Role Model or Quitter? Social Media’s Response to Simone Biles at Tokyo 2020

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Abstract

During the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, Team USA athlete, Simone Biles, withdrew from several gymnastics events mid-competition, citing mental health issues. Biles, one of the most recognizable stars of the Games, faced intense scrutiny from both the world’s media and the general public in the immediate aftermath. The purpose of this study was to analyze the Facebook narrative surrounding Biles’ withdrawal within the theoretical context of framing, as crafted through user comments on various public high-profile Facebook pages. A total of 87,714 user comments were collected and analyzed using the qualitative software Leximancer. The themes emerging from the data suggested a polarizing narrative with many users supporting Biles, engaging in wider discussion surrounding athlete mental health, whilst others condemned her action suggesting she quit on the biggest sporting stage.

Keywords: mental health, athlete, social media, framing, Olympics
Arriving at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games the consensus was that Simone Biles would continue her dominance in the gymnastics arena (Braidwood, 2021), adding to the four gold and one bronze medal achieved in Rio de Janeiro five years prior. With both Michael Phelps and Usain Bolt now retired, the Tokyo Games needed a new Olympic superstar and many considered that Simone Biles, poster athlete for Team USA, would fulfil the role (Armour, 2020; Menon, 2021). Despite suffering several mishaps during qualification in Tokyo, Biles progressed to the all-around and vault finals in first place, the floor exercise final in second place and also the balance beam and uneven bars finals. Prior to the finals Biles claimed on Instagram that she felt as though she has “the weight of the world” on her shoulders at times (Biles, 2021, para.2). During the team final on July 27, 2021, Biles hesitated on her vault mid-air, performing 1.5 twists instead of the expected 2.5, and subsequently left the competition floor before returning shortly after. She later withdrew from the rest of the team final citing mental health issues, stating that she was reluctant to jeopardize her team’s chance of securing a medal, as well as her own health and safety (Martin, 2021). Nonetheless, her performance helped the United States secure a silver medal in the event. Following several medical evaluations, Biles went on to withdraw from the individual all-around, vault, floor exercise, and uneven bars finals explaining that she was experiencing ‘the twisties’, a psychological barrier causing gymnasts to lose positional awareness when performing twisting elements (Carayol, 2021). Biles received sharp criticism within some mediated narratives: Ben Maller of Fox Sports labelled her the “biggest quitter in sports” (Leitner, 2021, para.1), Deputy Attorney General in Biles’ home state of Texas, Aaron Reitz, described her as a “national embarrassment” (Hill, 2021, para.5), whilst journalist Piers Morgan called the decision “selfish” (Morgan, 2021, para.54). Despite these examples of disapproval, the decision to prioritize her mental health was praised by other commentators and gymnasts, sparking wider conversations relating to mental health in sport
On August 2, 2021, Biles confirmed that she would compete in the balance beam final, and with the world watching she secured a bronze medal. Despite winning a combined 32 Olympic and World medals, she described this bronze as the most meaningful because it represented her focus on mental health and perseverance (Fieldstadt, 2021).

The fragmented conversation surrounding Biles during the Tokyo Games shines a light on the differing perspectives towards athlete mental health, not only within the confines of the highly pressurized world of sport but also more broadly within American society. With journalists reporting on the Biles situation through mainstream media outlets, individual users also engaged in debate through social media platforms. The general public often participate in one-sided communication with well-known personalities through a process called parasocial interaction (PSI), which allows individuals to interact in a manner often associated with their personal acquaintances (Parrott et al., 2020). The nuances of this interaction can be examined through the concept of framing, which was initially introduced by Goffman (1974) and later conceptualized by Entman (2007), outlining how stories are shaped through their narrative and emphasis of particular themes. Research into the framing of athlete mental health is lacking, especially through public perception rather than traditional media.

This study is designed to address a gap in research by investigating how thousands of social media users debated an athlete’s mental health struggles. Through qualitative analysis, this research examines the themes that were created by individuals and the distinctions between users commenting through different outlets of information, which other research has yet to investigate when focusing on athlete mental health. It also addresses how Biles was framed compared to other athletes entangled in mental health debates. By analyzing the manner in which this story was received by the general public, we can better understand how
individuals perceive the mental health of elite athletes and the psychological challenges associated with sports performance.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

Derived from sociological roots, the concept of framing was first articulated by Goffman (1974) who defined it as a framework into which experiences are organised that facilitate the processing of information in our everyday lives. Whilst a clear description of framing remains contested by academics, the notion has been explored further by Entman, specifically related to the media. Although Entman updated his conceptual work his definitions remain largely consistent and here the author uses his 2007 overview that through framing the media choose various aspects of reality, making them more meaningful through selection, emphasis and the exclusion of information (Entman, 2007). Essentially, by promoting importance to certain philosophies the media is able to encourage its audience to think and feel in particular ways (Zaharopoulos, 2007).

Traditionally, scholars have investigated framing within traditional media (i.e., print and broadcast), establishing that these platforms affect public opinions, audience attitudes and perceptions of issues (Frederick et al., 2016a). The application of framing within a sports context has been undertaken through the analysis of several events, such as the Olympic Games (Dashper, 2018; Gutierrez & Bettine, 2020), and the FIFA World Cup (Bell & Coche, 2020; Ozornina & Mannin, 2020), and more focused topics, for example race and nationality (Eagleman, 2011), athlete scandal (Allison et al., 2020; Frederick et al., 2016b), and athlete activism (Doehler, 2021; Frederick et al., 2018).

The growth of social media in the twenty-first century has changed the way in which individuals interact with one another (Wallace et al., 2011), giving users opportunity to
participate in interrelated communication with minimal effort by creating, contributing, and setting their own political agendas through framing (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). Social media platforms have become a place for discussion and debate on controversial topics (Paavola et al., 2016) and offer their users greater authority over content (Frederick et al., 2016b), by providing individuals with a stage to voice their opinions in the public domain (Clavio, 2013). Consequently, this has instigated an increase in scholars examining framing through social media platforms. The framing of content by individuals is what Nisbet (2010) refers to as ‘bottom-up framing’. According to Nisbet (2010, p.75), this bottom-up model occurs when “lay citizens” become active contributors and creators in their own right, allowing individuals to present divergent interpretations of news stories and social issues (Maireder & Ausserhofer, 2014). Whilst bottom-up framing is becoming an increasingly explored area of investigation, there has been relatively limited emphasis on this approach in a sporting context compared to traditional media framing. To date, research has focused attention on an array of matters such as responses to ice hockey riots (Burch et al., 2015), debate surrounding National Anthem protests (Schmidt et al., 2019), perceptions of the US Women’s soccer team (Pegoraro et al., 2017), responses to mental health disclosures (Parrott et al., 2020), and rule changes in youth American football (Sanderson & Cassilo, 2019).

Through bottom-up framing social media users engage in PSI, a psychological and media phenomenon first established by Horton and Wohl (1956), which examines the relationship between users of mass media and representations of those appearing in the media, for example celebrities, athletes, and politicians. Unlike social, or two-way, interaction, PSI is one-sided and mediated whereby users engage actively with media personalities (Frederick et al., 2012). This can manifest positively within social media, such as expressing passion (Stavros et al. 2014), providing guidance and advice (Allison et al., 2020; Sanderson & Emmons, 2014), and articulating emotional associations with athletes
Conversely, some use social media platforms to express negativity towards athletes, with Kassing and Sanderson (2015, p.3) coining the term ‘maladaptive parasocial interaction’, to characterize how hateful, and often vitriolic, messages are increasingly directed towards athletes in the current social media era. Whilst positive PSI behaviors have been well investigated by scholars, the range of maladaptive behaviors remains comparatively under-explored. The first study into this topic found admonishment and criticism (Sanderson, 2008), whilst Sanderson and Truax (2014) later established that characteristics of maladaptive PSI towards athletes include belittling, mocking and sarcasm.

While PSI has been applied to social media communication within academic research, in this paper the author is also interested in how individual users frame a situation through social media conversations, offering observations into the nuances of these one-sided interactions between social media users and media personalities. This would also allow for analysis into how individuals also interact with one another, assessing Sanderson’s (2010) claim that users are inclined to attack those whom they perceive to say something wrong, and findings from Frederick et al., (2016b) that subgroups often develop to challenge those with conflicting views. To date, there is limited research which analyses the framing of athlete mental health through a bottom-up, PSI perspective. It is important to explore this evolving shift in framing conceptualization through scholarly investigation as it modifies the focus of framing research from traditional media as the hegemonic gatekeepers, to everyday individuals who engage in online communication, ultimately becoming contributors, creators, and analysts themselves. As suggested by Karen and Washington (2010), sport embodies an inimitable facet of social life by providing a distinctive lens through which various aspects of larger society can be observed. As such, when analyzing the framing surrounding Simone
Biles’ withdrawal at the Tokyo Games, a bottom-up approach was a logical and appropriate method of investigation offering original perspective previously under-explored by scholars.

**Framing of Controversies**

Investigation through both traditional framing and bottom-up framing have been employed by researchers who seek to determine how controversies are framed. Political movements have been scrutinized, for example Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) investigated the Arab Spring, establishing that social media users played a significant role by rising to prominence and elevating others through networked gatekeeping actions, Kim and Wanta (2018) investigated the US immigration debate, and Dekker (2016) conducted a frame analysis of migrant politics. In a further study, Harrison et al. (2019) focused on social media’s response to ESPN’s Jemele Hill calling then US-President Donald Trump a “white supremacist”, uncovering that race and gender became a significant discussion point, which has resonance to the current study with Biles being both Black and female. Within a sport context, controversies can be broadly split into on-field (anything relating to an athlete’s sports performance) and off-field incidents (anything not relating to an athlete’s sports performance). As the Biles controversy stemmed from her sports performance, on-field controversies will be the focus here. Drug use is a popular topic amongst scholars for studies into framing relating to on-field controversies including steroid use in baseball (Utsler & Epp, 2013), doping in tennis (Allison et al., 2020; Bell & Hartman, 2018) and athletics (Pfister & Gems, 2013). Both Utsler and Epp (2013) and Allison et al. (2020) found that fans tend to forgive athlete transgressions, especially when said athletes are successful or make significant contributions to winning teams. Love and Maxwell’s (2020) framing analysis of two sporting controversies surrounding Serena Williams established that both sex and race were subjects of discussion, convergent with findings from Harrison et al. (2019). In their bottom-up framing analysis of the 2014 Sochi Games, an event shrouded in controversy before it even
began, Frederick et al. (2016a) established that both an echo chamber, whereby bottom-up framing reinforced trends that emerged through traditional media, and organic content which withstood the transfer of sentiments from the media. This development partially challenges the thoughts of Bronstein (2005), and Lind and Salo (2006), who asserted that once an issue is defined through traditional media, it is difficult for individuals to redefine it. Issues of nationalism have been explored through framing, with Park et al. (2019), Frederick et al., (2018), and Doehler (2021) all concluding that the media often negatively depict athletes who challenge loyalty through their actions. Echoing this, Schmidt et al. (2019) established that social media users heavily criticized both Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe during their 2016 national anthem protests.

The response to controversial occurrences can vary from outlet to outlet. For example, Fox News is trusted by those on the ideological right with traditionally Republican affiliations, whilst the likes of CNN and NPR are more likely to be consumed by those with more liberal views (Pew Research Centre, 2020). Political and ideological positions can also impact perspectives on mental health, with the liberal left being more supportive of mental health policies (Barry & McGinty, 2014). Meanwhile, the conservative right is traditionally less supportive of mental health coverage (Munsch et al., 2020), especially males (Conley & Baum, 2022). Exploring responses to sporting controversies through multiple media outlets with differing ideologies may provide an interesting avenue of investigation, and it currently remains significantly under-researched within academia.

**Framing of Mental Health in Sport**

Despite being elite competitors who have risen to the top of their respective sports, the likes of Simone Biles, Michael Phelps, and Naomi Osaka, amongst others, have all divulged challenges with their mental wellbeing. This openness has confronted a stigma
which exists in the United States (Parrott et al., 2021), where athlete mental health long remained a taboo subject (Kaier et al., 2015), created around the impression that athletes with fragilities impugned the belief of their superior mental toughness (Bauman, 2016); this, despite mental illness being prevalent in at least 20% of American society (National Institute of Mental Health, 2022). The increase in athletes openly discussing their mental health has resulted in further media coverage of such issues. This is an important area of examination due to the media framing implications. In short, the media can shape how the public discuss health issues (Cassilo, 2022; Hayes et al., 2007). However, the media have long been blamed for contributing to the stigmatization of mental illness (Corrigan, 2004).

The disclosure of depression and anxiety by two National Basketball Association (NBA) players, DeMar DeRozan and Kevin Love, in 2018 was met positively within the media who framed them as mental health advocates for displaying such strength (Parrott et al., 2020). Parrott et al. (2020) also explored this topic through a bottom-up analysis of replies to DeRozan and Love through Twitter, discovering that fans provided overwhelmingly positive responses to the athletes, offering advice, encouragement, and sharing of personal experiences, thus supporting the findings of Sanderson and Emmons (2014) and Allison et al. (2020). However, given that only replies to DeRozan and Love were analyzed this failed to offer nuanced interpretations by investigating how Twitter users responded to the topic through different media outlets or how they discussed the topic more widely without replying directly to the athletes. Cassilo (2020) analyzed the framing of mental health disclosures made by NBA’s DeMar DeRozan and Royce White. The latter’s revelation, coming during the 2012-13 season, generated media frames that were critical of him and his experience, attributed largely to White’s role as a vocal and frequent communicator about mental health. Cassilo and Kluch (2021) established that college athletes experienced different framing compared to professional athletes in their study of press
articles reporting on D.J. Carton, a former Ohio State men’s basketball player who took a leave of absence from his team during the 2019-20 season to focus on his mental health. Although eliciting a largely positive response, an interesting frame was developed by the media whereby they treated Carton as a commodity by focusing on his athletic value and what Ohio State was losing through his absence.

Research in the sports communication field relating to athlete mental health is in its relative infancy, with most studies coming in the last few years. This is an important area which requires further growth and depth. Whilst media framing is one area where some attempts have already been made to better understand athlete mental health, research is rather limited at this point and studies generally analyze comparatively small sample sizes. Furthermore, the scope is narrow with most studies examining athletes within the NBA, including crossover between one of the athletes analyzed (DeMar DeRozan), and thus far only male athletes have been examined. Cassilo (2022) directly suggests the importance of investigating the response towards Biles, especially as, Cassilo proposes, attitudes towards mental health in the United States are becoming more progressive by the day. Cassilo (2020; 2022) also calls for further scrutiny into audience reaction on social media to athlete mental health related stories.

Given the gap, or lack of enquiry into the topic, this current study examines how social media responded to news that Simone Biles withdrew from several gymnastics’ finals at the Tokyo Olympics. Informed by the literature this investigation asks three questions:

**RQ1**: How did social media users respond to Simone Biles’ withdrawal from events at the Tokyo Olympics?

**RQ2**: How did the frames differ depending on the outlet of information?
RQ3: How did PSI towards Simone Biles compare to other athletes who have publicly suffered with their mental health?

Methodology

On 31 May 2022, a range of Facebook posts covering Biles’ withdrawal published between 27 July 2021 (the date of the team final) and 2 August 2021 (the date it was announced that Biles would compete in the balance beam final) were collected from four public Facebook pages: Simone Biles (her official and verified account), Fox News and CNN (American news outlets), and Bleacher Report (international news outlet which focuses on sport and sports culture). These pages were selected due to their widespread appeal to sports fans, amassing a combined 63.3 million Facebook followers. A conscious decision was made to include both a more conservative (Fox News) and a more liberal (CNN) news outlet to offer balance. Although these posts also featured on other social media sites, Facebook was chosen as the single platform to analyze comments from as there are no limits to the size of comments, therefore allowing users to vocalize their perspective without restriction. In total, 29 posts were sourced across the four pages. All comments were collected from the posts on 1 June 2022 using the Facepager software, an application for automated data retrieval on JSON-based APIs.

Sample

The data was screened to exclude comments that ‘tagged’ another Facebook user but contained no further text, comments not written in English and comments that only included emojis. Additionally, any comments made after the announcement that Biles would compete in the balance beam final were also omitted. This ensured that all comments were centered on the assumption that she would not participate in events and focused on her withdrawal, rather than her subsequent participation and bronze medal achievement. The final dataset comprised
of 87,714 comments: Simone Biles (n = 30,673 across two posts), Fox News (n = 37,476 across eleven posts), CNN (n = 14,856 across eleven posts), and Bleacher Report (n = 4,709 across five posts). A breakdown of posts, dates and number of comments can be found in Table 1.

**Data Analysis**

Comments from each post were scrutinized as distinct datasets but combined into one file for their respective Facebook page. To ensure that only bottom-up framing took place within the three posts, the researcher carefully examined the comment list to check that no official news outlets or verified news reporters commented on them. Four CSV files (one for each outlet) containing the comments were uploaded to Leximancer (Version 4.5), a text analytics tool used to analyze the content of collections of textual documents and display the extracted information visually. This software is beneficial analyzing large datasets that would be impossible to code manually (Allison et al., 2020). Leximancer works in two stages; a conceptual analysis is undertaken whereby documents are measured for the presence and frequency of concepts, for example words and phrases, and a relational analysis measures how such identified concepts are related to one another by establishing the co-occurrence of concepts found within the text. An advantage of the software is that it automatically generates a concept list (i.e., descriptors) that is statistically reliable and replicable, as it was produced from the input text itself, whereas manual lists require checks for coding reliability and validity (Angus et al., 2013). Leximancer’s output is a concept map which identifies the dominant themes contained within the analyzed text, comprised of several concepts.

Whilst computational approaches are a valid method for the examination of large datasets of text (Indulska et al., 2012), this current research considers Frederick et al.’s (2018)
suggestion that human contributions are an important and essential component in the coding process. As such, this investigation followed a similar approach to other scholars using Leximancer (e.g., Allison et al., 2020; Frederick et al., 2016b; Schmidt et al., 2019) by reviewing the thematic results and scrutinizing the lists of concepts within each frame to determine not just the discussion taking place, but the sentiment attributed to it. This approach supports the view of Macnamara (2005) that it remains the responsibility of the researcher to probe deeper into the data to determine the nuances of themes. Following extensive analysis of the initial themes some were renamed based on the researcher’s understanding of the content, adopting the same process as other academic research using Leximancer. Undertaking this task was necessary to negate the limitation that computer coding is unable to appreciate the context of content, supporting Wilk et al. (2017) in their suggestion that Leximancer should not be expected to undertake work for you, rather it should undertake the work with you. However, it would be remiss not to acknowledge a limitation of this study, as all analysis was undertaken by a sole principal investigator. Therefore, whilst this ensured methodological consistency, it lacked the ability to compare interpretations.

Leximancer has been utilized as an analytical tool for sport-specific social media research (see Allison et al., 2020; Billings et al., 2014; Blaszka et al., 2016; Frederick et al., 2016a; Frederick et al., 2016b; Frederick et al., 2018; Morgan & Wilk, 2021; Yang et al., 2020).

Results

Across the four datasets, a range of major themes emerged. Each theme identified within the Leximancer analysis had 40% or greater connectivity (i.e., relative importance) indicating moderate to strong relevance within the data set. The resulting Leximancer concept
maps (provided in Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4) display both the higher-level themes and their associated concepts. The theme colors are displayed through a heat-map which indicates their prominence from hottest (red) to coolest (purple). The size of themes does not represent their influence, instead it signifies their affiliation between each other. The concepts which build each overarching theme are depicted as small, grey nodes situated within their respective theme. The importance of individual concepts is based on where the words appear in relation to their theme. For example, words which are strongly representative of the themes appear closer to the center, while those less pertinent are located on the periphery of the theme. Concepts that are inextricably linked appear close to each other and occasionally overlap. For the purpose of brevity, these results will only present the most pertinent themes within each concept map. All user comments are provided verbatim and some contain typographical errors.

**Simone Biles’ Posts**

Figure 1 presents the Leximancer-generated concept map of Facebook users’ comments on the posts published by Simone Biles. Nine themes emerged from the data: role model, mental health, judgement on decision, self-care, love and support, impact of decision, GOAT (greatest of all time), proud, and Biles.

**Role Model**

The primary theme, role model, contained concepts such as: hero, women, amazing, inspiration, young, and Black. Facebook users whose comments fell within this theme reacted overwhelmingly positively to Biles’ withdrawal, arguing that she is a role model, particularly for young people facing mental health challenges. For example, one user wrote, “You are the true inspiration and role model young women should have today”. What stood out within this theme was not just the support Biles received, but the general outpouring of gratitude for
taking action to prioritize her health. One commenter posted, “Thank you for being an inspiration, a strong woman in the face of extreme adversity, and an incredible role model”.

A further angle evident through several users was to acknowledge Biles’ race within the conversation, noting her position as not just a role model, but more specifically a black role model. “All RESPECT to you for showing Black girls how a Black woman prioritizes and prevails”, “Your black girl magic rocks” and “You have helped more women (particularly more black women) with your deep focus on self, more than any amazingly difficult gymnastics move could have done”, are examples of that commentary. Users who made comments within this theme demonstrated how invested they were in Biles, an individual that many had unlikely ever met.

**Mental Health**

Building on the first theme, a mental health theme emerged as users engaged in conversation that dissected the health of athletes, using concepts such as: strength, courage, strong, example, world, and others. Within this theme the majority of comments displayed a supportive attitude with users generally applauding Biles for taking action on the biggest stage in order to preserve her mental health. For instance, “Glad you chose to take care of your mental health first. True role model and courage at its finest”, and “Congratulations to Simone for not only being an incredible woman and mentor to your teammates but for your courage for bringing more awareness to mental health issues”, are examples of that dialogue. Many users within this theme referenced their own position as justification for their support, for example, “As a Pediatric Psychologist, I want to thank you for putting the importance of mental health in the spotlight! Your Olympic decision has changed history and has taught kids and adults that it's ok to put yourself first regardless of others' opinions or expectations”, was one of several comments which displayed this narrative. Whilst this theme was largely positive some users criticized the argument that Biles withdrew to preserve her mental health,
with comments such as, “You are a joke, you blame your mental health as the reason you shit on your team mate because it wasn't going your way”.

Judgement on Decision

This theme deliberated the decision that Biles made and included concepts such as: team, let down, best, and believe. When news broke of Biles’ withdrawal from the team final and subsequent announcements by Team USA of her withdrawal from other finals, her status as one of the most high-profile athletes at the Olympic Games brought about a level of attention that many others may unlikely have received. Here, Facebook users debated their perception of her decision at length and this was the most divisive of these three themes analyzed. Regardless of their perspective, users appeared impervious to opposing perspectives and one-sided comments dominated. One user suggested, “She quit competing and abandoned her team. That's cowardice. She's a shameful excuse for an athlete”, whilst another claimed, “I don't support you, you let down your country, your team and you quit”. Conversely, others were less focused on the impact Biles’ decision had on her teammates or their chance of success, and instead placed attention on Biles herself, for example, “I have so much respect that you have been strong enough to make the right decision for you”, and “You're always going to be the best & taking care of yourself is more important than the medal”. Whilst not one of the more prevalent themes, impact of decision, related closely to this current theme with several overlapping concepts and discussions amongst users. These two themes were the most critical of Biles through her two posts.

Although not dissected within this section, the remaining themes captured within the Biles’ posts displayed largely supportive narratives. Generally, users offered love and admiration towards the athlete, with many suggesting she made the correct decision and giving further validation to the impression that Biles is the greatest gymnasts of all time.
Bleacher Report’s Posts

Nine themes emerged from Bleacher Report’s data (see Figure 2). The three most salient themes were: timing of transgression, quitting on the team, and reassigning blame.

Timing of Transgression

One theme that emerged through Bleacher Report’s posts centered on the timing of Biles’ withdrawal. This prominent discussion used concepts such as: time, Olympics, country, world, and dominant. The conversation was less focused on Biles actually withdrawing and more concerned that her decision came once the competition had begun. For example, user comments included, “Imagine needing the Olympics to be your stage to tell everyone you're quitting on your team for stress?”, and “She should have quit before, not on a national stage”. Several users compared her to other elite athletes as a means to condemn her action. “Phelps, Usain Bolt, MJ and Brady have never quit like this. Quitting mid-performance in a team event after poor warmups…disliking the pressure that comes with it really just seems like a selfish, hypocritical case of the yips”, highlights this perspective. In contrast, a small number of commenters downplayed the importance of the timing. “I can’t believe someone I don’t know, competing in an olympic event I’m not part of, made a decision for herself that has nothing to do with me without asking me my opinion first”, one user wrote. Another stated, “So people get to schedule a time when they’re going to have mental health issues? Oh hey brain, can you hold off these internal issues I’m dealing with until after the Olympics?”

Quitting on the Team

This theme echoed a relatively consistent message that Biles had let down both her teammates and nation, with concepts including: others, GOAT, quit, pressure, selfish, and stress. Similar to the previous theme, this was predominantly critical of Biles with many
voicing their displeasure. One user wrote, “You let your country down and your team”, whilst another described her a “selfish loser”. Some individuals called to attention how this impacted those gymnasts who failed to make the squad, for example, “Imagine being the 1st athlete left off the squad and then seeing the GOAT just quit on her team”, and “Think of who almost made the squad. 1 person away. U feel bad for her”. Debate surrounding her position as the greatest gymnast of all time, often termed the ‘GOAT’, was prevalent with many commenters using her withdrawal as a means to question her position as the best ever. For example, “Proclaims herself the GOAT. Crumbles under GOAT pressure/expectations”, “GOATs dont make excuses about pressure. They live for that heavy s—t”, and “Heavy is the head that wears the crown. Dont sew a GOAT on your unitard if you dont want the pressure”.

A few users challenged the predominant narrative, shifting attention towards the lessons learnt from the situation. “She'll always be the GOAT, no matter what. I just hope we all learn a lesson about pressure here” and “A lot of athletes should learn from this. If they aren't preforming well and there is a possibility someone on your team can do better you make that call and sit down and cheer them on”, are examples of this perspective.

**Reassigning Blame**

The final theme explored within Bleacher Report’s posts is reassigning blame, which included concepts such as: committee, media, banned, and dominant. Facebook discussed who was responsible for Biles’ withdrawal, recasting culpability from the athlete, thus largely defending her actions, to numerous other entities including the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the media, and USA Gymnastics. There was emphasis on the International Gymnastics Federation’s (IGF) decision to underscore Biles’ difficulty rating previously. However, users regularly and incorrectly assigned guilt to the IOC on the matter. One user suggested,
She didn't do anything besides be the most dominant force to ever perform in gymnastics. So much so that the Olympic committee basically banned her from doing her entire routine because no one else on this planet can perform something remotely close to her level.

Others agreed, for example, “The Olympic committee adjusted the rules just so others would have a chance at beating her”, and “The IOC judges are to blame for her mental stress that led to her exit”. Several users suggested that USA Gymnastics were blameworthy for failing to protect Biles, with some intimating at the sex-abuse scandal that engulfed the governing body and in which Biles herself was a victim. One user wrote, “Larry Nassar still very much looms over US gymnastics”, in reference to the jailed team doctor. Few comments in this theme implicated Biles herself, though one such comment was, “Messed up on the vault and blames every else but herself, typical 2021 victimizing and not accepting responsibility”. Instead of criticism, within this theme Biles was often described as a victim herself of both the pressure placed upon her and being failed by the sport’s authorities.

In summary, while Facebook users responded to Biles in varying ways within these posts with the exception of the two most dominant themes, timing of transgression and quitting on the team, the remaining themes were generally supportive of Biles. Although not scrutinized in this section it is interesting to note that the issue of gender is the only gender specific theme across all four outlets.

**Fox News’ Posts**

Nine themes emerged through comments on this outlet’s posts: pressure of competing, team performance, personal attributes, preservation of mental health, impact on team, best, a selfish act, quitter, and America (Figure 3).

*Pressure of Competing*
This theme offered contrasting perspectives, with concepts including: time, competition, athletes, mentally, and pressure. The comments reflected strong debate about the nature of competing at the Olympics and its associated pressures. A primary point of contention amongst many was that elite athletes should be able to handle the stress. Examples of these comments included, “A seasoned gymnast bailed on her teammates. This is not her first competition and all of those Olympic players feel the pressure so her excuse is crap. Give me a brake,” and “Absolutely absurd!...How long has she been competing and going to the Olympics. This is certainly not her first time and all of a sudden now the pressure is too much”.

A subset of conversation within this theme saw Biles compared to gymnast Kerri Strug and wrestler Kurt Angle, who both secured gold medals at the 1996 Atlanta Games despite suffering serious injuries. “Didn’t see Kerri Strug…say to her coach and teammates “oh I’m just too stressed, I’m stepping aside”…That’s what real champions do - fight through the pain and have mental toughness”, and “Kurt Angle won a gold medal for the USA with a BROKEN FREAKING NECK. I imagine Kurt's neck was under alot of stress when he did so”, exemplify this narrative. Other users challenged these standpoints, tackling both the wider concept of mental illness and the pressure on elite athletes, for example, “And we all wonder why no one talks about mental illness in this country nor have adequate treatment and resource. People are shamed for it”, and “The pressure must be tremendous! She made a decision that in the end benefited her team”.

**Team Performance**

Like several previously discussed themes, Biles was subject to criticism from users here, with concepts including: Gold, silver, podium, Russia, and medal. Dialogue pertained to the issue of fault and accountability tied to Biles as reason for the United States achieving
silver medal in the team final, and not gold. “She gave the medal to Russia!” and “What a coward. So you let Russia win. If you can’t hack it, don’t GO! Ashamed!” demonstrate discourse of this nature. One commenter went as far to suggest they no longer held allegiance to America, stating, “I am glad Russia took it. The U.S. is a disgrace to the country and deserves not one gold”. Whilst support for Biles was relatively rare, it did exist. For example, “Don't put the US getting the silver on Simone. It was a team event”, acknowledged that Biles was one of four athletes representing Team USA in the final. The focus within this theme often shifted from the narrative outside the comments, to within the comments whereby users engaged and argued with those who held divergent views. In response to a user who described Biles as selfish one respondent wrote, “If she quit on her team as you ignorantly claim she would have been selfish and kept going which would have cost her TEAM a silver medal. Please sit down. You have no idea what TEAM means, or sacrifice,” whilst another individual defending Biles was met with, “your an idiot, your fiancé should run as fast as possible”.

**Personal Attributes**

The dialogue within this theme was nuanced, with multiple topics serving as the focus of discussion and the following concepts were identified: ego, spoilt, black, white, race, quit. Suggestions that Biles harbored too much self-belief was prominent, as displayed by two users who commented, “Bruised ego is a medical issue?” and “All the stress was created by her own ego”. An intersectional conversation around race was far more prevalent within this theme compared to others analyzed within the corpus of comments. One widespread response was the notion that anyone criticizing Biles was guilty of racism, for example one individual commented, “Of course here come all of the Fox News racists to bash her over nothing”. In response another user suggested, “You can't sneeze these days without being called a racist for sneezing”. Some called out the conservative ideology of Fox News, directly insulting the
outlet’s audience. “Who cares what a bunch of misogynistic white supremacist Fox viewers think?” asked one user. Whilst discussion around racism was extensive, blatantly racist comments were limited to a handful of users, for example, “Blacks can’t handle the pressure”. A subset of conversations within this theme dealt with wider political and social issues in America with many users expressing their own political stances, such as, “I’m no racist, I couldn’t care less about someone’s skin color…and I supported trump”, or, conversely, criticizing the political leanings of others, “…coming from a brainwashed Biden dumbRAT, your input is irrelevant!” This theme displayed some strongly worded, one-sided sentiments which were often antagonistic, inviting debate from those with differing perspectives to the original commenter.

Facebook users commenting on Fox News’ posts displayed divergent perspectives which, on one hand, criticized Biles suggesting that her action was selfish, egotistical, and spoilt, and comparisons to other elite athletes were often used to berate Biles. On the other hand, some users offered support to Biles by attacking the outlet itself and their predominantly conservative consumers. Fox News was the only outlet whereby commenters outright blasted others for their engagement with the outlet.

CNN’s Posts

Eight themes emerged through comments on this outlet’s posts: mental health, athletic ability, advice, timing of decision, pressure on athletes, effect on team, public apathy, and GOAT (Figure 4).

Mental Health

As with Biles’ posts, the most profound narrative had many users commenting on wider discussion surrounding mental health, with concepts including: injury, physical, mind, issue, and struggle. A common response was to support Biles and most remarks praised the
athlete’s decision to prioritize her mental health. Many users divulged personal experiences regarding their own mental health, suggesting that Biles’ situation resonated with them. For example, in response to those who questioned the timing of Biles’ withdrawal, one user declared, “I have general anxiety disorder and I can’t go down a slide let alone throw myself in the air. Ppl need to mind their business and keep their opinions about what doesn’t affect their daily life to themselves”. More infrequently, individual’s personal experiences were used as a means to condemn Biles. One such example was,

I suffer from PTSD and occasionally depression…I persevere though, just like so many others. So many of us don’t let it define us or keep us from the big moments…I can relate to her problems a hell of a lot more than most of you. Just not on her decision to quit.

Another facet of dialogue within this theme focused on wider debate around mental health perceptions, with Biles herself on the periphery of discussion. Generally, users attempted to raise awareness of mental health challenges, such as, “The dark stigma on mental health needs to be removed and we all need a better understanding of the difficulties that we all face from time to time”, and “Mental health is every bit as serious and important as physical health”. A minority of Facebook users rejected Biles’ action, with one user asking, “Are ‘mental health issues’ now the go-to excuse for any poor performance in elite sport?”

However, the predominant response was that of support, with Biles described as, “a consummate professional”, “an excellent example of strength”, possessing “courage, strength and maturity”, and “the perfect role model for all young people”.

Athletic Ability

Here, Facebook users argued over Biles’ athletic credentials, with concepts including: gymnast, compete, Olympic, world, country, and medal. Many attacked the legitimacy of her
abilities with some citing Larisa Latynina, the former Soviet athlete who holds the record for most Olympic gold medals by a gymnast, as a means to berate Biles’ achievements. Meanwhile, others focused on Biles’ broader achievements beyond the Olympics to praise her, for example, “Shattered records to become the world's most decorated gymnast. Has four moves named for her. Fought on behalf of abuse survivors. Simone Biles has already won. She owes us nothing!” This theme was contentious with several users engaging in discussion around the demands of elite athletes, emphasized by comments echoing those found in Fox News’ pressure of competing theme, for example, “How weak. Athletic competition is all about mental toughness. Why is she even there? My goodness, the athletes of today are weaklings”. This discourse was coupled with disparaging remarks around female athletes more broadly, with one user concluding, “This reminds us that women are soft as hell and why people prefer to watch men’s athletics over women’s”.

Advice

Finally, this theme saw a continuance of the conversation pertaining to mental health and included descriptors such as: best, better, well, and let down. Narrative focused on two strands, advice to Biles and advice to others. The discussion towards Biles was bidirectional in nature. Common guidance from users was for her to “take care” of herself and to “get some rest”. Others suggested, “Breath in, breath out. Take vacation in Hawaii, take a sea bath”, and she would be “smart to take time off”. Often the negative sentiments were accompanied by admonishment from those who opposed Biles’ action. This was evident in comments such as, “Her performance was horrible, she was not prepared for this, it is time for her to go and retire!” and “She should go home and hang up her leotards...Let's focus on the athletes who chose to stick it out to the end of the Games”. Meanwhile, the second narrative focused on users offering advice to one another, in most cases because of their conflicting perspectives. On several occasions, users who were critical of Biles were met with
reproach themselves. Comments such as, “Take the time to get well yourself and learn some compassion”, and “What an embarrassment to the Y chromosome. Please stop talking and turn in your man card, you’re not worthy of it”, are illustrative of this discourse.

Those responding to CNN’s posts considered a range of themes which were often echoed within other outlets. However, there was limited discussion around wider political affiliations as exhibited by those commenting on Fox News’ posts. Whilst comments were typically polarizing, there was some limited positionality in the middle where users offered an apathetical perspective on the discussion. Simply put, they neither supported nor condemned Biles, instead they were indifferent to the conversation and this was displayed through the public apathy theme, which was unique to this outlet.

**Discussion**

RQ1 sought to analyze how social media users responded to Biles’ withdrawal from Olympic events. Whilst research indicates that social media has improved the communication dynamics between individuals and media personae (see Frederick et al., 2012; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010), our findings illustrate how PSI affords users the opportunity to frame situations both positively and negatively based on where their allegiance sits, often attributing their perspective to personal values and experiences. Whilst many users applauded Biles for putting her mental health first, the athlete also experienced backlash for the timing of her withdrawal with many claiming that she had quit, letting her team and country down. This supports research that indicates social media allows individuals to present divergent interpretations of news stories and social issues (Maireder & Ausserhofer, 2014).

Passionate responses from users were commonplace, irrespective of their perspective on the story, echoing Stravos et al. (2014). Themes borne out of the data that exhibited support for Biles establish similar sentiments to research where social media users offered
advice and guidance to athletes (Allison et al., 2020; Parrott et al., 2020; Sanderson & Emmons, 2014), and furthermore supports Kassing and Sanderson (2009) that users articulate emotional associations with athletes. This was displayed regularly as many individuals demonstrated how invested they were in Biles despite having likely never met her. Users frequently depicted Biles as a superhuman athlete who disclosed very human emotion, and therefore was deserving of their compassion. Facebook allowed individuals to respond to Biles similarly to how they would perhaps treat a close friend or family member who had been struggling with their mental health, by showing support in their perceived time of need. This reinforces the work of Utsler and Epp (2013) and Allison et al. (2020), who propose that athletes are often supported in their transgressions through bottom-up framing, especially when contributing to winning teams. Whilst it might be controversial to term Biles’ action as a ‘transgression’, one could argue that she violated the norms and code of conduct expected of her. Interestingly, in a challenge to this, many of Biles’ detractors used Team USA’s second place position in the team final as a means to berate Biles, arguing she was to blame for them not achieving the gold medal, rather than commending her for contributing to their silver.

A considerable number of users expressed negative sentiments towards Biles which were often accompanied by admonishment and criticism, comparable to the conclusions of Sanderson (2008). Ironically for those who opposed Biles’ action, many questioned her position as an athletic superstar yet still considered her privileged enough that she should be immune to mental health concerns. Demonstrated within the negative frames was maladaptive PSI (Kassing & Sanderson, 2015), whereby disdainful and derisive comments were routine amongst her detractors. Reproach focused on letting her country and teammates down, the perception that as an elite athlete she should be able to handle pressure, and
questioning the reason for her withdrawal. This criticism was often displayed through belittling, mocking, and sarcasm towards Biles, consistent with Sanderson and Truax (2014).

Conversations around both race and gender were evident within the analysis, lending credence to the findings of Harrison et al. (2019) and Love and Maxwell (2020). These topics were used to both praise and condemn Biles, as well as accuse other users of racism and sexism if they were critical of her. Through discussion and debate social media users created organic dialogues, assigning their own interpretation to the situation. This counters the notion that the media encourages its audience to think and feel in particular ways (Zaharopoulos, 2007), given that none of the analyzed posts addressed these topics specifically.

Another noteworthy finding was that many users chose to attack those with differing opinions to their own. Previous research has shown that users tend to attack those whom they perceive to say something wrong (Sanderson, 2010). There has been limited research which demonstrates the extent to which these users challenge those with opposing perspectives and often in this research insults directed conversation away from Biles’ withdrawal, with users questioning both the intellect and sporting prowess of those who they disagreed with. Occasionally, subgroups of those with likeminded opinions combined to challenge others with conflicting thoughts and some appeared to thrive on the opportunity to debate their perception of elite athletes acting as a pseudo judge in the court of social media, echoing conclusions drawn by Frederick et al. (2016b). Although data into user’s gender identity was not collected in the current study, an observation during the analysis highlighted that traditionally the more vitriolic responses towards Biles, or comments which outright disregarded mental health struggles, tended to originate from profiles with male forenames, supporting research which indicates men are less supportive of mental health coverage (Conley and Baum, 2022).
Social media has become a place for discussion and debate on controversial topics and therefore provides an opportunity to influence opinion. Within our analysis, each theme consisted of opposing opinions on an emotionally appealing topic. Therefore, it became a target for the deliberate practice of trolling, whereby a user leaves comments that serve no purpose other than to hurt, shock or offend. Whilst it is difficult to guarantee that trolling occurred with this dataset, it stands to reason that some users may have commented on for this very purpose, thus enhancing negative connotations towards Biles and those supporting her, whilst amplifying the polarity of conversations as they unfolded.

An interesting idea to unpack is the arena in which Biles withdrew, the Olympic Games. Being a major global sporting event attracting worldwide interest, prestige is placed on the medal table, with the United States securing top position in each of the last three Olympics (including Tokyo). As such, questions could be raised on two counts. Firstly, would the media furor have been so extensive had Biles withdrew at a less significant gymnastics event? Secondly, did feelings of nationalism play a role in her detractors’ criticism? We know Olympic events promote feelings of national identity (Ho and Bairner, 2013), and therefore when Biles withdrew on the biggest stage many users may have felt she violated patriotic and nationalistic virtues. This can be demonstrated through the number of comments suggesting that she had let both her teammates and nation down. Precedent has undoubtedly been set for athletes who challenge nationalism with condemnation the general reaction (Doehler 2021; Frederick et al, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2019). Of course, the author asks rhetorical questions, but it raises discussion points that could be investigated further as a comparison to other similar occurrences outside of the Olympic Games.

RQ2 intended to establish whether the frames developed through social media users differed depending on the outlet of information. Certainly within this corpus, the most supportive narrative towards Biles came through her own Facebook profile. Her two posts,
which were personal in nature, focused on two areas. Initially she thanked those who had
supported her since her withdrawal, and then subsequently congratulated American
teammate, Sunisa Lee, for her performance at the Games following a gold medal in the
individual all-around (adding to their silver in the team final). The most compassionate
rhetoric was uncovered within Biles’ posts, which could be explained through the fact that
loyal supporters may already follow her on Facebook and feel inclined to respond to her
posts, supporting findings from Allison et al. (2020). However, this pattern is contradictory to
Schmidt et al. (2019) in their analysis of Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe, where both
athletes were heavily criticized through their own profiles. However, a direct comparison is
challenging to draw given that the nature of controversy was different in these scenarios, with
Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s centered on athlete activism as opposed to athlete mental health.

The remaining outlets, Bleacher Report, Fox News, and CNN, offered coverage that
was both factual in nature, offering updates on the developing situation regarding Biles’
initial and subsequent withdrawals, and opinion-based perspectives from journalists and
athletes. Bleacher Report offered generally supportive perspectives on Biles, and whilst
polarizing interpretations from users occurred, many themes were sympathetic towards the
athlete putting her health first. This was the only outlet which included significant discussions
on two topics, her gender and attributing blame towards the sport’s authorities. Given that
none of Bleacher Report’s posts that were included in the corpus focused on these issues, this
strengthens claims from Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) that social media gives users
opportunity to contribute and set their own agendas through framing. Meanwhile, Fox News
generally offered a more critical stance than other outlets, with larger proportions of users
berating Biles within their comments. Most the themes within the Fox News concept map
were dominated by negative and blameful narratives, interspersed with challenges to this
mindset. Race and racism were discussed as a means to criticize both Biles and fellow
commenters. Many of those in support of Biles took the opportunity to disparage not only the outlet, but its core demographic of consumers also, which was a finding unique to the Fox News analysis. This response from both the outlet and its consumers is perhaps partially predictable given their learnings towards more conservative ideologies and less sympathetic attitudes towards mental health (Munsch, Barnes, and Kline, 2020). Finally, CNN offered a middle ground between Bleacher Report and Fox News where their commenters were generally more supportive of mental health discussions than Fox News, as expected due to their more liberal positioning (Pew Research Centre, 2020), but still criticized Biles in terms of her athletic ability and position as the greatest gymnast. Much like Fox News, arguments between users were commonplace, however this focused less on political and ideological affiliations, and more intellect or personal values.

These opposing findings, particularly between the news publications, could be partially attributed to the nature of their posts. Bleacher Report’s five posts during the analyzed period included three which reported facts and two that provided their own, and others, support of Biles. The more supportive stance from Bleacher Report followers may be ascribed to their younger, socially driven audience (Shorty Awards, 2016), which is likely be more understanding of those suffering with their mental health. Much like Bleacher Report, CNN’s posts during this period were either factual or supportive. However, a more divergent response was yielded through their commenters. Meanwhile, many of Fox News’ eleven posts were framed with negative connotations, such as attributing Russia’s gold medal in the team final to Biles dropping out, adverse responses from fellow athletes, and reporting that Biles boosted her endorsement potential despite her Olympics withdrawal. Given that research suggests the media are able to influence public opinions and attitudes through their reporting (Frederick, Pegoraro and Burch, 2016), especially regarding health issues (Cassilo,
2022; Hayes et al., 2007), this may go some way to explain why those responding to Fox News’ posts were the most critical of the four outlets.

Finally, RQ3 explored how the PSI towards Biles compared to other athletes who have publicly suffered with their mental health. Given the polarizing nature of comments, this research supports both Keier et al. (2015) and Parrott et al. (2021) in that there remains a stigma in relation to mental health, with many users outright disregarding Biles’ struggles or considering them an excuse for poor performance. While research suggests that attitudes towards mental health in the United States are becoming increasingly progressive (Cassilo, 2022), the current findings would not fully support this claim. Instead, evidence indicates that whilst support for Biles was present in social media discourse, the response was far from overwhelming in her favor. Although focusing on traditional media, Parrott et al. (2021) concluded that news stories relating to athlete disclosures of mental health struggles framed individuals as demonstrating strength of character. However, this current research would assert that this is largely dependent on the news outlet and cannot be claimed for the more conservative outlet included within this collection. Parrott et al’s (2020) research of the same athletes through bottom-up framing established similar findings to how many users responded to Biles’ posts, as opposed to the news outlet’s posts, by offering encouragement and advice. However, a noticeable difference in the research is that within the present case Biles withdrew from a high-profile competition and, as such, may explain why some users were more critical of her situation. Considering many attributed Biles’ absence to USA’s second place in the team final, and discussion around her athletic value was contested amongst users, this supports research that indicates athletes can be treated as commodities whereby their worth is widely debated during periods of absence (Cassilo & Kluch, 2021).

In terms of practical implications, the case of Simone Biles raises questions concerning the responsibilities of professional sporting organizations and the media in
relation to the mental health of athletes. The extent to which USA Gymnastics protects its athletes has been questioned for some time, and given this situation occurred with their most recognizable athlete there appears further work for the organization to undertake. Meanwhile, reporters should appreciate the potential effect their coverage of mental health related topics might carry for their audiences. Biles’ experience provides a powerful example of how mental health should, and should not, be treated. Positive depictions of mental health disclosures through both traditional media and social media can stretch beyond high-profile individuals, setting the standard for how society responds to such revelations and how mental health may become a less contentious issue amongst the public.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The current study is not without limitations. It only focused on the response to a single athlete and therefore unequivocally generalizing the findings to all athletes would be ill-advised, especially considering the specific arena in which Biles withdrew from competition which, potentially, impacted results. Additionally, the three media outlets included within the sample are all based within the United States and therefore an international perspective has not been included on her withdrawal. Questions could be raised whether Biles would have faced the same criticism from sports fans outside of America, where nationalistic ties to her performance at the Olympics would likely have been less relevant. However, within this study information pertaining to user location was not available, and therefore comments from non-Americans are likely to have been included within the analysis without any attention paid to it. Finally, the researcher made the deliberate decision to not include comments once it had been announced that Biles would return to competition for the balance beam final. However, this could have made for an interesting comparison between comments from when she withdrew, to when it was announced she would return.
This author would encourage scholars to continue to utilize bottom-up framing to determine how sports fans cope with controversial incidents, generally either painting athletes as a hero or villain on social media platforms. Future research may also benefit from comparing the responses to similar incidents. This would be especially interesting if considering intersectional factors such as gender or race. Although bottom-up framing has been used to dissect a range of sporting incidents or topics, this paper builds upon our extant knowledge from the context of mental health and elite athletes, and it is recommended that scholars continue to investigate this angle.

**Conclusion**

Shortly after the Tokyo Games, Simone Biles revealed that she did not foresee her actions would spark global conversations about athlete mental health, and nor did she envisage herself as a mental health advocate (Bregman, 2021). In July 2022, Biles became the youngest living person to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor. The White House (2022) described her as a “prominent advocate for athletes’ mental health and safety, children in the foster care system, and victims of sexual assault”. Despite the recognition, Biles’ action in Tokyo remains a contested topic on social media with many users questioning President Biden’s decision to award Biles with the honor.

Overall, this paper contributes to the growing body of literature into framing of athlete mental health, specifically through a bottom-up framing perspective. To our knowledge, this is the first paper that uses a female athlete as the focal point and has uncovered two noteworthy findings. Firstly, the public generally fail to establish a consensus on athlete mental health, with many feeling that athletes should remain impervious to the stresses of competition. The narrative surrounding Biles calls into question how progressive the public is when it comes to issues of mental health and the author asserts that this remains a contentious
subject. Secondly, that whilst not a significantly dominant theme throughout the narrative, Biles’ gender and race were framed both positively and negatively by social media users, in a manner that may not have been present with male or white athletes.
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Table 1

*Information Relating to Individual Facebook Posts Included Within Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facebook Page</th>
<th>Content of Post</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bleacher Report</td>
<td>USAG says Biles will be assessed daily to determine medical clearance for future competitions</td>
<td>27 July 2021</td>
<td>760</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(Prayer emoji)</td>
<td>27 July 2021</td>
<td>1,270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone Biles has withdrawn from the women's individual all-around final to focus on her mental health</td>
<td>28 July 2021</td>
<td>1,028</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Michael Phelps shows his support for Simone Biles</td>
<td>28 July 2021</td>
<td>1,010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone Biles thanks athletes for their support</td>
<td>28 July 2021</td>
<td>641</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>JUST IN: US gymnastics superstar Simone Biles has withdrawn from the team competition at the Tokyo Olympics</td>
<td>27 July 2021</td>
<td>2,911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Whenever you get in a high-stress situation you kind of freak out,&quot; Biles said. “I have to focus on my mental health and not jeopardize my health and wellbeing.&quot;</td>
<td>27 July 2021</td>
<td>1,649</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>The twisties are a mysterious phenomenon — suddenly a gymnast is no longer able to do a twisting skill she's done thousands of times before. Your body just won't cooperate, your brain loses track of where you are in the air.</td>
<td>28 July 2021</td>
<td>1,573</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The most decorated American gymnast defies gravity like a</td>
<td>28 July 2021</td>
<td>1,315</td>
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<td>Content of Post</td>
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<td>Facebook</td>
<td>superhuman, but even our near-perfect heroes are fallible</td>
<td>2021</td>
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<td></td>
<td>BREAKING: US gymnastics superstar Simone Biles has withdrawn from the</td>
<td>28 July</td>
<td>2,005</td>
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<td></td>
<td>individual all-around competition, USA Gymnastics said.</td>
<td>2021</td>
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<td>Of all the GOAT things that Simone Biles has ever done, this might be the</td>
<td>28 July</td>
<td>1,300</td>
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<td></td>
<td>greatest, argues Amy Bass for CNN Opinion</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>As the only survivor of Larry Nassar's sexual abuse to compete in these</td>
<td>28 July</td>
<td>569</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Olympics, &quot;I had to come back to the sport to be a voice, to have change</td>
<td>2021</td>
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<td></td>
<td>happen,&quot; Biles told NBC's Hoda Kotb this year</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Simone Biles' excellence stands out because it feels like an act of rebellion,</td>
<td>29 July</td>
<td>224</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>writes Brandon Tensley</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>2021</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;The outpouring love and support I've received has made me realize I'm more</td>
<td>29 July</td>
<td>463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>than my accomplishments and gymnastics which I never truly believed before,&quot;</td>
<td>2021</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Biles said.</td>
<td>2021</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Biles is scheduled to compete in the four individual events of vault, bars,</td>
<td>30 July</td>
<td>1,494</td>
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<td></td>
<td>balance beam and floor exercise.</td>
<td>2021</td>
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<td></td>
<td>JUST IN: Simone Biles withdraws from the vault and uneven bars finals. She's</td>
<td>31 July</td>
<td>1,353</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>being evaluated to determine if she'll compete in balance beam and floor</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>exercise.</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Fox News</td>
<td>AMERICA UPSET: Russia takes Olympic gold after Simone</td>
<td>27 July</td>
<td>4,152</td>
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<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>Biles drops out of gymnastics team final due to 'medical issue.'</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook Page</td>
<td>Content of Post</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Published</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIMONE SPEAKS OUT: Biles reveals stress of competition, not injury, knocked her out of Olympic event.</td>
<td>27 July 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>7,214</td>
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<tr>
<td>BREAKING: Simone Biles to miss next round of Olympic competition.</td>
<td>28 July 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>3,015</td>
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<td>CAREY IN, BILES OUT: America turns to 21-year-old Olympics backup after star drops out of solo event.</td>
<td>28 July 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>3,788</td>
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<td>RONDA’S GOT HER BACK: Ex-UFC star, Olympian blasts critics of Simone Biles after gymnast drops out.</td>
<td>28 July 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>2,822</td>
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<td>'I'M SORRY': Simone Biles sends powerful message to teammates after exiting event.</td>
<td>28 July 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>6,631</td>
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<td>BILES TWEETS: Gymnastics star Simone Biles breaks her silence after pulling out of both the individual and all-around events at the Olympics.</td>
<td>29 July 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>4,122</td>
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<td>GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY: Simone Biles boosts endorsement potential despite Olympics withdrawal.</td>
<td>30 July 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>1,257</td>
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<td>PHELPS' PERSPECTIVE: Legendary Olympian reacts to Simone Biles pulling out of Olympic events.</td>
<td>30 July 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>551</td>
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<td>MORE WITHDRAWALS: Biles pulls out from additional Olympics events; replacement named.</td>
<td>31 July 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>1,639</td>
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<td>‘TOUGH LOVE’: Former American gold medalist says Simone Biles needs 'nice kick in the a--.'</td>
<td>1 August 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>2,285</td>
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<td>Simone Biles</td>
<td>The outpouring of love and support I’ve received has made me realize I’m more than my accomplishments and</td>
<td>29 July 2021</td>
<td>2021</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook Page</td>
<td>Content of Post</td>
<td>Date</td>
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<td>gymnastics which I never truly believed before</td>
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<td>CONGRATS PRINCESS Absolutely killed it!!! OLYMPIC CHAMPION RIGHT HERE!!! So so so beyond proud of you!!!</td>
<td>29 July 2021</td>
<td>4,008</td>
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</table>
Figure 1

Leximancer concept map - Facebook user comments on Simone Biles' posts
Figure 2

Leximancer concept map - Facebook user comments on Bleacher Report’s posts
Figure 3

Leximancer concept map - Facebook user comments on Fox News’ posts
Figure 4

Leximancer concept map - Facebook user comments on CNN’s posts