In a context where traditional media outlets have been criticized for ignoring or trivializing female athletes, it has been suggested that social media harbors feminist potential to challenge dominant representational regimes by providing avenues for sporting women to enhance their visibility on their own terms. Moving beyond analytical paradigms which examine whether representations of female athletes have ‘improved’, that is, whether sportswomen are being depicted ‘fairly’, ‘accurately’ and in ‘positive’ ways by others and/or themselves, we investigate how postfeminist tropes of ‘agency’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘capacity’ operate as discursive logics informing how female athletes craft the self online. An exploration of how sportswomen use social media platforms within a neoliberal and postfeminist context has broader relevance to understanding the transformative shifts in media representations of female athletes, whereby self-expression becomes the mechanism by which the feminine body and self as a commodified brand is simultaneously produced and regulated (Banet-Weiser, 2012, 2015). The significance of this study lies in what digital media platforms can reveal about wider social conditions informing how female athletes make themselves visible online.

Motivational images of sport and physical cultures which adorn Instagram and other self-authored social media sites and have been heavily criticized for contributing to women’s ongoing oppression and objectification within a neo-liberalist context. However, such ubiquitous critique has failed to adequately represent the voices of women who experience a phenomenological sense of empowerment through active engagement in the practices of posting and consuming these images. This paper will critically adopt a postfeminist approach to analyse both images from the social media site Instagram and phenomenological accounts of women’s own lived experience of engaging with this platform in order to explore one of the diverse ways by which engagement with sport and physical cultures can be a pathway to wellbeing and empowerment for women. Specifically, we draw upon phenomenologically informed dwelling-mobility theory in order to explore examples of how this form of engagement with sport and physical cultures online provides a pathway for women to have positive body experiences by developing an embodied identity that encourages a sense of ‘I am my body’ or ‘my body can’.

With millions of hits, posts, shares, and likes, fitspiration has become a social media phenomenon. While fitspiration has the potential to combat dangerous messages about women’s bodies, the imagery – and attendant discourse – oftentimes perpetuates longstanding hegemonic beauty ideals, appearance-based notions of health and fitness, and heteronormative gender ideologies. A “fitspo” body is a desirable one, and physical activity/exercise are commodified tools for achieving that body. The ubiquitous fitspo meme includes an image of a white, thin-yet-toned, woman’s body overlaid with “inspirational” phrases like “strong is the new skinny.” Such memes promise an achievable fit-looking body through proper consumer choices. But, because they are intertextual, user-created internet content that can be easily and rapidly shared, copied, or altered, memes have also been used to call into question the circulating messages of fitspo. Tagged as #changeourfitspiration, #stopfitspiration, and #takebackfitspo, these memes critique postfeminist ideology by explicitly challenging fitspo discourses. In this paper, we explore how various
fitspo memes work in a world where women are proclaimed to be the makers of their own capitalist destinies.

7F Anna Baeth, University of Minnesota
“Playing the Female Athlete: Elite Sportswomen’s Choices of Self-Representation in Autonomous Media Outlets”

In 2016, Serena Williams was named Sportsperson of the Year by Sports Illustrated. Consumer responses to the celebratory cover of Sports Illustrated (Williams in a small black bodysuit draped across an ornate golden throne) were immediate and dichotomizing. Sports Illustrated reacted swiftly, highlighting that Williams chose the photo herself. Williams’ choice is consistent with the literature that a majority of elite female athletes portray themselves – often to their disadvantage – as simultaneously athletically competent (the queen of the court) and as sexually appealing (in a lacy bodysuit). Given the emergence of globalized and instantaneous social media, athletes – female athletes in particular – have more opportunity and autonomy to brand themselves. The primary purpose of this study is to discern how four elite female athletes chose to be portrayed in self-dictated media outlets. This study serves to answer the questions: 1. In what ways do elite female athletes most often sell their personal brands? 2. Do elite sportswomen use sex to sell themselves and their sport? 3. Do sportswomen sell themselves and their sport differently depending on their intersectional identities? These questions aim to discern whether female athletes’ choices in branding are indicative of more broadly constructed and contested narratives pervading women’s sport.