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AUTHOR	Riikka Turtiainen
TITLE	'Dare to Shine': Megan Rapinoe as the Rebellious Star of the FIFA Women's World Cup 2019
YEAR	2021
DOI	https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83982-936-920211013
VERSION	Author accepted version
CITATION	Turtiainen, R. (2021), "'Dare to Shine': Megan Rapinoe as the Rebellious Star of the FIFA Women's World Cup 2019", Dashper, K. (Ed.) Sport, Gender and Mega-Events (Emerald Studies in Sport and Gender), Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 133-148. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83982-936-920211013

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Post-print

Riikka Turtiainen

‘Dare to Shine’: Megan Rapinoe as the Rebellious Star of the FIFA Women's World Cup 2019

FIFA Women's World Cup France 2019: From Marginal to Mainstream

Research findings have proved for decades that there is gender inequality in the sports world. Women's sport has a secondary status compared to male sports, and women's sports media coverage, especially in ‘masculine’ team sports, has failed to evolve much (e.g. Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015; Domeneghetti, 2018; Fink, 2015; Kian, Bernstein, & McGuire, 2013). However, there has been a lot of positive progress around media coverage of women's football recently.

In 2019, the FIFA Women's World Cup eventually turned into a mega-event. The official slogan of the tournament was ‘Dare to Shine’, reflecting the desire for the empowerment of girls and women through the sport. The viewing figures prove that the popularity of the women's game is truly growing: FIFA (2019) announced that over a billion people watched the event worldwide and over 82 million viewers watched the final game live. Coverage on digital platforms was accessed by 481.5 million people. Consequently, there is no longer room for excuses such as: ‘there is no interest in women's football’ or ‘the quality of the game is poor’ (see also Sherwood, Osborne, Nicholson, & Sherry, 2017). It seems that, finally, male sports followers also realise the true skills and athleticism of top female football players. One reason for that was the investment in the television broadcasting: in many countries the World Cup games were shown for the first time, with pre- and post-game programmes, and analysed closely by the studio hosts and guest specialists. The mainstream media has a responsibility for promoting women's sport and right now is the culturally relevant moment for a change in mentality. Furthermore, increasing numbers of followers and greater media coverage assist women's football to attract more sponsors (e.g. Finstad-Milion, Rethore, & Stengelhofen, 2019;

Leberman & Froggatt, 2019). FIFA has now recognised the growing interest in female football and the commercial opportunity it offers. As FIFA President Gianni Infantino (FIFA.com, 2019) has articulated:

More than a sporting event, the FIFA Women's World Cup 2019 was a cultural phenomenon attracting more media attention than ever before and providing a platform for women's football to flourish in the spotlight. The fact that we broke the 1 billion target just shows the pulling power of the women's game and the fact that, if we promote and broadcast world-class football widely, whether it's played by men or women, the fans will always want to watch.

In mainstream media, presentations of female athletes have long been trivialised by focussing on their personal lives and appearance emphasising femininity or by comparing their performance with men (Black & Fielding-Lloyd, 2019; Kane, LaVoi, & Fink, 2013; Petty & Pope, 2019; Ravel & Gareau, 2016). During the FIFA World Cup France 2019, female football players did not just gain widespread publicity but they were also treated in public with respectful interest based on their athletic performance. This is a significant improvement in contrast to the previous World Cup tournament in 2015 when Gordon Parks commented in the *Daily Record* that a mediocre version of the male game was being given a profile way beyond what it deserves. Among other things, FIFA published a profile of US forward Alex Morgan before the 2015 semi-final game and highlighted her physical appearance as 'very easy on the eye and good looks to match'. Moreover, the Football Association in England welcomed its bronze medallists home with a patronising tweet: 'Our #Lionesses go back to being mothers, partners and daughters today, but they have taken on another title – heroes' (Turtiainen, 2015).

In recent years, social media has served as a tool for more diverse (self-)representations for female athletes (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hayes Sauder & Blaszkka, 2018; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Turtiainen, 2015), although many of them have taken advantage of it in quite conventional ways (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a). It has been argued that, through social media, athletes can connect directly with their audience without the necessary presence of the mass media and without having their messages filtered through the public relations departments of sports organisations and mainstream-media outlets (e.g. Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, &

Greenwell, 2010). Certainly, there are sport federations, organisations, clubs and sponsors who want to control athletes' online behaviour; however, social media may provide athletes with a chance to bring forth issues that are not covered by mainstream media.

During the FIFA Women's World Cup France 2019, one female player eclipsed others in terms of media attention. Megan Rapinoe was impossible to ignore: the US Women's National Soccer Team won the World Cup and she was awarded the most valuable player and top scorer of the tournament. She was also named Player of the Match in the World Cup final where she was the oldest (34) woman to score. Later the same year she was crowned the Best FIFA Women's Player and Ballon d'Or winner. She was also named Sports Illustrated's Sportsperson of the Year, only the fourth woman to win in the award's 66-year history, and honoured with the Glamour Woman of the Year award, together with Margaret Atwood and Greta Thunberg among others. In her speech at FIFA's The Best awards gala, she spoke out against racism, homophobia and the pay gap in football (Wrack, 2019). Before the FIFA World Cup tournament, 28 members of the United States team had sued the country's soccer federation over gender discrimination concerning pay equity and working conditions (see Cooky & Antunovic, 2020). At the World Cup itself, Rapinoe stole the show on and off the pitch and made repeated headlines for her athletic performance and fight for equality.

Rapinoe tends to be outspoken on multiple forums: she was the first white athlete to follow Colin Kaepernick's example and knelt during the national anthem before the National Women's Soccer League game 2016 in protest against racist injustice in the United States. Later, when Rapinoe had repeated the act of kneeling, the United States Soccer Federation instigated a policy to require players to stand during the national anthem (Schmidt et al., 2019; see also Clarke, 2019). After Rapinoe's first kneeling act, Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, and Spencer (2019) analysed 56,402 user comments from Megan Rapinoe's Facebook page where she was labelled as anti-American, anti-military, and anti-nationalist. The common opinion in social media was that she should not mix sports and politics. But Rapinoe seems not to care about her controversial image. She is an unapologetic activist-athlete icon who, at the FIFA World Cup

2019, used her platform to act as a spokesperson for minorities and stand against discrimination in general.

Now that athlete activism – speaking out against perceived injustices, raising awareness and fostering dialogues around issues of inequality in and out of sports culture – has become more prominent due to the political movements like #metoo and #blacklivesmatter, it is relevant to examine how athlete activists use their social media platforms alongside physical acts as part of their protest activities to understand the new reality of activism in the digital age (Cooky & Antunovic, 2020; Galily, 2019; Schmidt et al., 2019). With that in mind, in this chapter I examine how Megan Rapinoe became ‘the sportsperson of the year’ in 2019. I do that by answering the following questions:

- What did she publish on her Instagram profile during the FIFA Women's World Cup France 2019?
- How did the mainstream media treat her performance on and off the football field?

Theoretical Framework

Previously, feminist sport studies has debated exclusion, marginalisation, trivialisation and sexualisation of female athletes, but a new kind of ‘mainstream feminism’ produces different articulations of femininity (Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017, p. 372). This post-feminism can be seen either as an anti-feminism – when feminism seems not to be needed anymore – or as an attempt to re-join femininity with liberal feminism when women want to be both feminine and politically active (e.g. Tredway, 2020). Postfeminist rhetoric emphasises women's autonomy, choice and empowerment. Consequently, as active subjects, female athletes are ‘personally responsible for their own successes or failures’ (Toffoletti, Francombe-Webb, & Thorpe, 2018, p. 7; see also Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a). Similarly, neoliberal ideologies value individual empowerment, personal responsibility and entrepreneurial subjecthood, and according to Kim Toffoletti et al. (2018), female athletes therefore adapt media-savvy, body-focussed and entrepreneurial strategies. Altogether, in neoliberal post-feminist ideology, women are

encouraged to become individualised entrepreneurial agents: ‘Simply, women who are able to individually overcome structural inequalities and obtain economic independence and success are celebrated as feminist subjects’ (Thorpe et al., 2017, p. 372). These neoliberal feminist subjects are typically white, middle class, heterosexual and not concerned with equality, wage gaps and domestic violence (Tredway, 2020).

In this chapter, as my theoretical framework, I utilise Kim Toffoletti's and Holly Thorpe's (2018a) feminist thematic analysis of sportswomen's self-representation on social media. They explored how social media is used by female athletes to represent and promote themselves and their sport within a neoliberal and post-feminist context. As part of that, they discovered three strategies that female athletes adopt for constructing their identity and marketing themselves online: *self-love*, *self-disclosure* and *self-empowerment*. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) analysed social media profiles of five top individual athletes: tennis players Serena Williams and Maria Sharapova, wrestler Ronda Rousey, racing driver Danica Patrick and surfer Alana Blanchard. In this chapter I test their results in the case of a team sport athlete, using the same thematic categories when analysing Instagram posts of football player Megan Rapinoe. Except for Maria Sharapova, all the athletes analysed by Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) are Americans, as is Rapinoe, but in other ways Megan Rapinoe's public profile seems to differ from the other athletes. Although Rapinoe is white, she is an openly gay female athlete with a non-heteronormative outlook. However, in the discussion below I consider to what extent Rapinoe uses the same strategies to promote her own agenda. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) argue that less controversial and political female athletes who do not challenge gender norms have larger social media followings. Despite (or because of) their research findings, it is interesting to examine how Megan Rapinoe managed to achieve the status of the ‘soccer superstar’ and the sportsperson of the year while promoting her outspoken and, for some sports people, controversial statements against discrimination in social and mainstream media during the FIFA Women's World Cup France 2019.

Methodology

According to Toni Bruce and Dunja Antunovic (2018), feminist sports media scholars are facing multiple methodological challenges when potential sites of research such as new apps and social media sites are expanding and changing rapidly. They require new methodological approaches (e.g. in-depth cases or digital ethnographies) for a more nuanced understanding of gender in digital sport environments. As a researcher of digital culture, I have employed and developed diverse methods to approach sports-related social media content – both user-produced and mainstream online media-centred. In this particular case, I introduce my method to collect and handle ephemeral Instagram stories. I follow Oren Soffer's (2016) argument about fading (audio)visual social media content as spoken communication. According to Soffer, instant-messaging application Snapchat represents the contemporary grammar of social media when it applies an oral paradigm to extremely visualised content. There is only limited time for viewing the content before it becomes inaccessible – like spoken words fade away and disappear. Similarly, to Snapchat, Instagram launched (in 2016) its Stories feature which allows users to add text, drawings, emoticons, filters and augmented reality stickers to temporary (24 hour) images or video clips. I considered those Instagram stories as a part of an oral paradigm when I handled my research material, without downloading or recording the content itself anywhere. My material collection method respects the ephemeral social media content and maintains its authenticity by paying attention to the production context. I watched all the Instagram stories when they were available in the application. I wrote down ethnographic field notes about them without taking any screenshots or capturing moving images. I regard this as an ethical decision when Instagram stories are not originally meant to be permanent social media content. They have been created to be momentary glimpses impossible to return to after a certain time frame – not to be archived to the researcher's computer to watch again and again. That said, the privacy of public figures, such as Megan Rapinoe, can be considered to be narrower than other private individuals when posting publicly on social media, so it is ethically acceptable to include their publicly posted social media content within research, without

gaining their explicit informed consent (see TENK, 3/2019, p. 57; Townsend & Wallace, 2016, p. 10).

Initially, I chose to follow eight players from the quarter-final teams attending the FIFA Women's World Cup France 2019. I observed their ephemeral Instagram stories published from the quarter-finals to the final game and for a couple of days after it (27 June–9 July 2019). The players were Caroline Graham Hansen (Norway), Lucy Bronze (England), Wendie Renard (France), Megan Rapinoe (USA), Sara Gama (Italy), Shanice Van De Sanden (Holland), Dzseinifer Marozsan (Germany) and Nilla Fischer (Sweden). The players I selected had significant roles in their teams, they represented different ethnicities and were at least relatively active on social media. I categorised their Instagram stories according to my own previous categorisation of female athletes' social media content (Turtiainen, 2016) to see what themes these football players were presenting overall in their posts. I asked how they were presenting themselves as professional female football players and what kind of topics they were dealing with in their Instagram posts. I was interested to see if they used social media as a tool for influence by speaking out for societal and political issues or raised awareness of equality among (sports) people.

Afterwards, I chose to focus in this study on Megan Rapinoe because she stood out from the other athletes with her outspoken posts. I have examined previously (Turtiainen, 2016) female team sports athletes who use social media to express their stance and values about gender (Finnish ice hockey player Noora Rätty), sexual orientation (Swedish football player Nilla Fischer) and ethnicity (Māori rugby player Portia Woodman), so I wanted to perceive how Megan Rapinoe utilised the media attention – both social and mainstream media – during the FIFA World Cup to get her voice heard. In addition to Rapinoe's social media content, I went through online mainstream media publications which were framing her image and actions regarding the FIFA World Cup. At the beginning of the tournament (June 2019) Rapinoe had about 650, 000 followers on her Instagram profile (<https://www.instagram.com/mrapinoe/>) and at the end of the year 2019 there were over two million of them. She published 61 ephemeral

Instagram stories in the time frame beginning from the FIFA World Cup quarter-finals and 27 still posts during the whole tournament. I also included those still Instagram posts in my research material when I analysed her pathway to becoming the respected rebel of the FIFA Women's World Cup France 2019.

From Self-love to Equal Love

The first of Toffoletti and Thorpe's (2018a) strategies by which female athletes construct the self online includes bodily self-esteem and acceptance. They discuss an Instagram selfie of Serena Williams as an example of making a Black female body visible in an empowering way. Williams brands herself as authentic and accepting by following the body-positive discourse (about the 'love your body' discourse, see Gill & Elias, 2014). Another example is photos where athletes pose without makeup, celebrating their 'real' and natural looks. When attached to this post-feminist discourse, the rules of bodily objectification and sexualisation of female athletes become redefined. These kinds of posts were common across Toffoletti and Thorpe's (2018a) research material and can be understood as branding the athletic self as a gender-progressive subject, challenging unrealistic body standards. But according to them:

What is being 'sold', then, in a neoliberal marketplace is the female athletic body as a gendered product through which consumers can feel good about themselves without having to seriously challenge or question a sport culture that reproduces inequality on the basis of race and gender. For the followers of these athletes on social media, what they are being encouraged to relate to is not a highly trained, elite female athletic body that troubles the idea of male sporting superiority, but messages of women's self-esteem, self-worth and body confidence. (pp. 27–28)

Megan Rapinoe represents diverse femininity with her lavender dyed short hair that became her trademark during the FIFA World Cup. In her Instagram posts she seems a thoroughly self-confident athlete. Occasionally she gives a rather 'arrogant' impression of herself by not being afraid to take up space, express herself and be proud of her achievements, which is a part of her habitus and her way to express self-love. She breaks boundaries of traditional femininity by being slightly rough and loud and encourages her followers to 'be themselves'. During the FIFA World Cup, the discourse around her was less about her appearance than it was about the impression she gave through her behaviour. With her unapologetic attitude she certainly annoys

some football followers, but that can be construed as an intentional message saying ‘you do not have to please everyone’ (see, e.g., Brockes, 2019). After the FIFA World Cup, the New York Post's Kyle Smith (2019) named Rapinoe as ‘America's anti-sweetheart’ and described her as ‘arrogant, abrasive, sanctimonious, whiny, humourless, unpatriotic, self-important and immensely boring’. Rapinoe herself pointed out that there is a double standard for women in sports as male sports stars can be called arrogant in a positive way but female athletes should be humble in their success (Casey, 2019; see also Darvin & Pegoraro, Chapter 3).

One expression of Rapinoe's self-esteem is her signature pose, which became a symbol of her confidence and the fight for equality during the FIFA World Cup. She did the ‘arms-wide goal celebration’ with a satisfied expression on her face six times during the World Cup, and when she was asked about the origin of the pose in a *New York Times Magazine* interview, she explained:

It was probably born out of a little arrogance. Like, are you not entertained? What more do you want? And it was sort of saying to Trump – but more to detractors in general – that you will not steal our joy from us as a team, as the L.G.B.T.Q. community, as America. It was kind of a [expletive] you, but nice. (Marchese, 2019)

After the victorious final game, Rapinoe's post-goal pose ended up on the covers of several newspapers and magazines (e.g., The Washington Post, L'Équipe, Sports Illustrated) and she re-posted those full-page pictures on her Instagram profile. She tends to draw attention to herself through both the pose and her outstanding athletic performance, but after doing so she takes advantage of this attention by using it to question the reproduction of inequality, e.g. homophobia, racism and underestimation of women's football. During the FIFA World Cup her individual actions were framed as catalysts for social change because beside her sport related statements she also used her publicity to raise awareness around issues affecting minorities. Apparently she has adopted the logic of neoliberal post-feminism when acting in a media-savvy way as a marketable role model, but instead of challenging only body standards, as some other female athletes have done, she wants to shake the standards of the whole sports culture and open public debate beyond the sports context as well. In the case of Rapinoe, loving herself

means above all a statement on behalf of an equal love. As an openly gay footballer, her aim is to influence attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people – to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to ‘make the most of their lives’.

Self-disclosure as a Statement

The female team sports athletes I have examined previously present themselves primarily as professional athletes rather than wives, mothers or in other roles previously given them by mainstream media (Turtiainen, 2016; see also Barnett, 2013; Kristiansen & Broch, 2013). They mention their sports achievements on their social media profiles and their sport-related profile pictures are carefully considered self-presentations. The major part of their social media content concerns the team, games, training sessions, awards and sponsors. On the other hand, they also publish lots of selfies and through that practice, these athletes achieve ‘subversive frivolity’, the generative power caused by its ordinariness (Abidin, 2016). By publishing more sports career-related material, they differed from athletes in earlier studies (e.g. Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Lebel, 2013; Sanderson, 2013; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). However, almost all athletes who are active on social media publish posts about their personal lives too, such as photos of family and friends from dinners and holidays, and social connections are expressed with greetings like birthday wishes or by thanking others for support.

Themes within Megan Rapinoe’s Instagram posts and stories can be categorised in the same way as other female team sports athletes I have studied previously. She posted photos and video clips from the World Cup training sessions with her teammates, selfies with ‘how many hours to the match?’ counters, but also photos with her family and girlfriend, basketball player Sue Bird. In such ways she can be compared to football player Nilla Fischer who balances between authentic and strategic posts skilfully when revealing facts about her personal life on social media. When Fischer is on a tournament tour with her team, she dedicates her Instagram posts to her wife by tagging (@) her and writing: ‘I miss you wifey – luckily we will be seeing soon’. But certainly, the posts are not targeted only for her wife because she posts them publicly on her Instagram profile, exposing both her private life and societal values to her fans and

followers (Turtiainen, 2016). Megan Rapinoe acted in the same way at the end of the World Cup tournament when she posted a photo about herself and girlfriend Sue Bird with the caption 'I'm so in love with you. Thank you baby @sbird10'. She also shared the same picture on her Instagram story when 'introducing love of my life'.

One of the dominant features of athletes' social media use has been the opportunity to reveal aspects of their private lives to their followers – or at least create some sense of it. The posts are usually thoughtfully measured, but they should appear to be spontaneous so they can be considered as 'real'. These social media posts are expressions of contrived authenticity and reflexivity, as well as saleable objects (Abidin, 2016). Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) notice how in the case of Ronda Rousey, self-disclosure functions as a form of affective labour. They identify her as a symbol of 'a woman's capacity to strive for something better' (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, p. 25). She is an athlete who has taken responsibility for her own well-being by striving her way to the top of the sports world, coming from a working-class background. She operates in an affective way by revealing something 'authentic' and selling an idea of her own journey and her capacity to relate to other people's difficulties. Rousey is not the 'Do Nothing Bitch' (DNB), as she has branded herself with inspirational and motivational posts on social media. She invented 'DNB' to imply a woman who has no goals or ambitions in her life and is taken care of by someone else (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a).

Megan Rapinoe can be compared to Ronda Rousey because of her background. She is from rural California where she grew up within a big working-class family. During the FIFA World Cup, she published a lot of posts related to her family. Most of her family travelled to France to see her play. They met in Paris during the early stage of the tournament and again two days before the final game on her and her twin sister's birthday, when Rapinoe published Boomerang posts (mini videos that loop back and forth) from a park picnic to her Instagram Stories. Right after the World Cup final, Megan Rapinoe wished 'happy birthday' to Brian on a live television interview. On the same day she posted a photo of him in her Instagram profile with the caption 'Happy Birthday to this rose (only a few thorns) I love you @calihound so proud of you!❤️'

Mainstream media reported that Brian was her brother who had just gotten out of prison to a rehabilitation facility to watch his sister win the World Cup (O'Kane, 2019). By revealing such things from her personal life on Instagram, Rapinoe makes herself more approachable. Her current life may seem glamorous, but distressing family circumstances make her more 'real' and easier to identify with. Through both social and mainstream media she is construed as an authentic fighter – fighting for herself and for others.

Self-empowerment and Politics

There are multiple ways to express self-empowerment present in the social media posts of female athletes. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) focus mainly on sexualised empowerment when analysing their social media material. Athletes can now highlight their heterosexual femininity in the name of neoliberal post-feminism, when in the past, sexual images in male-dominant sports media were considered as objectification. Rather than passive and objectified, feminised selves are promoted as empowered and active subjects. That means Ronda Rousey can post her Sports Illustrated cover photo on her social media profile to celebrate the diversity of women's body types. On the other hand, racing driver Danica Patrick avoids posting sexually alluring photos on social media and performs her inner confidence with 'the right kind of visibility in a male-dominated sport' (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, p. 26). Athletes respond to the market for empowerment with their strong, muscular bodies which articulate assertive femininity – the kind that female athletes are expected to perform in the context of a neoliberal ethos where a flourishing sporting career can be seen as a personal choice (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a).

Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) long for female athletic bodies that break heterosexy norms. As an openly gay, albeit white athlete Megan Rapinoe serves as this 'something else'. In her case, self-empowerment appears in her self-confident performance, as discussed above.

Rapinoe promotes her own products on her Instagram profile, just like Serena Williams and Ronda Rousey. However, the life-style brand re-inc that she has co-founded with three other athletes is gender-neutral. During the World Cup she also promoted the Love is Uninterrupted hoodie she designed together with her partner Sue Bird. They launched a campaign to raise

awareness and funds to protect Black and Brown queer youth against homophobic violence and bullying. Rapinoe published several posts and re-posts on Instagram with the hashtag #loveisuninterrupted. On one of the still posts she wrote: ‘Sue and I designed this hoodie to acknowledge the history of pride and to end homophobic violence and bullying. We collaborated with @melodyehsani on this custom piece to acknowledge, empower and educate allies of #LGBTQ youth of colour’.

Megan Rapinoe mentions empowerment several times in her Instagram posts. Many of those posts are co-operation campaigns, such as the one with Microsoft where Reign FC (Rapinoe's club) players give advice to their younger selves. They explain how sport has shaped their lives as professional athletes, intending to inspire and encourage the next generation of female players. As Rapinoe retells in her post: ‘Here's to empowering today for tomorrow’. She has also posted a video made in co-operation with Visa where she tells her story as a gay athlete and a female football player. On the video, marked with hashtags #dreambig and #betrue, Rapinoe makes clear how seriously she takes her responsibility as a role model. She calls it ‘double earn’ when female players have to do their best as athletes and at the same time help their sport to grow ‘to leave the game in a better place’. Like other female athletes in this ‘neoliberal post-feminist moment’ (see Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, p. 28), Rapinoe is balancing herself between individual empowerment and commercial self-promotion. She is undeniably producing her own brand but at the same time she is openly political in her statements. When Rapinoe was asked in a *New York Times Magazine* interview if she has any sympathy with the idea that sports should be a non-political oasis, she answered:

I don't understand that argument at all. You want us to be role models for your kids. You want us to endorse your products. You parade us around. It's like, we're not just here to sit in the glass case for you to look at. That's not how this is going to go. Yeah, I don't [expletive] with that concept at all. (Marchese, 2019)

During the FIFA World Cup, Rapinoe became involved in national politics in a considerable way when then US President, Donald Trump, became irritated by her. Before the last 16-round game against Spain, an old video of Rapinoe went viral on online media. On the video she was

asked whether the team would visit Donald Trump if they won the World Cup tournament and were invited. Rapinoe gave a laugh and responded: 'I'm not going to the fucking White House'. Donald Trump found it necessary to comment by tweeting: 'I am a big fan of the American Team, and Women's Soccer, but Megan should WIN first before she TALKS!' and 'Megan should never disrespect our Country, the White House, or our Flag, especially since so much has been done for her & the team'. The debate between Rapinoe and the US president resulted in international headlines. Rapinoe 'won the battle' by scoring two goals in the game against Spain and eventually winning the World Cup with the US team. As online memes and some media sites announced after the World Cup final, 'she made America great again' (see, e.g., Clarke, 2019; Keh, 2019).

Megan Rapinoe published several openly political posts on her Instagram profile during the FIFA World Cup. In one of her Instagram stories she re-posted sabre fencer Ibitihaj Muhammad's photo of a berry pie frosted with the US flag and with the text 'Close the camps' on it. Muhammad was the first Muslim American woman who wore a hijab while competing for the US in the Olympic Games. Rapinoe also re-posted numerous 'congratulations' in her stories and one of them was a tweet from Hilary Clinton who reminded followers about the significance of the US team's achievements: 'As we get ready to cheer on the #USWNT in Sunday's final, let's note that they're fighting for equal pay – and their advocacy could help all female athletes. I'm proud to stand with @mrapinoe and this team for fighting to win, on and off the field'.

For Megan Rapinoe empowerment is embracing who you are and simultaneously shedding light on issues to make the world a better place, whether that means fighting for LGBTQ+ and racial rights or pay equity for female athletes. She does not fear the consequences when she posts and says what she thinks. The neoliberal post-feminist discourse is clearly present in everything she does. She emphasises the potential of women who are capable, powerful and successful if they achieve change and have enough space and platforms to show who they really are. According to Rapinoe, the FIFA World Cup France 2019 was a turning point – the question

is no longer *should* women be supported but how it can be done in general (see, e.g., Gregory, 2019; Parker, 2019). Rapinoe herself confirms she will continue to celebrate feminism by being loud and boisterous. As the *Washington Post* put it: '[S]he is an essential rebel: a defiant woman refusing to play by the antiquated be-cute-and-courteous rules that make many men feel better about female athletes' (Brewer, 2019).

Conclusion

As media coverage has an effect on public opinion, top athletes may have a strong impact through their acts on social and mainstream media (e.g. Galily, 2019; Turtiainen, 2015, 2016). Female athletes have become idols and role models within modern society (see Meier, 2015) and, if they want, they now have the opportunity to draw attention to wider issues and inequalities. During the FIFA Women's World Cup France 2019 Megan Rapinoe became the rebel who stood for something bigger than herself. The public discourse around her focused on her athletic performances and the impression she gave with her social criticism. This is noteworthy as women athletes have long been defined primarily by their appearance and their traditional private life roles. The mainstream media raised Rapinoe to become the face of social change on and off the field and she deepened that image herself through her Instagram profile.

In the case of female athletes constructing representations of themselves online, all the self-attributes identified by Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018a) apply also to Megan Rapinoe. She has adopted the neoliberal post-feminist strategy to represent herself as a self-loving role model. On Instagram Rapinoe performs as a marketable, self-confident athlete who encourages her followers to express and be themselves, as the post-feminist ethos of acceptance announces. However, with her lavender dyed short hair she breaks boundaries of traditional femininity by being boisterous. She expresses self-esteem by taking up space (e.g. with her signature pose) and being proud of her achievements. She balances between authentic and strategic Instagram posts and follows the neoliberal strategy of *self-disclosure* by also revealing private matters from her personal life. This – together with things like her working-class background – makes her more 'real' and approachable. Furthermore, Rapinoe emphasises the importance of *self-*

empowerment in her public performances and social media. She sure is a successful and celebrated person herself who has individually overcome inequalities and obtained economic independence, but as an openly gay activist-athlete she challenges heterosexual norms of this neoliberal feminist subject.

Megan Rapinoe is not afraid to put herself in the public eye and receive publicity, but as a team sports player, she is doing this at least partly in the name of her team, female sports, and non-discriminative sports cultures in general. Her team is not just the US World Cup winners or even just female athletes whose task is to help their sport to grow, but all marginalised groups – LGBTQ+, ethnic/racial minorities etc. – and people who support her values. There is certain complexity in Rapinoe's self-presentation and actions since, as a gay athlete, she is a member of a minority group herself, yet at the same time she acts in the name of solidarity, e.g. in support of people of colour. She promotes diversity and inclusion by raising awareness of Black queer youth's discrimination, and simultaneously promotes herself and sells products of her gender-neutral brand, but she does this in an unapologetic way without a need to please anyone. In the context of neoliberal post-feminist ideology this is a contradictory combination and therefore an interesting aspect to pay attention to in future research.

Furthermore, a more intersectional analysis is needed to address the whiteness of feminist athlete-activism since it is commonly available only to privileged white women (see McDonald & Shelby, 2018). Megan Rapinoe was the only player analysed for the project reported on in this chapter who drew attention to wider societal issues during the FIFA WWC, but as a white US player she also had better opportunity than most to gain the mainstream media's attention. As the US Women's National Team player and Rapinoe's National Women's Soccer League teammate, Crystal Dunn, has stated, the face of US women's soccer is that of a white woman. Dunn wants to change this narrative and demands her right as a black female athlete to be a star of campaigns, instead of just being a player (Glass, 2021). Thus, even though Rapinoe was labelled America's anti-sweetheart during the FIFA WWC, she was still suitable for the role of a national hero thanks to her whiteness.

Although Megan Rapinoe is outspoken and challenging, she still contributes to neoliberal agendas through her promotion of corporations and sponsors in association with her views of equality. She utilises her position and strength of character in two ways: to gain attention to her societal message *and* to make her own living. That demands the ability to appear as agentic and confident, and to cause affective feelings of intimacy and inspiration. In sport-specific contexts, this can be understood through the concept of the athletic labour of femininity in order to make sense of complex dynamics and articulations of empowerment, entrepreneurialism, and individualisation (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018b). According to this perspective, Rapinoe's actions can undeniably be seen as a part of a neoliberal post-feminism, but at the same time there is something different in that arrogant and shameless way she acts – a way many male athletes have long acted. She is someone who really dares to shine.

This research was supported by the Academy of Finland project Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies (CoE-GameCult, 312396).

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