's teams do not receive the same publicity as men's teams, this could be crucial in shifting local, and potentially national, opinions of women in sport and continuing the increase in demand for women's athletics (Cooky et al., 2021). Similarly, the more that pictures elevate female athletes as elite performers circulate, the better the chance to change traditionalized feminist ideals and limit some of the anti-liberal feminist perspectives expressed by commenters on many of Fuller's posts.

Together, social media and athletics departments can provide athletes the ability and the platforms to break through barriers. As college sport continues to grow and adapt, it is likely that another non-traditional event, such as Fuller's kick-off, will occur. Thus, this study offers a way scholars and practitioners can learn from this historic event and apply this knowledge to future cases. For example, it is likely, that Fuller opened the door for more women to express interest in football or other male-dominated sports. As the relevance of social media continues to grow (Li et al., 2020; Sanderson, 2018) scholars and practitioners in athletics can use data provided from social media platforms to further our understanding of this intersection of sport, gender, and other areas such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation and identity.

Limitations & Conclusion

There are a few limitations with this data set. First, commenters can be blocked or muted by those monitoring the Vanderbilt accounts. Thus, someone who stated something particularly heinous could have been prevented from continuing to comment. Second, some comments may have been added or deleted since data collection took place. Third, the researcher did not investigate the gender identity of those commenting on these posts and future research could examine this area. However, because this data is publicly available, reliability of this research is maintained (Nowell et al., 2017). Finally, this study did not examine Fuller's own Instagram. However, future research may consider exploring athletes' Instagram, social media posts and commentary to compare this to what is commented on department-managed accounts.

Despite these limitations, this research adds a novel contribution as it examines a unique data source, Instagram comments, while also employing liberal feminist theory to explore a historic case in college athletics. While a host of the news coverage and press about Fuller was relatively positive (Forde, 2020), this analysis shows an opposite pattern on social media as the majority of comments supported objectification, oppression, traditional female stereotypes and gender roles, and patriarchal control of college athletics. With this in mind, McManus (2020) contended, "Fuller's story is inspiring, and her approach to pressure is excellent, but it isn't to be confused with systemic progress" (para. 5). Scholars and practitioners alike must continue to advocate for and study the intersection of women in college sports to better the experiences of the next generation of female athletes.

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