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Title: Sportswomen and Social Media: Bringing Third-Wave, Postfeminism and Neoliberal Feminism into Conversation

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Abstract: In this paper, we take seriously the challenges of making sense of a sporting (and media) context that increasingly engages female athletes as active, visible and autonomous, while inequalities pertaining to gender, sexuality, race and class remain stubbornly persistent across sport institutions and practices. We do so by engaging with three recent feminist critiques that have sought to respond to the changing operations of gender relations and the articulation of gendered subjectivities, namely third-wave feminism, postfeminism and neoliberal feminism, and applying each to the same concrete setting – the social media self-representation of Hawaiian professional surfer Alana Blanchard. In aiming to conceptually illustrate the utility of these three feminist critiques, we are not advocating for any single approach. Rather, we critically demonstrate what each offers for explaining how current discourses are being internalized, embodied and practiced by young (sports)women, as they make meaning of, and respond to, the conditions of their lives.

The challenge of how to best theorize issues related to media representation of female athletes has long occupied feminist researchers. The on-going challenges of this project are evident in the size of the research corpus, which includes many thousands of published articles dating back to the 1970s. However, the emergence of new forms of femininity that embrace ‘girl power’, in tandem with the advent of social media technologies such as Facebook and Instagram, have radically altered the ways in which media depictions of athletes are produced, disseminated and interpreted. Indeed, as Karlyn (2010) argues, “popular culture infuses the world in which today’s

young women live, and the face of feminism today, for better or worse, is being written across media culture” (p. 7; also see Cocca, 2014). These factors, amongst others, complicate established interpretations of female athletic representation in terms of exploitation, marginalization, sexualization and oppression, and provoke numerous questions. In an evolving media landscape where seemingly contradictory messages about women athletes as highly sexualized whilst strong and empowered proliferate, how do we understand the workings of gender (in)equality in sport? How might we theorize the ambiguities and multiplicities encompassed in the production of contemporary sporting femininities?

In this article we take seriously the challenges of making sense of a sporting (and media) context that increasingly engages female athletes as active, visible and autonomous, while inequalities pertaining to gender, sexuality, race and class remain stubbornly persistent across sport institutions and practices. Our approach is driven by the belief, shared with other feminist media critics, that “(s)ome of the older critical languages seem to have lost their purchase as a means of grasping gender in the media” (Gill, 2011, p. 63; Heywood and Dworkin, 2003). Our approach to the need for new theories and concepts is to engage with three recent feminist critiques that respond to the changing operations of gender relations and the articulation of gendered subjectivities in a late modern period characterized by fragmentation, uncertainty and risk (Giddens, 1990), namely third-wave feminism, postfeminism and neoliberal feminism. The limited investigation of these feminist critiques in sport studies has prompted us to explore the distinct features that each offers for analyzing and making sense of shifts in representational politics.

Our intention is to offer a roadmap for sport scholars seeking to understand the relationship between third-wave feminism, postfeminism and neoliberal feminism. In discussing the different strands of feminist criticism that have emerged in response to the shifting landscape of feminist and gender politics, we are not advocating for any single approach. Rather, we critically consider what feminist critiques of each of these moments (the third-wave, postfeminism, neoliberal feminism) offers for explaining how current gender discourses are being internalized, embodied and practiced by young (sports)women, as they make meaning of, and respond to, the conditions of their lives. In bringing these theoretical strands into conversation, we do so with the explicit recognition of “the diversity and shifting nature of various feminisms and the fluidity of their boundaries” (Prügl, 2015, p. 615). Moreover, we acknowledge that feminist critique, whilst historically situated, demands we think “comparatively, analyzing how feminists both work within inherited frameworks and respond to the demands of their time” (Zarnow, 2010, p. 295).

In this paper we engage in such comparative thinking by applying three strands of feminism to the same concrete setting – the social media self-representation of 27-year-old, Hawaiian-born, white, heterosexual, professional surfer (and self-proclaimed ‘bikini model’) Alana Blanchard. Although our decision to map theory and undertake original analysis in the one paper is somewhat ambitious and limits our ability to offer a full account of each of these modalities of feminist critique, we see value in our project because it reveals some of the complexities and contradictions in both the operations of gender discourses in sport *and* contemporary theorizing of the production of new sporting femininities. The remainder of this paper consists of three main parts: 1) an overview of literature on female athletes’ use of social media, 2) a discussion of Alana

Blanchard as our case study, 3) readings of Blanchard's social media usage using third-wave feminism, feminist critiques of the operations and logics of postfeminism and feminist interrogations of the neo-liberalising of gender and feminism itself in contemporary culture. These are followed by a brief conclusion in which we consider the strengths and limitations of each feminist approach, ultimately suggesting that a synthesis between these perspectives is beneficial to understand how sportswomen are using social media for personal, political and professional purposes, and how such investments operate in tandem with the global hegemony of neoliberalism (Baer, 2016).

Female Athletes' Use of Social Media

It has been well established across a variety of countries and cultural contexts that traditional media outlets such as print, television, magazines and sport news privilege male athletic endeavours over women's sporting pursuits (Bruce, 2013, 2015).

Quantitative and qualitative research has empirically shown that compared to men, female athletes and women's sports attract limited exposure and poorer quality coverage (Bruce, 2016; Cooky et al., 2013). When women's sport does receive media attention, female athletes are routinely aestheticized, sexualized and trivialized. These representational tactics reinforce gender differences and uphold masculine privilege in sport by positioning women athletes as inferior to a male standard (Bruce, 2013, 2015).

In this context, it has been suggested that social media has feminist potential to challenge dominant representational regimes by providing avenues for female athletes to enhance their visibility on their own terms (Antunovic and Hardin, 2012; Bruce and

Hardin, 2014). As a decentralized, immediate and interactive communication platform, social media enables athletes to create and circulate content with audiences globally, potentially transforming the nature of sport media (Pegoraro, 2010). It provides sportswomen with opportunities to bypass the gatekeepers that control traditional media products, regain some control over how they are represented, and potentially build new audiences. Existing investigations into professional female athletes' use of social media tend to come from a sports marketing approach (e.g., Guerin-Eagleman and Burch, 2015; Lebel and Danylchick, 2012). These studies have identified that sportswomen emphasize their personal lives and sexuality on social media, yet place limited focus on the contemporary gender arrangements and expectations shaping the (self) production of sporting femininities online (Toffoletti and Thorpe, in press). Such accounts have struggled to adequately explain the complex self-renderings of female athleticism that invoke both heterosexiness and athletic prowess, or how the language of female empowerment is used by sportswomen to uphold articulations of ideal femininity.

Scholars of sport and feminism have recently begun exploring how young women use social media as part of their involvement in recreational activities like soccer (Heinecken, 2015), surfing (Olive, 2015), skateboarding (MacKay and Dallaire, 2014), and roller derby (Beaver, 2016; Chananie-Hill, Waldron and Umsted, 2012). These studies examine how social media enables young women to craft and control their own representations in ways that counter stereotypical images of women in sport media. In these approaches, social media use is understood as an activity by which sporting women and girls can construct a sense of collective athletic identity online, and in doing so challenge the presumed 'natural' associations between masculinity

and sport (Heinecken, 2015; MacKay and Dallaire, 2014; Olive 2015). Although the social media content they create and share online is not always directed towards feminist activism, it is nonetheless seen to harbour transformative potential to enable women to construct alternative discourses around feminine sporting subjectivity. While some of this research notes ambivalences in how young women construct their online sporting identities, including the persistence of conventional articulations of femininity and sexuality as they attempt to meet wider social imperatives to appear as both sporting and feminine, there is considerable scope to further investigate these ambivalences.

In the remainder of this paper we consider how three strands of feminist criticism have sought to respond to the changing contexts in which gender relations, identities and representations are conceived and managed, and what they collectively might offer for further understanding the ambivalences and contradictions within sportswomen's use of social media, via the case of Alana Blanchard.

Case: Alana Blanchard in Social Media

A highly competent surfer, Blanchard is best known for her cute 'surfer girl' image and surfing lifestyle that she promotes on various social media platforms. This has gained her a large international following, including 1.9 million Instagram followers (<https://www.instagram.com/alanarblanchard/>), more than 2 million Facebook 'likes' and followers (<https://www.facebook.com/AlanaBlanchardFanPage/>) and approximately 185,000 Twitter followers. Although no longer competing on the World Surfing Tour, by embracing social media for self-promotion and marketing, Blanchard became the highest paid female surfer in the world, earning more than US\$1.8 million

in 2014 from her sponsorships, including Rip Curl, Sony and T-Mobile (The Stab List, 2014).

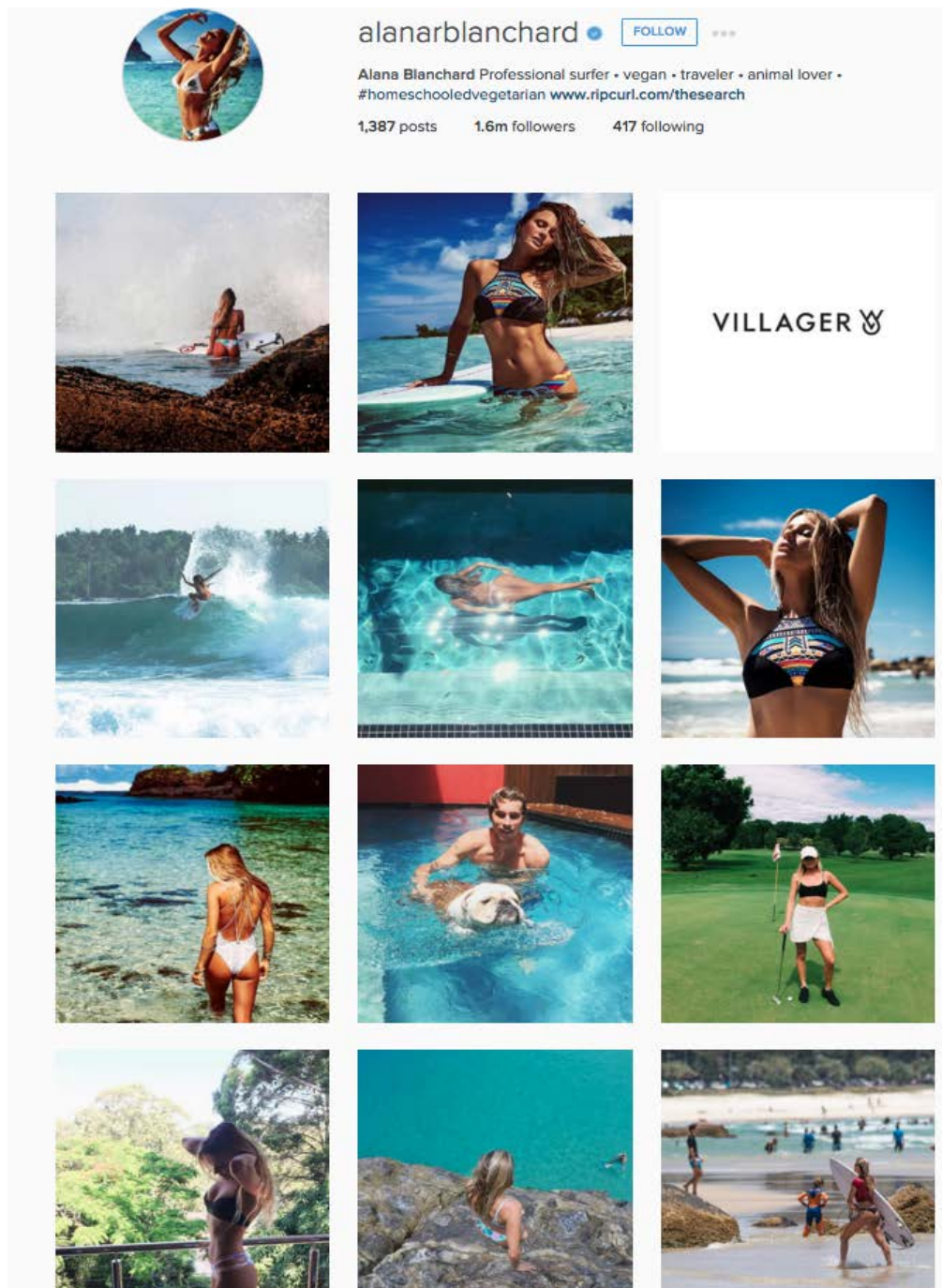


Figure 1.0: Screen grab of Alana Blanchard's public Instagram account (taken February 9, 2016)

We selected Blanchard as our case study not because she is particularly unique in her social media strategies—in fact, many sportswomen are engaging in similar media practices—but because she offers an indicative example through which we can critically consider how third-wave, postfeminist, and neoliberal feminist critiques can advance understandings of the gender politics of contemporary sportswomen. Our intention is to illustrate how these three strands of feminism offer different perspectives on female agency, power and politics, with some placing emphasis on “a wider context of persistent coercion and inequality” and others focusing on the operations of a “language of freedom and choice” (Gill and Scharff, 2011, p. 9).

Although this paper is not an empirical analysis, some details from two phases of observation of Blanchard's social media activity help contextualize our subsequent theoretical discussion. The first, a two-month observation of her Facebook and Instagram feeds (December 2015-January 2016), helped establish some baseline patterns. During this time, Blanchard posted a total of 69 images (some duplicates) on Instagram and Facebook, of which the majority (48%) were related to health, lifestyle, fashion and beauty, followed by surfing performance and training (23%) and then family and friends (18%). The second, an analysis of 123 images on her Instagram feed in April 2016, featured a higher percentage of images of Blanchard in modeling poses (14%) than actively surfing (11%), and the majority (61%) showed her in a bikini, one quarter of which highlighted “the most ogled ass in all professional sport” (Haddad, 2013, para. 8). The majority of images showed her in the ocean or near beach environments. Every fourth or fifth Instagram photo reiterated Blanchard's heterosexuality by featuring her boyfriend.

As a result of social media strategies that emphasize the combination of her athleticism, bodily confidence, an exotic lifestyle (i.e., beautiful beaches and waves around the world), and heterosexiness, Blanchard has gained a social media following that includes men who ogle her bikini-clad physique and post salacious responses, with links to male friends (“best booty in the biz”; “just sent you a PM [private message]”; “do you want to hit that?”). At the same time, many of her followers are girls and young women who envy her lifestyle and strive to achieve her ‘surfer girl’ look (“legit hair goals and color”; “body goals”). Her rapid rise in social media fame—from 450,000 in 2013 (Haddad, 2013) to 1.9 million Instagram followers in 2017—has led to Blanchard becoming a significant figure in contemporary popular culture, regularly featuring on the world’s ‘hottest athletes’ lists and appearing in *Sports Illustrated*. In 2014 *Forbes* magazine identified Blanchard as one of the 30 most influential sports stars in the world under 30.

Third-wave Feminism

In this section, we interrogate the ways that Blanchard’s social media production does, and does not, reflect key concepts articulated by those claiming the label of third-wave feminism. Within the context of considerable debate over what third-wave feminism constitutes, whether or not it represents a ‘wave’ or a generational shift (see Caudwell, 2011) and how it should be theorized, third-wave feminists broadly claim to embrace messiness, complexity, multiplicity, a non-judgemental attitude towards women’s cultural productions, and an attempt to think outside existing gender, sexuality and race binaries (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Chananie-Hill, Waldron and Umsted, 2012; Cocca, 2014; Fernandez, 2010; Garrison, 2014; Gillis, Howie and Munford,

2004; Hewitt, 2010; Scraton and Flintoff, 2013; Zarnow, 2010). We begin with key elements espoused by third-wave feminists, before identifying the limits to applying this approach.

We first identify how Blanchard's Instagram feed produces a wide range of images that support the third-wave focus on "the reclamation of signs of femininity as empowering" rather than disempowering (Cocca, 2014, p. 98). Rather than rejecting signs of femininity, Blanchard embraces them: the majority of images highlight her long blonde hair, and lean, lightly-tanned (white) body in bikini shots or surfing, all of which are markers of idealized youthful, white, western femininity. Thus, Blanchard's social media activity could be interpreted as evidence of the ways that younger women understand the pleasure and power of popular culture, utilize the Internet to tell their own multiple truths, and tell stories traditional media have ignored (Budgeon, 2011; Garrison, 2010; Heywood and Drake, 1997; Nguyen, 2013; Thorpe, 2008a). However, the similarity of Blanchard's Instagram images to mainstream media representations suggest little contestation to existing discourses of femininity that privilege youth, whiteness, heterosexuality and emphasized femininity (Bruce, 2016). A third-wave take on the kinds of images that second wave feminists most often categorize as 'sexualization' (i.e., focus on a sportswoman's body rather than her athletic competence), can lead to quite different interpretations that disrupt the standard focus on (hetero)sexual objectification, reframing such images as an "active self-present sexuality of a body that signifies power and achievement" (Bruce, 2016; Heywood and Dworkin, 2003, p. 83). Discussing cheerleading, Moritz (2011) proposed that "these girls embrace a powerful image of the cheerleader – one that fuses identities of femininity and athleticism" (p. 660) and argues that "cheerleading provides a place

where they do not have to choose between femininity and athleticism – they can be both simultaneously and in a fluid, moving context” (p. 668).

A third-wave perspective also explores the ways that images can do more than one kind of work; that is, they can be simultaneously “*both* empowering *and* oppressive” (Beaver, 2016: 654; Bruce, 2016; Chananie-Hill, Waldron and Umsted, 2012; Cocca, 2014). From this perspective, it is possible to see Blanchard’s social media as an example of the messy multiplicity of images and narratives of femininity and sport. For example, Blanchard appears to take for granted that women can be surfers and achieve successful professional careers, explaining in Episode 1 of the video series ‘*Alana: Surfer Girl*’ that “I just naturally was just always in the water...Every day. Then I started surfing and, I think around... eight I just got super into it and I was like, you know what, I wanna do this. Like, I want to be a pro surfer”. Overall, despite its focus primarily on gender, Blanchard’s narrative and visual arc is one of a life where her gender, age, sexuality and ethnicity are not limiting factors. Although outside of our period of analysis, it is worth noting that in mid-2017 Blanchard’s Instagram juxtaposed her pregnant body alongside images of her surfing: the implication being that early pregnancy had not limited her physical engagement in the sport.

Overall, her representation, especially on Instagram, implicitly supports the third-wave position that views femininity and physicality as an integrated whole: “rather than accepting *either/or* discourses, third-wave feminists argue for a *both/and* perspective that creates space for a ruptural discourse that sees no incompatibility between athleticism and femininity” (Bruce, 2016, p. 368). Thus, through her social media production and known success at (or near) the top of world surfing, Blanchard

embodies the increasingly common “Pretty *and* Powerful” third-wave sportswoman (Bruce, 2016, p. 361).

At the same time, her Instagram feed generally emphasizes her heterosexiness—the Pretty—and downplays her surfing expertise—the Powerful—through featuring more modelling poses (14%) than active surfing (11%) images. Several female journalists have reinforced this imbalance by focusing much more heavily on her physical attractiveness than on her surfing skill. For example, Haddad (2013) explained “all I knew about Alana...was that she was the main bikini model for her sponsors and the only female surfer the guys in the office were interested in, for all the wrong reasons. If you mentioned her name they wouldn’t wonder how she’d handle a ten foot barrel, their eyes would just glaze over and they’d head to their happy place” (para. 1) and Lee’s (2013) description recognises physical competence but places it last in reasons to follow Blanchard on Instagram:

If you've ever dreamed of dying and going to bikini heaven, then you probably want to start following Alana Blanchard on Instagram like ...yesterday. This girl has got everything—the total package. She's absolutely gorgeous, resides in picturesque Hawaii with her adorable little dogs, more or less lives in a bikini and she's a damn good surfer to boot. (paras. 1-2)

In the context of an increasingly commodified and sexualized mediascape that represents male and female athletes as sexy and attractive, the third-wave argument that the sexualization critique “no longer seems to wholly describe what is happening” (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003, p. 85) seems to capture an important shift in feminist understandings of the mediated female body.

Rather than dismissing sportswomen who choose to pose naked, semi-nude or in sexy poses as suffering from “a false sense of empowerment” (e.g., Weaving, 2012, p. 246), third-wave feminists argue that we need to take seriously sportswomen’s own sense-making. Heywood and Dworkin (2003) argue that sportswomen “know exactly what they are doing” and “do not experience themselves as manipulated and powerless” (p. 85). Instead, like many young women who have grown up in the third-wave, they embrace media visibility as a central element of their identities (Cocca 2014; Heywood and Dworkin, 2003). In this perspective, images of nudity or sexiness may send a message of “power, self-possession, and beauty” rather than communicating objectification or sexual access (Heywood and Dworkin, 2003, p. 80). Particularly in sport, through a third-wave feminist lens, the growing popularity and visibility of athletically competent, strong and beautiful female athletes—such as Blanchard—suggests the emergence of a potentially ruptural femininity that steps outside gender binaries and therefore offers the potential to disengage the longstanding articulation of sport and masculinity (Bruce, 2016; Thorpe, 2008b). At the same time, it is clear that this mode of femininity is not available to all—it is primarily sportswomen like Blanchard who embody desirable white western femininities who appear to be best positioned to be valued for, and exploit, their embodiment for strategic gain.

Another third-wave focus is how sportswomen play with and attempt to “undo gender” (Beaver, 2016, p. 639). Kearney (2011), for example, characterizes roller derby as “*the* third wave sport”, arguing that it serves to “explode the conventionally polarized world of gender by combining brute strength, strategic smarts, feisty aggression, confident sexuality, bawdy humor, and whimsical creativity in each

skater's body" (p. 286; emphasis added). Thus, roller derby uniforms can be conceptualized by exponents "as a playful and pleasurable expression of their sexual agency" (Beaver, 2016, p. 654). For others, third-wave feminism includes collective 'stealth feminism' in female sporting cultures and online spaces (e.g., McKay and Dallaire, 2014). Thus, within a "messy multiplicity of feminist activism" (Hewitt, 2010: 7; Hammer and Kellner, 2009), third-wave feminism claims to hold onto ideals of feminism as collective action. Nguyen (2013) describes critical, creative and often subcultural and intersectional third-wave coalitions (such as punk rockers Riot Grrls and radical art collectives Guerilla Girls, Dyke Action Machine and Toxic Titties) as movements and organizations that present "a plurality of oppositional consciousness that speaks to women's anger, creativity, and demands for social and political justice" and "resist capitalism, commodification, and marginalization while continually working to deform and reform tactics that resist co-option" and fight against "a forced 'internalization of sexism'" (p. 167). However, there is little evidence of this perspective in Blanchard's social media production. Instead, as discussed in the following postfeminism and neoliberal feminism sections, Blanchard's public representation is predominantly individualized. In addition, and in contrast to other top professional women surfers such as Carissa Moore (Moore 2014), Blanchard rarely chooses to engage with structural issues of gender inequality and sexism. She does not initiate critiques of structural inequalities in women's surfing on her own social media sites, but has acknowledged the media invisibility of women's surfing competitions. In one interview, she blamed this for why so few people are aware she is a world-class surfer: "nobody sees our contests. We just had a contest in New Zealand, and no one heard about it" (cited in Melekian, 2014, para. 23).

We conclude that turning a third-wave lens on Blanchard's self-representation reveals some important elements of the third-wave related to individual liberation, embrace of physicality, equality and choice, but provides little evidence of the broader "playful, campy, and ironic" cultural productions (Cocca, 2014, p. 100), or intersectional or collective trajectories that some third wave feminist writers argue are critical aspects of the third-wave. Thus, we conclude that the 'feminism' visible in her social media could, at best, be conceptualized as a 'soft' third-wave approach, in which she (re)presents herself as an empowered individual who sees no limits to what is possible as a woman, and embraces physical skill alongside dominant signs of (white, heterosexual, middle-class) femininity as empowering rather than oppressive. This analysis suggests both the weaknesses and the strengths of third-wave feminism for interpreting the complexities of contemporary femininities, including the ways that sportswomen's representations may challenge long-held cultural understandings of gender.

Postfeminism

Since the 1990s feminists have been engaging with the notion of postfeminism in order to make sense of the social and cultural conditions under which feminism has been repudiated as no longer desirable or necessary for women, and how such shifts are related to the expression and regulation of new modes of 'empowered' feminine subjecthood (Brooks, 1997; Genz and Brabon, 2009; Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2004, 2009; Gill and Scharff, 2011). It is within what Angela McRobbie (2004, 2009) describes as the social and cultural landscape of postfeminism that she identifies the complex

relationship between feminism and postfeminism, whereby aspects of second-wave feminism are incorporated into mainstream culture while concurrently being rejected as irrelevant to today's women. Although the meanings and uses of the term postfeminism remain varied and contested, it is generally agreed that two distinct formulations characterise how postfeminism is understood. One dominant way that postfeminism has been viewed is in epistemological and historical terms as the backlash against feminism - a period after second-wave feminism that signals the demise of a particular mode of feminist thinking and activism (Gill and Scharff, 2011). As I note below, this is frequently how postfeminism is invoked in feminist sport studies. The second formulation understands postfeminism as a contemporary cultural sensibility for analysis. Rosalind Gill (2007) suggests that approaching postfeminism as a sensibility can help feminist critics of media and culture understand how the circumstances brought about by a neoliberal, late-capitalist society impact on attitudes towards gender difference/identity/politics. A postfeminist sensibility encourages scholars to examine those instances where postfeminist sentiments, attitudes and discourses are expressed by sportswomen in the media for what they can tell us about gender dynamics of power in our current cultural moment.

It is the formulation of postfeminism as a *sensibility* that we address in this article because of its analytical purchase for engaging with contemporary media representations of sporting femininity and feminism. Engaging with postfeminism as a sensibility has received relatively little attention from feminist sport critics, which is surprising given the influence of postfeminist

criticism as an analytical device in feminist research across a diverse range of disciplines including sociology, gender studies, education, cultural and media studies. Although we can point to some sport literature that deploys postfeminism as a critical analytical term (Francombe, 2010; Francombe-Webb, 2015; McDonald, 2012), it has mainly been invoked in feminist sport research to define the historical period after second wave feminism (Birrell, 2000; Pfister, 2010) and as the context for third-wave feminist praxis (Carriero, 2009; Hall, 2005). Sport research is only just beginning to consider how a postfeminist sensibility might be used to approach sport institutions, cultures, practices and representations as postfeminist objects of critical analysis (Toffoletti, 2016, 2017).

Blanchard's social media posts can be interpreted as emblematic of a postfeminist sensibility, in that they demonstrate a combination of feminist and anti-feminist themes (Gill, 2007). The body confidence conveyed through pictures that show her surfing, and more commonly, posing assertively for the camera in a bikini, evoke second and third-wave feminist discourses of sexual autonomy, freedom and choice to present the self as an active subject and an inspiration to young women (a point made by many of her female social media followers). At the same time, as evidenced in a number of reader comments, such imagery is criticized for perpetuating the objectification and sexualization of women. Even though Blanchard is likely aware of these critiques she renders them irrelevant in her claim that her motivation is "staying true" to herself, "just being happy and healthy and trying not to care about what every other person thinks" (Cianciulli, 2013). It is through the suggestion that

Blanchard is “pleasing herself” (Gill, 2007)—by choosing to celebrate her femininity and sexuality in a way that she is comfortable with—that postfeminism as a cultural sensibility can be seen to operate. From this perspective, postfeminism does not simply stand for the rejection of feminism or a period after feminism but constitutes a distinctive cultural condition that invites and legitimates new articulations of desirable and acceptable femininity, and produces new mechanisms by which sexism and gender injustice flourish (McRobbie, 2004, 2009; Gill, 2011). Postfeminism as a sensibility normalises the framing of Blanchard as personally responsible for her own success, leaving unexamined the structural conditions in which certain types of feminine bodies (in this case, white, slender, heterosexual) are privileged within culture.

Critiques of postfeminism as a sensibility identify and attempt to make sense of the paradoxical, yet commonly accepted scenario whereby women are cast as empowered subjects because they are “assumed to choose to present the self in a seemingly objectified manner” (Gill, 2007, p. 151), much like many of the images on Blanchard’s Instagram feed. For feminist analysts of the media, it is becoming increasingly difficult to critique portrayals of women in contemporary culture that promote mixed messages and locate women as the source of their own objectification. Approaching postfeminism as a sensibility expressed through cultural forms offers sport media feminists a way to move beyond determining whether representations promote ‘positive/realistic’ or ‘negative/unrealistic’ images of women. Rather, it offers a framework through which to understand the effects generated by the

increased complexity, ambiguity and fluidly in media representations of gender. These effects are not understood in terms of the ideological function of images to perpetuate dominant messages about masculinity and femininity—something postfeminist criticism suggests is increasingly difficult to do amidst a diversity and multiplicity of representations of gendered identities (Gill, 2011). Instead, critiquing the workings of a postfeminist sensibility allows us to identify new forms of media sexism that function via neoliberal logics to deflect attention away from wider structural and cultural conditions that sustain gender inequalities. In this regard, a postfeminist sensibility is useful and important, as Gill and Elias (2014) stress “because it draws our attention to the dynamics of sexism as an ongoing set of discourses and practices, highlighting the capacity of media discourses to change and mutate in response to critique” (p. 180).

As a mode of feminist critique, viewing postfeminism as a sensibility is not directed toward personally criticizing Blanchard for the choices she makes in presenting herself. Rather, its emphasis is on revealing the workings of wider culture on how contemporary women are invited to perform and enact their gendered, feminine subjectivities, which includes an unproblematic celebration of individualism, promotion of one’s bodily capital, and a focus on consumerism and choice as a path to self-actualisation. In this regard, the object of postfeminist critique is the set of social conditions under which a cultural emphasis on subjectification, sexualization and the body (all clearly evident in Blanchard’s self-representation) become forms of governing logic under which women internally regulate the self, according to a new set of

criteria whereby women are no longer objects under patriarchy but viewed in the context of neoliberalism and late-capitalism as active subjects responsible for their own self-making. This approach is different to the way third-wave feminism deals with the range of gender performances and identities on offer, which is to defer judgement of individual women's choices by acknowledging and embracing the variety of identities women may choose to occupy.

Through the lens of a postfeminist sensibility, Blanchard's combination of sporting competence and femininity can neither be read as a marker of resistance to gender norms, nor uncritically celebrated as a new, positive, empowered model of sporting femininity. Blanchard acknowledges that, despite willingly presenting herself as a heterosexually attractive, sexy sporting woman on social media, "it's also so hard to see yourself in photos, it's definitely a mind thing. But you have to get over it. I think as a girl...it's hard to be in this industry when they want you to look a certain way. But it's just all about staying true to yourself..." (Cianciulli, 2013). This kind of narrative demonstrates some acknowledgment by Blanchard of the pressures and expectations that women athletes face to gain greater visibility for themselves and their sport, to garner sponsorship and act as role-models. Concurrently, it demonstrates a culturally valorized model of contemporary femininity whereby women are not victims or objects, but seemingly doing what they love (in this case, surfing and modelling).

Drawing attention to a postfeminist sensibility within culture helps us to see the pervasiveness of the language of self-responsibility to find a solution to the demands that women 'look a certain way'. Instead of criticising media

expectations, or demanding structural change to a patriarchal media industry that sustains itself by upholding gender and race difference, Blanchard (like many young women) is consigned to personally managing and navigating the complex terrain of contemporary representational politics. As speaking out on such issues would likely result in what would be deemed self-inflicted damage to Blanchard's image and reputation, the only solution she is empowered to make as an individual is to 'get over it,' and not pay attention to negative commentary online.

Blanchard's Facebook page suggests a privatized form of self-expression, giving the semblance that she is in control and/or making a personal choice in terms how she chooses to present herself (i.e., emerging from the surf in a skimpy bikini and holding a surfboard, looking out over the forest as she stands on her balcony in another bathing ensemble, accompanied by the caption 'Morning Vibes'). The postfeminist sentiments being expressed by Blanchard's social media imagery suggest she takes pleasure in projecting a heterosexy appearance and that she is no 'victim' of patriarchal expectations or regulations; hence she appears to repudiate the need for feminism because gender equality has been reached and the world is an open and exciting place for her to act as she likes, go where she wants and look as she chooses. In reflecting on this aspect of postfeminism, Budgeon (2011) argues that "by asserting that equality has been achieved postfeminist discourse focuses on female achievement, encouraging women to embark on projects of individualized self-definition and privatized self-expression exemplified in the celebration of lifestyle and consumption

choices” (p. 281). And yet, problematically, the appearance Blanchard apparently freely chooses emphasizes bodily displays of dominant femininity in the form of long flowing hair, a slender, toned body, and sexualized appearance (Gill, 2008).

Blanchard’s social media references to her sponsor Ripcurl are salient in light of expectations for young women in a postfeminist age to be self-directed, self-managing and agentic, which intersects with the demands under neoliberalism and late-capitalism for individuals to demonstrate entrepreneurial, flexible, adaptable forms of subjecthood. Under these conditions, any success the female athlete is likely to achieve must be done so through her own motivation, persistence and using the tools at hand. In this case, rebadging sexual objectification as a version of female empowerment—a choice Blanchard is assumed to freely make in order to advance her career/gain sponsorship by promoting her body as an exemplar of empowered and inspirational femininity.

Whereas third-wave feminism embraces the messiness and complexity that characterizes gender representational politics in contemporary times, feminist critiques of postfeminism interrogate how such complexities operate to sustain inequitable gender power relations through recourse to discourses of individual choice and self-making. Gill’s conceptualization of postfeminism as a sensibility thus responds to dominant trends in neoliberal and late-capitalist society, whereby attributes of individual success, empowerment and choice become the governing logics through which femininity, gender difference and social injustice are reproduced and sustained. Despite the

notable shift toward the naming and visibility of feminism in popular culture in recent times, feminist scholars have advocated for an ongoing critical engagement with postfeminism (Gill, 2016). In arguing that new forms of popular feminism actively sustain the depoliticisation of feminism, the value of postfeminist critique resides in its exposition of the remaking of feminism along neoliberal lines as an individualized pursuit that women may choose to take up for the goal of personal emancipation and transformation (Gill, 2016; Gill and Elias, 2014; McRobbie, 2015; Scharff, 2012).

Neoliberal Feminism

As suggested in the previous section, critical feminist media and cultural studies scholarship suggests “a profound relation between neoliberal ideologies and postfeminism” (Gill, 2008, p. 442). The majority of this work has focused on the emergence and proliferation of postfeminism within the social, political and economic context of neoliberalism, with some authors decrying “the growing complicity of certain strands of feminism with neoliberal capitalism” (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 421). For example, Gill (2008) has expressed concern that too many feminist scholars utilising approaches such as third-wave feminism are depicting young women as “unconstrained and freely choosing”, and argued that such analyses seem “trapped within the very neoliberal paradigm that requires our trenchant critique” (p. 436). In a particularly brutal critique, Fraser (2013) places blame on feminists themselves, arguing that the “foregoing of economic analyses, particularly by poststructural feminists” has played a major role in contributing to “the current

merging of feminism with neoliberalism” (cited in Rottenberg, 2014, p. 421). Yet others are exploring in more depth “the emergence of a contemporary mode of feminism profoundly informed by a market rationality” (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 421), and more explicitly considering how neoliberal feminism may be similar to, as well as different from, third-wave and postfeminisms. In this section we consider how recent critical engagements with an emerging modality of neoliberal feminism may offer a framework for contextualizing Blanchard’s self-representation strategies within the neoliberal marketplace.

Based on our readings of Rottenberg (2014) and Prügl (2015), we understand ‘neoliberal feminism’ or the ‘neoliberalising of feminism’ as entailing a “particular machinery of governing women in global markets” (Prügl, 2015, p. 627). In contrast to third-wave and postfeminism, critiques of neoliberal feminism place the emphasis on the market, and consider how women are increasingly encouraged to become entrepreneurial agents in control of their own destinies via careful economic, and very much individualized, strategizing. More importantly, however, neoliberal feminism is the manifestation of a new kind of mainstream feminism, where gender inequality is being called out (rather than repudiated) but responses and reactions to such inequalities are framed by neoliberal discourses of individual entrepreneurialism and economic independence only. Simply, women who are able to individually overcome structural inequalities and obtain economic independence and success are celebrated as feminist subjects.

Feminist sport scholars have long examined the articulations of feminism with (late) capitalism (e.g., Cole & Hribar, 1995), and more recently,

some are engaging explicitly with the intersections of neoliberalism and feminism (e.g., Heywood, 2008; McDonald, 2012, 2015). However, Toffoletti and Thorpe (in press) are among the first feminist sport scholars to critique how sportswomen are internalizing neoliberal discourses of self-entrepreneurialism in relation to their self-branding and use of social media. In the remainder of this section we build on this work by applying a critique of neoliberal feminism to understand Blanchard's entrepreneurial strategies as "contradictory outcomes of the neoliberalisation of feminism" (Prügl, 2015: 615) in the contemporary sports-media-industry complex.

In April 2015, Blanchard announced that she would be opening her own surf modelling agency. According to Blanchard, the company—"The Surf Look"—will "fill a gap in the market": "Basically, there are hundreds of multinational brands - from telecommunication companies to fast-food networks - willing to hire fresh new faces that can be commercially attractive and also pass on a very particular lifestyle with millions of consumers. Surfing sells" ('Alana Blanchard opens', 2015, para. 4). From third-wave and postfeminist perspectives, Blanchard's individual successes might be pointed to as a feminist success (even though she does not discuss them in this way). Yet, recent critiques of neoliberal feminism direct us to pay attention to the contradictory narratives that she embodies as savvy and sexualized, carefree yet calculating. Recognizing Blanchard's entrepreneurial agency, *Surfer Today* wrote: "The Hawaiian bombshell understood there was a missing link in the surf industry market and decided to put on the executive blazer" ('Alana Blanchard opens', 2015, para. 2). Similarly, Chris Cote, surf journalist and

commentator, observed in Episode 1 of *Alana: Surfer Girl*: “She recognizes her marketing potential. That kinda sounds ridiculous, but it’s true!” (‘Surfer Girl’, 2014). In contrast, however, Blanchard rarely reveals the strategizing behind her personal social media representation or, more recently, the branding of other surfing bodies and the lifestyle more broadly. Rather, she suggests her social media fame has been merely by happenstance. In response to a surf journalist, who commented, “It feels like your fame’s tripled in the last year”, Blanchard’s reply implied a lack of intent or strategy: “I don’t know what it is. I try to not pay attention to it all, I guess. I just try to be myself and be happy.... I don’t know why people are drawn to me but it’s cool, I guess.” However, the interviewer followed up, noting that she had 100 thousand more followers than the world’s most famous and successful male surfer, Kelly Slater, to which she offered a more complex response that simultaneously suggests a naïve positioning (“I don’t know what’s up with that”), and an awareness of female power through sexuality (“Maybe he should start posting some bikini pictures”), alongside hints of a critical response to the lack of positive coverage of female surfers (“I don’t know, I just wanna put a positive image out there for women’s surfing”) (Struck, 2013, paras. 6-7). Furthermore, her images as sexy, carefree and apolitical might initially appear to be at odds with the idea of a calculating and strategic subject, yet a neoliberal perspective would suggest that this is actually central to how she can forge a successful brand, as it fits within wider social expectations that women appear authentic and down to earth rather than preoccupied with obtaining fame and wealth. In so doing, she is not seen as a

real threat to men's sense of economic and/or cultural power (whether this really exists is not the point), and thus her apparent self-branding strategies find a place in the current surfing, and broader popular cultural, marketplace.

Critically engaging with neoliberal feminism, we are encouraged to focus our attention on how some contemporary sportswomen, such as Blanchard, may be internalizing neoliberal discourses of the self as autonomous, individual, entrepreneurs whose responsibility it is to make the most of their physical and gender capital as part of their personal branding strategies (Toffoletti and Thorpe, in press). In the opening of her own business, Blanchard has shifted from worker to capitalist, which can be interpreted as the emergence of a neoliberal feminist subject who is, as Rottenberg (2014) explains, "entrepreneurial in the sense that she is oriented towards optimizing her resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation. Indeed, creative individual solutions are presented as feminist and progressive" (p. 422). With a focus on economic motives, ongoing gender-based struggles (e.g., lack of mainstream media coverage of sportswomen), and market- and media-based strategies, a critical engagement with neoliberal feminism may help us critically contextualize the "rise and proliferation of discourses of sexual entrepreneurship" among a growing number of contemporary sportswomen (Harvey and Gill, 2011, p. 52).

Sarah Banet-Wieser's (2015) work on economies of visibility, while not explicitly a form of neoliberal feminist critique, is useful in further developing the arguments of Prügl (2015) and Rottenburg (2015) to consider the market value of female athletes' bodies, with a focus on the political economy of

particular visibilities. Banet-Weiser (2015) explores “how economies of visibility work in an era of advanced capitalism and brand culture, postfeminism, and multiple media platforms”, and adopts a “nuanced account of the *logics and moralities* of both economics and culture as a way to understand how identities are constructed within the economy of visibility” (p. 56). Continuing, she explains that “*the product* in gendered economies of visibility is the feminine body” (Banet-Weiser, 2015, p. 57). Also honing in on the entrepreneurial body-work that many women are increasingly practicing, Elias, Gill and Scharff (2017) develop the notion of ‘aesthetic labour’ to rethink beauty politics in the context of neoliberalism. They argue that in this “moment of ubiquitous photography, social media, and 360 degree surveillance, women are increasingly required to be ‘aesthetic entrepreneurs’ maintaining a constant state of vigilance about their appearance” (no page). Thus, from a critical neoliberal perspective, a hyper-sexual surfing body (her own and others) is a product Blanchard is selling, about which we should ask: who is benefiting from such an economics of visibility, and who may be losing?

It is important to note that while Blanchard might be making a multi-million dollar salary, there are increasing concerns being publicly expressed by other professional female surfers (including Silvana Lima, Carissa Moore, Cori Schumacher), recreational surfers and journalists of both sexes, and surfing academics (see lisahunter, 2016; Knijnik, Horton and Cruz, 2010; Thorpe and Olive, 2014), who believe that the current focus (from both the surfing media and the self-representational strategies of some female surfers, including Blanchard) on young, blonde, bronzed, semi-naked female surfers,

is effectively silencing and marginalizing the increasing diversity of female surfers, who represent different body sizes, ages, ethnicities and sexualities. In so doing, such critics are drawing upon an array of feminist discourses, in some cases second-wave feminism, and in others more third-wave feminist arguments.

In contrast to a third-wave feminist perspective that recognizes the agency of young women to pose in ways that emphasize their sexuality and femininity, recent critiques of neoliberal feminism encourage us to locate discourses of individual freedom and entrepreneurialism within a (severely constrained and brutally inequitable) market place. To paraphrase Prügl (2015), sportswomen's apparent self-subjectification on social media and their arguments of empowerment and entrepreneurialism may be considered an "instance of the neoliberalisation of feminism" (p. 626). Adopting a critical neoliberal feminist perspective, it might also be said that whilst sportswomen such as Blanchard are using the feminist language of women's empowerment and agency (e.g., "it's just all about staying true to yourself"), they are "empty[ing] it of its elements of collective struggle" (Prügl, 2015, p. 626). Within the neoliberal context, empowerment appears to have become "a matter of reshaping responsible selves", with such women increasingly "internally driven to improve themselves" as they become "entrepreneurs and consumers enmeshed in a global market" (Prügl, 2015, p. 626). Thus, a strength of recent critical engagements with neoliberal feminism is that they encourage consideration of the broader context in which female athletes are increasingly positioned as active participants in the global economy.

Moreover, in a neoliberal era the burden of responsibility to effect change/address larger gender inequalities is explicitly put onto individual women themselves and the market is touted as the solution. They are not only expected to self-manage and self-regulate but be sufficiently empowered *through the market* to find their own solutions to wider gender injustices. In the case of female athletes, lack of media attention places expectations on women (not the media) to self-market and produce their brand in order to garner greater visibility and economic opportunity.

While both Rottenberg (2014) and Prügl (2015) offer a somewhat bleak outlook on the growing potency of the intersections of neoliberalism and feminism, they both conclude with optimism and suggestions for future directions. In particular, Prügl (2015) issues a call to arms against the neoliberalizing of feminism and encourages feminist scholars to find better ways of understanding the “conditions under which neoliberalized feminisms provide openings to challenge oppressive power relations” (p. 627). In sum then, a critical engagement with neoliberal feminism requires an understanding of the market forces, and particularly neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurialism, that this perspective argues are being internalized and practiced by sportswomen such as Blanchard, but it also raises concerns about the effects of such actions for women’s positions in the sports-media-industry complex and identifies the necessity for challenging such oppressive power relations. In contrast to third-wave feminism, however, neoliberal feminism has yet to offer suggestions or insights into the strategies necessary to create such change at either the individual or collective levels.

Conclusion

This paper engages with three different strands of feminist critique to think through the self-representation of sportswomen, with a particular focus on Alana Blanchard's use of social media. The intent of this paper was not to argue for one feminist perspective over another, but to consider what aspects third-wave feminism and critiques of postfeminism and neoliberal feminism, might direct research attention towards. As those who have read our individual work may be aware, we have each used a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to examine the media representations of women in sport in different settings (i.e., football, snowboarding, basketball, Olympics) and contexts (America, Australia, New Zealand), as well as the rise of social media for offering new opportunities for sportswomen to represent themselves. Thus, it may come as no surprise that although we write in a collective voice, our individual perspectives and preferences differ. Yet, at the conclusion of writing this paper, we each have come to new understandings of the partiality and limitations of the three feminist perspectives, their points of overlap, as well as the potential of each approach for encouraging different lines of questioning of the multiple and complex operations of gender inequality and the varied strategies being utilized by women in sporting contexts today.

While we recognize the limitations of using a single case study for bringing three strands of feminism into conversation, we hope that grounding our theoretical discussion in the Blanchard example helped illustrate some of

the complexities inherent both in contemporary feminist theorizing *and* in young sportswomen's bodily performances and social media engagements. Furthermore, this collaborative project has highlighted the need for more theoretically-informed empirical research on sportswomen's use of social media, and particularly scholarship that provides space for sportswomen's own voices on how and why they are using social media in multiple, and sometimes paradoxical, ways. In such research, we will likely hear tenets of third-wave feminism, postfeminism and/or neoliberal feminism being expressed by sportswomen, in some cases consciously and politically, and in other cases considerably less so. For some athletes there is likely to be echoes of third-wave feminism in their celebration of the power of their sporting and feminine bodies while for others self-representations of their sporting lives might be an explicitly political act and/or an attempt to problematize long-standing gender binaries. Others may embody postfeminist discourses that suggest we are beyond sexism in sport and thus no longer need collective feminist politics. In such cases, a postfeminist sensibility that draws critical attention to discourses of sportswomen as "active, freely choosing, self-reinventing" subjects (Gill, 2008, p. 443) would be of particular relevance. For some sportswomen, we might hear about their entrepreneurialism in efforts to overcome on-going gender inequities through individual market-based strategies and, in such cases, a feminist critique of neoliberalism could be useful. Certainly, there is much blurring within and across these three strands of feminist thought, and in the ways that women are embodying and practicing gender and gender politics within and across

physical and digital sporting and physical cultural spaces. Third-wave feminism, postfeminism and neoliberal feminism do offer considerably different conceptions of female agency, power and politics that we believe deserve further research, discussion and debate.

This comparative analysis has highlighted some of the strengths and limitations of these three feminist approaches. Feminist analyses of postfeminist and neoliberal feminist sentiments are valuable in helping us to understand the broader cultural conditions that influence how many sportswomen are engaging with social media, particularly as a form of self-branding in the context of neoliberalism. Less clear, however, is how such approaches might guide political action. Third-wave feminism is more overtly political, yet there is a tendency to focus on women's embodied forms of agency while overlooking the broader social forces that continue to shape how sportswomen are conceiving their struggles, strategies and successes in online spaces. Of course, by focusing on Blanchard—a largely apolitical athlete—our discussion of feminist politics in digital spaces was less developed than if we had selected another, more political sportswoman. As noted earlier, some sportswomen and women involved in physical cultures (i.e., skateboarding, surfing) are using social media in political ways. Yet to date, much of the literature exploring such trends has tended to emphasize “the utopian possibilities of digital culture to overcome gender binaries” (Baer, 2016, p. 24). However, as illustrated via the case of Blanchard to understand sportswomen's use of social media platforms, we also need to consider how “commodified self-representation and the widespread dissemination of images

of the material body” may be escalating the demands of hegemonic femininity (Baer, 2016, p. 24). Arguably, new feminist approaches are needed to help us understand this tension between the sportswoman’s digitally represented body as “a locus of empowerment and identity formation” as highlighted by third-wave feminism, and as “a site of control” under constant regulation as highlighted by critiques of postfeminism and neoliberal feminism. Perhaps what is needed then is a type of synthesis between the three feminist approaches discussed herein, or a digital feminism that reflects “both the oppressive nature of neoliberalism and the possibilities it offers for new subjectivities and social formations” (Baer, 2016, p. 17).

While this paper has revealed some of the convergences and divergences in three strands of feminist thinking, it is important to note that scholarship on these approaches has tended to focus on issues relating to femininity/body politics/feminist sentiments in the global North, and often with a focus on white, heterosexual femininities. We acknowledge that by engaging with these strands of feminism, our analysis of Blanchard not only reflects, but in some cases reproduces such limitations. Thus, it is worth noting those instances of feminist scholarship that attempt to productively respond to such criticisms. For example, Scharff (2011) has argued that for many women embracing postfeminist sentiments, their “self-presentation of empowerment” is being “contrasted sharply with the portrayal of ‘other’ women as victims of patriarchal oppression” (p. 119). For those women disarticulating feminism, their empowered selves are often “constituted by the othering of Muslim women” (Scharff, 2011, p. 119); simultaneously it is

exciting to see research emerging on how Muslim sportswomen and women from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are engaging with social media in similar and different ways to women from the global North (Ahmad, 2017). Scholarship on the 'Girl Effect' in development is also critically engaging with feminist critiques of postfeminist and neoliberal feminist moments by exploring how organizational social media representations of girls from the global South works to reinforce existing power relations, and how such representations are read differently (with radically different implications for girls and women) in the global North and South (Calkin 2015; Switzer 2013; Thorpe, Hayhurst and Chawansky, in press). As these examples illustrate, some feminist critiques of postfeminism and neoliberal feminism are invested in exploring how the privileging of white, western hetero femininity are sustained via postfeminist and neoliberal narratives of gender empowerment and equality.

Of course, the feminist approaches that we have focused on in this paper are not fixed but continuing to evolve, and the relations between feminist approaches to the third-wave, postfeminism, neoliberal feminism (and others such as pop feminism and fourth-wave feminism – e.g., Alter, 2014; Chamerlain, 2017; Zimmerman, 2017) are ever-changing. Thus, rather than trying to argue for one approach over another, we hope this paper has revealed the need for ongoing conversations that highlight the “centrality of multiplicity, plurality, contradiction and conflict in all current feminist thinking” (Braithwaite, 2002, p. 342), and particularly how such approaches might further expand our understandings of the complex workings of power on and

through sportswomen's bodies, and the emergence of new forms of body politics and feminist activism in digital platforms.

We conclude with a call for more theoretically-rigorous and empirically-nuanced engagements with sportswomen's use of social media, as well as a continued discussion of the strengths and limitations of different strands of feminism for understanding and supporting the struggles and strategies of sportswomen engaging with social media within and across different sports, nationalities, ethnicities, ages, sexualities, ability levels, and class and religious backgrounds. Such projects are important in further revealing the complexities and contradictions in sportswomen's use of social media, and we hope such examinations will further stimulate this dialogue about the relevance of, and intersections and overlaps between, different strands of feminism.

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