

From the rugby field to the dance floor: A narrative case study of Ilona Maher's negotiation of femininity while competing on *Dancing with the Stars*.

by

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Abstract

This qualitative research proposal explores the negotiation of femininity that non-traditional female sports athletes experience. This thesis is an investigation of how U.S Women's Rugby Olympian Ilona Maher performs her femininity as a negotiation strategy during her time competing on the television show *Dancing with the Stars*. Through a narrative case research method, this study focuses on analyzing the discourse surrounding Maher's experiences on *DWTS* through the social media content that she posted regarding her time on the show and aired episodes of *DWTS*. The study provides a deeper contribution to discussions surrounding gender performance, self-representation, negotiation, and the intersection of media, athletic sports, and femininity through a societal lens.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Olympic women's rugby bronze medalist Ilona Maher has recently shifted her display of athletic ability from the rugby field to the dance floor while starring in Season 33 of the hit dance competition show *Dancing with the Stars (DWTS)*. Traditionally, the five-foot-ten, two-hundred-pound rugby superstar can be seen using her muscular body to tackle her opponents for the win. However, she has now migrated into an athletic space that demands elegance and gracefulness over strength and combativeness. Through this athletic adjustment, Maher has redirected the way in which her performance of femininity, through body and word, is viewed by her wider audience. Ultimately, Maher reveals a clear negotiation of her femininity from the way in which she showcases her non-traditional athletic identity in a feminized athletic context.

Maher's positionality as a media figure and as a non-traditional female sports athlete turned overly feminized sports athlete opens communication to reimagine the boundaries of femininity placed onto female athletes. The characteristics of femininity in the context of athletics expressed by Krane (2001) relate to one's use of feminine manners associated with being emotional, dependent, compassionate, and gentle. Therefore, when a female athlete — much like Maher — strays from the traditional social construct of femininity by performing in an assertive, competitive, and physically demanding manner, they break from the “normal” views of femininity. Through breaking away from the traditional construction of femininity, a display of negotiating one's gender identity takes place. In the context of this proposed research, negotiation is defined through the symbolic power of performing differently and justifiably than what is normally accepted by the wide set societal construct (Kolb & McGinn, 2008). Maher's conscious act of performing of her femininity as a non-traditional female sport athlete in a feminized space can be seen as a symbolic power of negotiating her gender identity. Thus, the redirection of femininity that Maher negotiates while competing on *DWTS* highlights how a non-

traditional female athlete continues to experience gender negotiation even when not competing in their direct athletic sport.

Non-traditional female sports, also known as male-dominated sports, are usually combative athletics that require an athlete to engage in a violent and/or aggressive manner (Smart et al., 2021). In context with this research, the strength, aggression, and combativeness needed to be successful in rugby is categorized as a non-traditional female sport, thus making Maher a non-traditional female sports athlete. Female athletes who choose to compete in non-traditional female sports allow for a deeper negotiation and reframing of society's meaning of gender and femininity through the powerful area that sports promote (Brake, 2017). However, in Maher's public transition from being in a non-traditional sports setting to a feminine athletic setting, she can display to the larger media her femininity in connection to both spaces in which she competes. Thus, through Maher's shift from competing in a non-traditional female sport to a sport that is seen as overly feminine, she displays a clear performance of negotiating her femininity to a large-scale media audience using sport as an area for negotiation.

This study investigates how media content portrays Maher's negotiation of femininity on *DWTS*. The analysis will focus on both aired *DWTS* episodes and social media content produced and shared by Maher during her time on the show. By examining this intersection, the study expands upon previous research on femininity in sports, offering new insights into how non-traditional female athletes navigate hyper-feminized performance spaces. This area remains underexplored in sports media discourse. Thus, the goal of using discourse analysis for this study is to uncover the cultural tension of how non-traditional female sports athletes negotiate their feminine self-identity to a wider audience outside of the context of their direct athletic sport.

To contextualize Maher's negotiation of femininity, this study builds upon existing research on gender performance in athletics, particularly male-dominated sports. This literature

review examines key theories of gender negotiation through the lens of Mead's symbolic interactionism and Butler's concept of performativity. Then, it explores how female athletes navigate femininity in hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine spaces and finally discusses media representation of female athletes as applications of the theoretical foundation. From there, this study discusses the research methods that were conducted in this study. After an in-depth explanation the results that were found through conducted discourse analysis will be explored. Lastly, this thesis will address the key findings, practical applications, and future recommendations in the discussion and conclusion chapter.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical frameworks in this study are Mead's symbolic interactionism and Butler's performativity. The theoretical framework of George Herbert Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionism, which was later adapted by Mead's apprentice, Herbert Blumer, assists in understanding the way in which society creates and maintains perspectives through interactions (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Essentially, the theory focuses on the interpretation of symbols and language to explain the way in which we, as humans, develop and shape beliefs through how society views certain ideals. Within symbolic interactionism, "root images" are a key to understanding the process that symbolic interactionism forms when building societal views. Blumer (1986) described such root images as the nature of objects, human and societal groups, and human actors that interconnect interactions of human society. Through understanding root images and how they relate to social interactionism, this study can examine the deeper connection that Maher has as an actor of interaction to greater society.

Accompanying Mead's symbolic interactionism, this research uses Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Gender performativity, as defined by Butler (2006), states:

Performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself.

Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration. (p.7)

Essentially, performativity illuminates how the continual performance of masculine and feminine behaviors ultimately creates a natural and normative understanding of that gender (Butler et al., 2013). Therefore, when masculinity and femininity are repetitively performed

outside of societal and cultural expectations, the concept of gender can be challenged. In connection to Maher's display of femininity, Butler's performativity assists in the understanding of how Maher performs and challenges gender ideals and identities.

The combination of theoretical frameworks of Mead's social interactionism and Butler's performativity, in focus on the objectives of this research study, was crucial to understanding the way society perceives female athletes' display of gender identity through the performativity of femininity. Symbolic interactionism, as it relates to athletics, can help recognize athletic identities and highlight the way that those identities develop and function (Baird & McGannon, 2009). The nature of gendered performativity expressed in sports showcases athletic identities that are often challenged due to the masculine view put onto female athletes. Thus, this study examines Maher as a "root image" actor for symbolic interaction with her gendered performance during her time as a dancer on *DWTS*.

Ilona Maher's negotiation of gender that is understood through the lenses of symbolic interactionism and performativity calls for an exploration of literature focused on non-traditional female sports, performance of femininity in hyper-feminine spaces, and negotiation of agency via social media. Through Maher's experience associated with the broader discussions of gender, sports, and media, this research study builds on existing scholarship by addressing gaps in how female athletes balance performative femininity within their athletic identity. Understanding how female athletes perform and negotiate gender requires examining how societal norms shape expectations of femininity in sports. The next section explores these norms, focusing on how non-traditional female athletes challenge conventional gender expectations.

Non-Traditional Female Athletes and Gender Norms

Well-known gender norms in athletics that enhance perspectives of how gender is understood and performed in and outside of an athletic context are challenged by non-traditional

female athletes, like Maher. Butler's performativity highlights that masculinity and femininity are not innate traits but are developed through one's continuous expression of gender. Therefore, non-traditional female athletes that repetitively express gender views that fall outside of societal expectations of how femininity is performed challenge set gender norms. The societal component of performing one's gender that non-traditional female athletes encounter highlights the need for Mead's symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism in this context provides a clear focus on how these athletes step outside the bounds of societies gender expectations to rethink how gender is performed to a wider audience. In connection to this study, the societal impact of Maher's negotiation of her femininity as a non-traditional female athlete can be examined through her performativity of gender to the wide scale audience that *DWTS* provides.

Femininity vs Athlete

The masculinized traits associated with physical strength and aggression in male-dominated sports forces female athletes that compete in these sports to negotiate between athletic development and expression of femininity at both the self and societal level. Traditionally, female athletes are expected to separate their athletic identity and their feminine identity; this can result in one's gender identities not being inclusively aligned with other parts of the self (McGannon et al., 2018). If an athlete chooses to combine their athletic physicality and their feminine identity, much like Ilona Maher does, oftentimes, the female athlete will find alternative ways to express their self-feminine identity as a form of negotiation. Additionally, Royce et al. (2003) addressed that while female athletes felt their identities associated with athleticism and femininity were separated in their personal lives, male athletes and non-athletes had opposing ideals of how female athletes perform their identities associated with gender. Therefore, female athletes who compete in male-dominated sports experience societal rejection

of their femininity, even though they may feel as though their athletic sport does not affect their sense of a feminine self.

Body

Non-traditional female sports athletes use, display, and perform their bodies as a tool for negotiating. The ideal feminine body is often described as being a small, thin, and model-like frame (Krane et al., 2004); however, female athletes competing in sports such as bodybuilding, throwing, and weightlifting, , are required to build certain body types that do not align with the ideal feminine body to benefit athletic success. Due to the societal separation of muscular bodies and femininity, the negative body image associated with female athletes who possess muscular bodies serves as a barrier to continued participation in non-traditional female sports. The intertwined connection between body performance and body image contributes to young girls' dropping out of athletic sports (Lunde & Gattario, 2017). Ultimately, the projection of masculine identity associated with the physical body that is pushed onto non-traditional female sports athletes jeopardize the expansion of female participation in male-dominated athletics.

Female athletes in sports who break from traditional scripts of femininity by actively participating in hyper-masculine sports are stereotyped as masculine due to the physical toughness that may be achieved when training. Such stereotyping of masculinity can negatively impact an athlete's view of their body image. An interview conducted by Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009) explained that female wrestlers expressed that the gaze of masculinity is set on athletes in male-dominated sports stemming from the physical toughness females need for successful athletic competition. To ensure athletic success in non-traditional female sports, athletes must build their bodies to be more muscular, bigger, and/or heavier to achieve strength that benefits athletic performance. Considering that athletic adjectives such as “big,” “ripped,” and “heavy” are associated with male athletes, female athletes who may have these body types are seen as

masculine (Boyle, 2005). Thus, when an athlete's display of their physical strength falls outside the bounds of the ideal feminine body, they are often masculinized for their contrast with the normative construct of femininity.

Male Contribution

In the context of navigating identity, the performance of femininity seen within female athletics stems from male contribution. Hence, gender stereotyping of what it means to be “feminine” in athletics is through the male gaze. Male athletes are seen as the standard competitor for most if not all, sports; thus, female athletes are seen as “less than” their male counterparts (McGannon et al., 2018). Considering that historically, sports have been developed and structured through primarily male contribution, with limited female assistance, men have created the rules and norms for all athletics, including female sports. In female athletics, men have decided on uniform choices, rules, regulations, and behaviors (LaVoie, 2023). Due to the long-embedded nature of the male gaze and governance in a sports context, men have influenced female athletics, including female athletes' performance of identity. This not only requires female athletes to perform outside of how society views their gender identities but also leaves female athletes marginalized and with others questioning their status of being a “real woman” (McGannon et al., 2018).

There exists a significant connection between the body image concerns of female athletes and the influence of the male gaze on societal perceptions of female athletics, a dynamic that forces female athletes to grapple with their gender identity in relation to established societal standards of female attractiveness. While cultivating a muscular physique can enhance an athlete's performance, such a body often strays from traditional ideals of female beauty (Appleby & Fisher, 2005). This disparity creates a divide between an athlete's physical appearance and societal expectations of femininity, serving as a barrier to female participation in combative

sports. Cockburn and Clarke (2002) discovered that female athletes, especially young girls, frequently feel compelled to choose between engaging in physical activity and being deemed attractive. Consequently, female athletes not only navigate the complexities of embodying masculinity or femininity but also contend with their appeal to a wider audience.

Femininity in Hyper-Feminized Performance Spaces

Hyper-feminized performance spaces, such as dance, serve as important arenas where gender performativity can be both reinforced and challenged. According to Butler's theory of performativity, femininity is not an inherent trait; rather, it is created through the repeated actions, behaviors, gestures, and expressions that conform to societal gender expectations. In these hyper-feminized performance spaces, female athletes like Maher must navigate the tension between their athletic identities and the societal pressures to conform to traditional notions of femininity.

Additionally, examining Maher through a symbolic interactionist perspective highlights how hyper-feminine performance environments allow for a stage directed towards gendered self-presentation constructed and interpreted by audiences, judges, and social media spectators. By analyzing Maher's performance on *DWTS*, this thesis examines how Maher negotiates and redefines the boundary of femininity in spaces that are traditionally known for strict gender norms.

Femininity and Performance

Performing femininity, in relation to this research study, can be understood through the understanding of *doing gender*. West and Zimmerman (1987) defined *doing gender* as “a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (p. 126). Aligning one's doing of gender to the context of the performance of femininity reflects the molding of female

athletic identity and female athletic experience. By performing femininity in athletics, female athletes (re)construct the ideals surrounding female athletic identity (Meân & Kassing, 2008).

Due to the perception of masculinity that non-traditional female athletes face, these athletes often emphasize their performance of femininity both in and outside of their competitive sports more than those in hyper-feminine sports, such as dance or figure skating (Kaskan & Ho, 2014). Non-traditional female athletes like Maher do not conform to societal physical expectations. Instead, they adopt emphasized femininity to showcase sociability rather than their athletic identity (Craig & Liberti, 2007). Similarly, Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009) found that women athletes emphasize their femininity by overly expressing their feminine selves through fashion choices by wearing dresses, makeup, and jewelry when not actively competing or practicing. Through the expression of femininity associated with appearance, one's body performance is more than just anatomy; it is also how an athlete displays their fashion and dress appearance. Thus, for this research, Maher's overemphasized performance of her femininity on *DWTS* is a negotiation of her femininity to her audience. While non-traditional female athletes often overemphasize femininity to conform to societal expectations, dance as a performance space further amplifies these gender norms. The next section examines how dance reinforces traditional femininity and how female athletes must navigate this hyper-feminized environment.

Femininity in Dance

Dance often reinforces gender roles and performances that emphasize expressions of femininity, largely because it is perceived as a female-dominated activity (Rinser, 2007). This female dominance creates a strong connection between dance and an exaggerated expression of femininity among dancers. Dance serves as a performance space for femininity, as seen through nonverbal body communication that conveys intentional purpose and cultural patterns of

feminine expressions of gender identity (Hanna, 2010). As a result, dancers are typically expected to express their gender identity through a feminine lens.

DWTS, as a media space, holds an important role for professional female athletes performing their femininity to a wider audience and for success on the show. Butler et al. (2013) conducted a study examining women's soccer star Hope Solo's negotiation of gender roles during her time competing on *DWTS*. As an athlete who does not conform to traditional notions of femininity, judges often focused on Solo's lack of femininity during her dance performances. To achieve success on the show, Solo adapted her gender identity to align with a normative feminine dancer (Butler et al., 2013). This adjustment can be compared to Maher's experience on *DWTS*, as both individuals struggled to balance their athletic identities with the expectations of performing in a traditionally feminine dance role.

Negotiation of Agency Via Social Media

Content on social media plays a significant role in shaping societal norms and expectations through individual agency. According to Mead's symbolic interactionism theory, societal views are constructed and interpreted through social interactions. In the digital age, social media provides a space where individuals can actively shape and control their public identity. This study examines agency in Maher's use of Instagram as she negotiates and redefines femininity, curating her own representation of athleticism and gender performance beyond mainstream sports media narratives. In this context, social media functions as both a mirror of societal expectations and a platform for challenging them. When connecting symbolic interactionism and negotiation seen via social media, female athlete influencers like Maher use their agency to assist in the reshaping of how society views gender norms. Furthermore, performativity in context with agency negotiation via social media provides a direct lens on the repeated behaviors that female athlete social media influencers showcase to express gender

expectations and redefine those expectations. By utilizing Maher's social media influence surrounding her time on *DWTS*, this thesis examines how Maher uses her agency to negotiate societal gender expectations and norms.

Media Representation

Media coverage and representation are some of the most important parts of athletics today. However, female sports are significantly underrepresented compared to men's sports (Skogvag, 2013). The small number of media that focuses on female athletics ultimately shapes how female athletics, athletes, and women, in general, are perceived and accepted in society (Huffman et al., 2004). Thus, the impression that few female athletes compete in athletics is expressed to the larger audience considering the lack of media representation. On the other hand, Markula (2015) discussed that the female athletics that are being covered by media are focused on heterosexual attractive women and are often sexualized.

Additionally, Markula (2016) explained that due to non-traditional female sports breaking the "normal" heterosexual feminine body and attractiveness, athletes within them must negotiate their gender gain media attention, which often fails. Thus, because non-traditional female athletes fall outside of the social construction of sexiness and attractiveness, they are extremely underrepresented, marginalized, and excluded in sports media. Given the limited representation of female athletes, social media has emerged as a crucial platform where athletes can construct and negotiate their identities. The following section explores how Maher used social media to navigate societal expectations of femininity while competing on *DWTS*.

Social Media and Identity Negotiation

Representation of female athletes on social media is essential, especially given the historically limited coverage of women's sports in traditional media. Social media provides a platform for individuals to negotiate and shape their identities (Yau et al., 2017). This research

study focuses on Instagram as the primary social media outlet for analysis, as it allows for clear visual representations of how users choose to present their “authentic” and “everyday” experiences (Reade, 2020). Instagram fosters authenticity in content and enables users to curate what they share with their audience. In the realm of female athletes expressing femininity, Instagram serves as a productive space for gender performance, allowing female athletes to portray their desired version of femininity to their followers (Nichols et al., 2021). Therefore, Maher’s content regarding femininity, gender, and athleticism reflects how she wishes to be perceived by society.

Agents of Change

Female athletes who display their femininity through expressing it on social media acts as an agent for change through providing visual representation of female athletes that compete in male dominated sports, furthering the negotiation gender equality and equal opportunity needed in sports media (Hovden, 2013). Additionally, the promotion of equality and active reframing of an athlete’s negotiation of femininity creates a ripple effect that encourages equality throughout many life aspects like work, school, and even family dynamics (Napoli et al., 2023). Furthermore, while there is a wide ripple effect, the younger generation of girls in athletics is one of the most important societal groups influenced by non-traditional female athletes. If sports want to see a rise in young girls’ participation in non-traditional female sports, it is crucial for current athletes in these sports, especially at the professional level, to promote and encourage women in male-dominated sports through utilizing media (NSW, 2019). Thus, athletes like Maher are ultimately creating a lasting impression on the evolution of young female athletes competing in non-traditional female sports and for the betterment of equality in and outside of athletics.

Research Questions

This study explores how non-traditional female athletes negotiate their femininity beyond competitive sports. By analyzing Ilona Maher's discourse regarding her performance of femininity while competing on *Dancing with the Stars (DWTS)*, the following research questions guided the investigation:

RQ1: In what way(s) does Ilona Maher negotiate her identity through her performance of femininity during her time competing on *DWTS*?

RQ2: How does Ilona Maher's performance of her gender challenge media representations of the norms of femininity?

This study employed a narrative case study approach to answer these research questions, utilizing discourse analysis of both traditional and social media content. The following section outlines the data collection and analysis procedures in detail.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This study employed discourse analysis with the assisted use of Butler's performativity and Mead's symbolic interactionism to investigate the ways in which Maher negotiated her femininity on her social media and while competing on *DWTS*. Discourse analysis was selected to conduct the research needed in this study for its focus on revealing gendered discourses stemming from language, identity, and power. Thus, the discourse was analyzed through an in-depth coding and thematic process. The data in the case of this research were sampled through purposive sampling which included Maher's 39 Instagram posts relating to her experience on *DWTS* and all 10 episodes from season 33 of *DWTS*. This chapter will discuss the research methods that helped guide this research study, next this chapter will discuss the data collection process, then the procedures for locating and selecting discourse, and lastly this section will discuss the data instruments used to conduct this study.

Research Methods

This study used a dual research method approach, specifically a narrative case study qualitative research method approach was best with the research goal of conducting this study. The justification for this research using the narrative study research approach is the fact that it directly investigated Maher's performances and negotiation of femininity. In addition to the narrative research method approach, this study had a clear bounded system that was examined as the case. The bounded system for this research study is the direct investigation of Maher's time competing on *Dancing with the Stars (DWTS)*; September 4, 2024, to November 26, 2024). The bounded case was examined from media surrounding the broadcasted television episodes, all content Maher directly posted to her social media platforms during the competition, and further commentary associated with Maher's performance on *DWTS*. Thus, due to the case focused directly on the narrative experience of Maher's time on *DWTS*, the dual research method

approach of a narrative case study justified this research. Now that there is a clear understanding of the research methods that helped guide this research study, this methodology section will next discuss the data collection process regarding selection for analysis.

Data Collection

This study employed a narrative case study research method alongside discourse analysis for data collection. Specifically, it analyzed the discourse surrounding Maher's experiences while competing on *DWTS*. The analysis focused on all ten episodes from Season 33 of *DWTS* and 39 videos Maher posted on her Instagram platform throughout her time on the show, which examined content from the beginning, middle, and end of her competition.

The selected episodes and social media posts provided a framework for exploring Maher's performance of femininity. This included aspects such as her physical presentation associated with her dancing, costume choices, displays of physical strength, and verbal expressions. Additionally, since Maher did not communicate verbally in every video, this discourse analysis also considered non-verbal communication and the use of music or TikTok sounds as they relate to her negotiation and expression of femininity (see Appendix C).

Additionally, to fully grasp the scope of Maher's challenging media representation, judges' and hosts' responses were analyzed from each episode of *DWTS* (see Appendix D). Each form of media selected for the analysis was sampled using the non-probability sampling technique of purposive sampling. Through discourse analysis of *DWTS* episodes and Maher's social media posts encompassing her time on *DWTS*, a better understanding of how non-traditional female sports athletes communicate their negotiation of femininity to a large-scale audience benefited this study. After identifying the relevant media content, this study applied a structured analytical approach to examine how Maher's negotiation of femininity was

constructed across different platforms. The next section details the procedures used to systematically analyze these materials.

Procedures

The selection and identification of discourse for analysis focused on Maher's social media content, particularly her Instagram posts, and all episodes from Season 33 of *DWTS*. Purposive sampling was used to ensure the inclusion of relevant content, aligning with the study's research methods and data collection process. Purposive sampling matched the need for discourse where Maher is either talking or showing her athletic identity in a feminine manner while in some way connecting to her competing on *DWTS*. Therefore, video posts relating to Maher's dances on the show, getting her makeup and hair ready, showing off her costume choices, displays of strength, and verbal expression were selected to examine how her performance of femininity is portrayed.

It is important to call to attention that this study specifically called to locate discourse content directly from Maher's Instagram platform versus other social media platforms due to the wide set of content that can be provided and the reach for many forms of audience demographics. For instance, if this study examined Maher's TikTok posts the target audience would shift to younger generations. Thus, this study located and purposefully selected discourse content from Maher's Instagram account to assist in the research collection and analysis (See Appendix B for the list of Instagram posts that were selected for analysis). In addition to examining Maher's Instagram account, all episodes from *DTWS* were used for the analysis needed to conduct this research. Each episode examined Maher's dances, costume choices, physical strength, verbal expressions and how the judges and hosts responded to her performance.

Data Instruments

To analyze the collected data sample, this study required multiple coding schemes to analyze the presented discourse. The coding sheets for research focused on the following categories: her dance performances, costume choices, displays of physical strength, and verbal expressions. Additionally, in the context of her social media posts, the use of TikTok sounds and trends (see Appendix C: Social Media Posts Coding Sheet) were analyzed and in the context of aired episodes judges' and hosts' response were examined (see Appendix D: *Dancing with the Stars* Episode Coding Sheet). The reasoning behind the chosen categories was that each category examined the different ways that femininity can be performed to a wide set audience. Analyzing the discourse within the bound of the coding categories bettered the designated themes and discursive strategies used by Maher. When analyzing the discourse, the researcher examined the categories through qualitative perspective, by describing in a in-depth manner how the video post visually and audibly expresses traits of femininity and feminine identity. Ultimately, these categories deepened the perspective of Maher's performance of femininity to better address the themes and strategies associated with how Maher displays her negotiation of femininity.

Discourse Analysis

In the context of this study, discourse analysis was a valuable tool to examine the way content and context assist in the shaping of society's views and expectations. Wetherell (1998) highlighted that utilizing an interpretative position when examining discourse reveals the ways that identity can be negotiated. Additionally, the discourse analysis driven in this research added to the broader cultural context of discourse surrounding societal ideologies related to identity, gender norms, and performance by using a synthetic approach. A synthetic approach, defined by Medved (2016) is "paying attention to larger culturally familiar tropes, narratives, and ideologies that are taken up, resisted, and/or transformed in "local" conversations." A synthetic approach

used in alignment with discourse analysis provided deeper attention to the cultural significance that discourse had in molding societal ideologies (Medved, 2016). Through taking a synthetic interpretative position on Maher's performance of femininity while competing on *DWTS*, discourse analysis provided a rich interpretation of how negotiation takes place when shaping and challenging societal views.

Trustworthiness

Considering that this study collected data through discourse analysis and relied heavily on researchers' interpretation, it was crucial that the findings express clear validity, reliability, and trustworthiness. , Creswell (2013) provided a list of strategies to ensure validation when conducting qualitative research. Two of Creswell's (2013) suggested strategies are useful in this research study: (1) rich, thick description and (2) peer review or debriefing.

This study called for a rich,thick, and in-depth description of discourse selected for analysis and the case. A clear use of rich and thick descriptions of each of the sampled social media posts from Maher was described through in-depth detailing of physical and nonverbal aspects, verbal expression, and context of when and where the content was displayed. Through in-depth descriptions that focus on Maher's performance of femininity, Creswell's (2013) rich and thick description pushed beyond analyzing the content as themes, rather discovering femininity in context with the discourse. In addition to providing in-depth detailing of the social media posts, a deepened description of the case itself was beneficial for the validity of the study. With the bounded system of this case being Maher's time competing on *DWTS*, this study thoroughly outlined the context of the television show and Maher's participation during the competition. Thus, through providing an in-depth, rich and thick descriptions of the social media posts and the case itself, the validity of the research was better showcased.

Peer reviewing and debriefing techniques were also used for the validity of this research. Having an outside source review the research conducted for this study allowed for multiple forms of feedback regarding the interpretation of the discourse analysis. Considering researcher bias is a limitation in this study, having a peer reviewer who debriefed the potential biases was important for the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the collected data. The major professor for this thesis, Dr. Sean Eddington, was the primary peer reviewer. Through using rich and thick descriptions as well as peer reviews and debriefings the trustworthiness of this study was better expressed, allowing for a clear and reliable study.

Limitations and Challenges

With the context of this study aiming to understand negotiation of femininity in media as it relates to non-traditional female sports through discourse analysis, there are several limitations and challenges that must be addressed. The two key challenges encountered in the conducting of this research study were: social media posts were only selected for analysis from Maher's Instagram account and the potential for misinterpretation and limited interpretation of the discourse. Considering that the sample of social media was only selected from Maher's Instagram platform, other forms of discourse surrounding Maher and her performance of negotiation on *DWTS* may not have been considered during the data collection of this study. As for the potential misinterpretation and limited interpretation of discourse, this study specifically explored how femininity can be performed through the categories listed on the coding sheet (see Appendix C), other forms of femininity performance were not fully investigated. In addition to the two challenges, there are also two limitations that must be addressed. Firstly, researchers bias could be seen as a limitation within the conducting of research for this study. Secondly, the coding and analysis will be conducted by a single researcher. These limitations will be further addressed in the following sub-section that discusses researcher positionality.

Researcher Positionality

As the single researcher for this study, I want to call attention to my potential bias and positionality as I was a previous competitor in several non-traditional female sports, as well as a former dancer. I have a personal connection to the negotiation of femininity in the context of non-traditional female athletics and dance. The topic of this study is meaningful to my personal experience with performing my femininity when actively participating in athletics, as well as the struggles that I faced with negotiating my outward facing feminine identity when retiring from competition. Through conducting this research, I furthered my understanding and hope to encourage other individuals to expand their knowledge of the negotiation that current and former non-traditional female athletes perform when addressing their femininity and athletic identity. Thus, I was willing and able to surface my own biases to gain a key sense on how other women, such as Ilona Maher, are experiencing and displaying the same negotiation that I myself have faced.

While there are limitations in this study, the previous section, trustworthiness, discussed the actions that were taken to ensure proper validity and reliability. Through using a thick and rich description of Maher's performance of femininity, a clear interpretation of her negotiation of femininity was observed through a non-bias lens. Additionally, this study found peer reviews from external sources to assist in the potential biases that I, as the primary researcher, may bring to my interpretation of discourse. My personal experience regarding performance and negotiation of femininity as a non-traditional female athlete was used as a strength to assist my interpretation and understanding of the ways in which Maher chooses to display her feminine athletic identity, but it was not the driving factor in my observations.

Chapter 4 - Results

The research questions in this study are guided by symbolic interactionism and performativity as they relate to Maher's negotiation of femininity. The first research question highlights Maher's negotiation of her identity through social media and mass media representations. The data collection for this question comes from two sources: (1) Maher's Instagram posts (see Appendix C) and (2) her media representation on *Dancing with the Stars* (see Appendix D). By examining this question, four major themes were identified: Costume Aesthetics, Audio Choices, Feminine Strength, and Emotional Vulnerability, which assisted in the discovering of femininity discourse. The second research question focuses on the judges' and hosts' responses to Maher's challenge of femininity norms through her performance of gender identity (see Appendix D). In addressing this question and assisting in structuring femininity discourse, three themes emerged: Maher's Femininity, Strength and Power, and Agent of Change.

RQ1: In what way(s) does Ilona Maher negotiate her identity through her performance of femininity during her time competing on *DWTS*?

To answer RQ1, this sub-section highlights the discourses of femininity surrounding Maher to tighten the scope of gender, visibility, and performance. This sub-section examines four key themes: costume aesthetics, audio choices, feminine strength, and emotional vulnerability through discourses of femininity. To investigate Maher's negotiation of her feminine identity, this results chapter shifts from framing thematic coding to reflecting on the discourse analysis that was the driver for the research conducted through displaying the key findings as femininity discourse. Beginning with Femininity as Sexiness, this sub-section explains Maher's use of costume aesthetics as a negotiation tactic when performing femininity

while competing on *DWTS*. Next, this section explores Femininity as Empowerment, highlighting Maher's empowerment choices through audio aspects of her digital and media identity. Following Femininity as Sexiness and Empowerment, this sub-section examines Femininity as Subversion. Maher combines athleticism and sexuality to challenge gender assumptions. Maher's performance of femininity, as it relates to Butler's Performativity, defies feminine expectations by destabilizing gender norms through her use of body, identity, and gender. Thus, Maher challenges traditional femininity by expressing her strength outside the usual context of femininity and initiates new discussions about how feminine identities are performed. Lastly, to answer RQ1, this section will explain Maher's use of Femininity as Emotional Vulnerability as a way in which she furthers her performance of identity.

Femininity as Sexiness

Through Maher's posts on social media and media's representation of Maher, a significant theme from the discourse analysis was femininity as sexiness, which can be observed through Maher's costume aesthetics. Maher negotiates her identity by using costume aesthetics to guide her femininity performance, which reinforces Sisjord and Kristiansen's (2009) stance on non-traditional female sports athletes' emphasizing femininity through fashion choices. Costume aesthetics in this case can be understood as the style of clothing, shoes, hair, and make-up she wears in her Instagram posts and while competing on *DWTS*. Maher is often shown through media landscapes in feminine costume aesthetics related to elegance and sexiness, which, through an interpretive analysis lens, is a strategy to enhance media visibility through the power of femininity discourse. It is important to note that while the figures shown within this chapter are posted through the official *Dancing with the Stars* Instagram account, it is directly displayed on Maher's Instagram feed. Each of the figures visually shows Maher's costume aesthetics,

which were considered when researching this thesis to understand her negotiation through her full performance of femininity.

Maher's costume choices serve as performative references to normative femininity (Butler, 1990). However, the heightened sensuality and athletic context simultaneously disrupt these norms, revealing gender as a fluid, unstable, deliberate, and strategic performance. By showcasing Maher's sexiness as a performance of her femininity through her costume aesthetics, her outfit selections often included high-cut leotards that accentuated skin and revealed her chest. Maher's aesthetic choices express a form of subversive femininity that blends athleticism and hypersexuality, aligning with Butler's theory of gender performativity. For instance, Figure 4.1 presents Maher's costume aesthetics from the first episode of the competition, featuring a pink leotard with a cut-out in the chest area, heels, vibrant makeup, and a half-up, half-down hairstyle.

Additionally, Figure 4.2 is taken from Maher's final performance on *DWTS*, showcasing her in a silver leotard with a deep V-cut neckline, thigh-high heels, and makeup with her hair down. The costume aesthetics seen in Figures 4.1 and 4.2 emphasize Maher's performance of femininity through a sexy lens. Beyond Maher's competition costume aesthetics, her Instagram posts and *DWTS* media frequently depicted her in athletic clothing such as shorts, sports bras, one-piece rompers, and bikinis. Given that her athletic wear was tight and revealing, this aesthetic can be interpreted as sexy. Examining Maher's choice to wear and share content in sexy clothing outside the competition empowers and reinforces discussions about femininity as sexiness, through the repetitive act of performing gender. This ongoing performance of sexiness aligns with Butler's idea that gender is repeatedly performed, thereby exaggerating conventional understandings of femininity. Therefore, Maher's use of sexy athletic clothing further illustrates

her performance of femininity as more than just a negotiation during competition, but also as part of her daily interactions.



Figure 4.1
Episode 1; Dance 1 Cha-Cha Photograph



Figure 4.2

Episode 10; Dance 2 Freestyle Photograph

In addition to the sexiness that Maher uses as a negotiation tactic for her femininity, Maher uses costume aesthetics that promote elegance to perform her feminine identity. The elegant costume aesthetics that Maher exhibits use long and flowy dresses with heels, and her hair is usually down with naturally styled make-up. Figure 4.3 shows Maher's use of elegance to promote her femininity, as she is wearing a light pink ball gown with a deep V cut, with her hair down. Similarly, Figure 4.4 visualizes her elegant aesthetic through her natural make-up, hair down style, and dark blue floor-length dress. Maher uses soft colors and light fabrics as part of sleek costume aesthetics to appear more feminine.

Furthermore, Maher posted a video (POST 12) of her first time wearing a ballroom skirt with the TikTok audio "Do you feel Bonita?" from Family Guy season 16, episode 11 "Dog Bites Bear". POST 12 addressed how wearing elegant clothing, such as a ballroom skirt, can leave the individual feeling "pretty", which can be connected to the larger-scale performance of Maher's femininity. Maher's expression of "feeling pretty" relates to its deeper connection with

sexiness and falls into a type of aesthetic labor. Maher is enacting such aesthetic labor, which conceptualizes the idea that an individual must feel good internally to look good to an external audience (Wood, 2017).



Figure 4.3

Episode 3; Dance 1 Foxtrot Photograph



Figure 4.4

Episode 5; Dance 1 Rumba Photograph

It is crucial to note that in this analysis, sexiness and elegance are strategically used in separate and together contexts. There are costume aesthetics that only focus on sexiness or elegance, but there are also instances where both are intertwined. Figure 4.4, for example, shows Maher in a sensual floor-length gown that reveals much of Maher's skin, with her costume mimicking a cloth draped over her. Accompanying Figure 4.4, Maher posted a video (POST 23) of her discussing her request to the costume design department that she wanted to show a lot of skin and nakedness to make her feel sexy and pretty. Thus, Maher demonstrates her aesthetic labor in the interconnection between sexiness and elegance to perform her feminine identity.

Femininity as Empowerment

When combining Maher's use of Femininity as Sexiness and Femininity as Empowerment, Maher actively shows strategic visibility as a guide for her social media content and media representation through her costume aesthetics and audio choices. Maher's strategies

for visibility can be understood as her creative, technologically mediated work, meaning that she constantly performs as herself in media as a form of labor (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Therefore, her choice in costume, TikTok trends, audio uses, and humor are active strategies to curate her femininity through digital culture.

Maher's choice of competition songs play a crucial role in her performance of femininity when negotiating her identity. The songs Maher and Bersten dance to on the show convey themes similar to how Maher expresses her identity on social media through a female empowerment lens. Working alongside the female empowerment audio aspects of Maher's performance of femininity, sexual and sexy audios and songs also play a role in Maher's feminine identity and expression of self. It is important to note that Maher often had a social media post that used the same songs she performed for her competition dances. The social media audios that mimic the same songs that Maher uses in her dance songs express her femininity and identity by articulating themes of women's empowerment and female sexual liberation to the large-scale audience that social media offers. Considering that both Maher's social media posts and competition songs have a recurring theme of women's empowerment and sexiness, it is a large part of the identity shaping that Maher performs.

Maher uses female empowerment songs as a primary way to negotiate her femininity through her time competing on *DWTS*. The first song that Maher and Bersten dance to in the competition is "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!" by Shania Twain, and was chosen by Maher as her "personal anthem" in episode one, "Premiere" of the show. Considering that "Man! I Feel Like A Woman!" has a major theme of girl power in the lyrics, it clearly set up the identity that Maher decided to perform to her audience while on *DWTS* from the very beginning of the season. Furthermore, to conclude Maher's competition on the show, her final dance was performed to "Femininomenon" by Chappell Roan, which embodies female empowerment and feminine

advancement. Through ending her time competing on the show with Chappell Roan's "Femininomenon" she leaves her audience with female empowerment as a key driver to her identity. She performs her identity in alignment with postfeminist femininity that frames sexual confidence as liberation (McRobbie, 2009). Maher's use of female empowerment songs throughout the dance competition promotes Duffy and Hund's (2015) notion regarding post-feminist self-branding, highlighting an influencer's visibility through body display, cultivation, and authenticity to provide gendered media discourse. Considering that Maher began and ended her season dancing to songs that promote female empowerment, it is a key aspect of how Maher negotiates her femininity as a female empowerment performance.

Accompanying the conceptualization of Maher using female empowerment to guide her identity on *DWTS*, she also uses sexually and sexily driven audio to express her performance of femininity further. Throughout Maher's time dancing on the show, she dances to "Lady Marmalade" by Christina Aguilera, Lil' Kim, Mya, and P!nk as a competition song on episode three, "Soul Train Night." Christina Aguilera, Lil' Kim, Mya, and P!nk's song "Lady Marmalade" reflects women's empowerment through sexual liberation, which conveys a sexy perspective to Maher's performance of femininity in relation to female promotion. Furthermore, Maher's use of sexualized audio on social media has a recurrence on the analysis of her Instagram posts. Maher uses sexual songs such as "Birthday Sex" by Jeremih (POST 11) and "Pony" by Ginuwine (POST 36) as audios in her social media posts, which further shape her feminine identity through a sexual and sexy lens. Besides songs used as a social media sound, Maher also uses audio trends to articulate a sexy feminine identity. For instance, Maher posted a video (POST 21) of her and Bersten recreating a scene from *American Dad!* season 7 episode 17. The episode from *American Dad!* Maher recreated has her stating, "I'd forget my own butt if it wasn't so big" then Maher walks away from the camera and redirecting back to the camera to

state, “made you look its normal.” This trend expressed sexual ideals through the aspect of Maher directing the video to focus on her backside. Thus, Maher uses sexualized audio and sounds to assist in her negotiation of femininity that she conveys to her audience by pushing the notion that sexiness is a concept within femininity rather than reinforcing sexual objectification.

Femininity as Subversion

Considering Maher’s high profile as a U.S. Olympian, social media influencer, and competitor on *DWTS*, she uses her stance in popular feminism to reimagine the culture surrounding femininity through her subversion. Popular feminism is a form of feminism that stems from a following and a media presence that highlights the demand for difference and visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Maher’s popular status is key to the importance of her intertwined performance of costumes, audio selections, choreographed strength, and emotion, which signifies femininity through gendered power that reframes feminine identity and strength in media.

Maher’s athletic ability stems from her physical strength when participating in rugby, so she uses such strength to her advantage while competing on *DWTS* and demonstrating her feminine identity. Considering that strength is often related to masculine performance, the feminine space of dance accompanied by strength can be understood through a lens of femininity. While competing on the show, Maher is referred to as the first woman to lift her partner during a dance competition. This is notable due to its disruption of traditional gendered scripts of physical power and ultimately expresses feminist ideals. After showcasing her ability to lift her partner, Bersten, in episode two, “Oscar Night,” Maher strategically used it in various dances to present aspects of having feminine strength. Through the repeated use of lifting, Maher continues to resist traditional gender norms and further subverts feminine identity through her gender performance. Additionally, Maher continuously posted media on her Instagram that

exhibited her physical strength and how it was altered to fit a more feminine perspective.

Through Maher's performance of physical strength in the feminine area of dance, the way that Maher negotiates her larger identity can be better understood.

Social media posts were crucial to Maher's negotiation of her femininity in relation to her display of strength. Maher posted videos showing her lifting and spinning Bersten to participate in the social media trend #womeninmalefields (POST 37). She uses these videos to assert her strength as part of her female identity by directly referencing the norm of male strength and reframing it to fit a female perspective. To further utilize her social media platform to negotiate strength through a feminine lens, Maher employed a sexy appeal to strength. She uploaded a video of herself and Bersten taking off their shirts to showcase their muscles underneath (POST 14) and a video of them dancing and lifting each other on a dancing pole (POST 16). By showcasing her muscles and exhibiting strength through pole dancing, these two posts illustrate Maher's connection between strength and femininity from a sexy perspective.

A significant contributor to Maher's expression of feminine strength is evident in all media landscapes related to her performances in episode six, "Disney Night." Maher and Bersten interpretatively danced as Luisa Madrigal and a donkey from Disney's *Encanto* to the song "Surface Pressure" by Jessica Darrow. In this dance, Maher metaphorically performs strength by pushing over prop rocks and holding up the world (a beach ball decorated like the world). Still, she also shows a significant amount of her physical strength by repetitively lifting Bersten. Maher also concluded the dance by holding Bersten on her shoulder with one hand and showing off her bicep muscles with her other arm. Accompanying this dance in episode six, Maher joined other stars in the competition to do a team dance. This team dance included Joey Graziadei with partner Jenna Johnson, Chandler Kinney with partner Brandon Armstrong, and Jenn Tran with partner Sasha Faber, in which they danced to "I2I" by Tevin Campbell from *A Goofy Movie*. In

this dance, Maher physically lifts three people in three ways, showing off her strength. Through both dances, Maher posted several media videos in which all the posts showcased her strength. Maher shows her strength in one of her posts (POST 26) by visually showing off her biceps while dressed in her Lusia costume.

Additionally, Maher posted two videos of her lifting other dancers before the competition. In one of the videos, Maher, in heels, uses Jenna Johnson to explain how to lift during a dance, calling it a “lifting masterclass” (POST 17). In the other post, Maher uses an audio sound from *Encanto*, “Lusia, the donkeys got out again,” then lifted Bersten over her shoulders and walked away with him. Through Maher’s social media display and media representation of her strength, she continues to add and contribute femininely, such as through her costume, audio components, and the feminine space of dance.

To further advance the discourse of femininity as subversion, Maher’s dance partner, Bersten, enhances Maher’s performance of femininity by engaging with and expressing his feminine ideals while challenging masculine gender norms. Through Maher’s social media posts, she depicts Bersten’s performance of femininity through sexiness, clothing, and redirecting gender norms. Bersten is seen in multiple of Maher’s posts that express femininity as sexiness. Such as POST 4, where Bersten is encouraging Maher to “FEEL the sex appeal” by using a sexual dance move to motivate Maher to do the same. To continue adding to sexy femininity, Bersten and Maher show off their sexy pole dancing skills to prove that they are the sexiest couple on *DWTS* (POST 16). Through Bersten’s use of sexiness as a motivation for Maher’s performance of femininity he adds to the subversion of Maher’s feminine identity.

In addition to sexiness, Bersten willingly shows femininity through wearing Maher’s costumes and feminine clothing. Bersten is shown wearing a fringe skirt while Maher questions his intent of wearing it (POST 29), his willingness to wear a skirt, and for it to be posted to

Maher's social media page opens a conversation regarding his challenging of gender norms and clothing. Furthermore, Maher and Bersten participated in a TikTok trend that asks the audience to guess whose clothing is whose, with them wearing each other's costumes, which shows Bersten in one of Maher's costume dresses (POST 30). Bersten's ability to openly and willingly wear clothing that is associated with feminine identity positively impacts his part in Maher's subversion of femininity.

The last way that Bersten plays into Maher's performance of femininity is by their strategic combination of feminist work to challenge gender norms. Maher participated in a TikTok trend highlighting that men don't receive flowers until their funerals. In this post (POST 13) Maher surprised Bersten with a bouquet of flowers, to which his response is joyful and appreciative. Additionally, how Bersten allows Maher to display her physical strength by lifting him challenges gender norms by switching the roles of strength. Maher explains in episode two, "Oscar Night," that her social media audience encouraged her to lift Alan during her dances, to which Bersten responded positively by saying, "Let's do it." How Bersten and Maher interact to challenge gender norms provides deeper insight into his role in Maher's larger performance of femininity.

Femininity as Emotional Vulnerability

One's ability to present emotions and vulnerability is often connected to gender performance of femininity. During Maher's time competing on *DWTS* she had several moments that highlighted her performance of femininity through her emotional and vulnerable identity. Maher's display of emotion and vulnerability operates through affective labor, which is feminized digital emotional labor that is intensified through social networking and emotional investment (Mäkinen, 2020). When analyzing emotion and vulnerability as themes, there was a clear distinction between Maher's visible emotional performance through television and her

social media presence. Maher only posted one key post that presented emotional vulnerability, compared to the multiple moments on the show that showed Maher's vulnerable side. However, both media platforms showed Maher's emotional openness related to her close relationship with dance partner Bersten and her overwhelming commitment to the competition.

Maher developed a deep connection and friendship with Bersten during her time on the show.

Through their relationship and the interdependence that ballroom dancing relies on in the competition, Maher showed her emotional side regarding Bersten and her close partnership. On Maher's social media, she refrained from posting content surrounding emotional vulnerability,

only fully crying in one post (POST 42). The post shows Maher and her partner Bersten preparing for the final episode of the competition and shows them emotionally embracing each other in tears. In addition to this single post highlighting Maher's emotional connection with

Bersten, they are also shown crying over their competition's conclusion in the season's last episode, "Finale." In the "Finale" episode, Maher and Bersten emotionally embraced each other in the interview before the last dance. While Maher exhibited emotional vulnerability stemming from her close friendship with Bersten, she also showed her vulnerability when not performing to her standards and to what she believed Bersten's standards were for her during competition.

For instance, in episode four, "Hair Metal Night," Maher had an emotional outburst when talking to the judges and hosts after having messed up multiple times in her dance. In the after-dance interview with co-host Julianne Hough, Maher cried and talked about not living up to Bersten's expectations. In the next episode, "Dedication Night," Bersten responded to Maher's statement and emotional vulnerability as a "human moment" and that Maher could never disappoint him, which led to Maher crying once again. Maher's outlet of emotional vulnerability stems from her relationship with and expectations from Bersten, which is vital to how Maher uses her emotions

as a part of her identity, considering the relationship between femininity and emotional displays.

RQ1 Finding Summary

During her time on *DTWS*, Maher portrayed femininity as a means of exploring her identity by projecting herself to a broader audience through feminine wardrobe choices, audio preferences, strength, and emotional openness. Analyzing Maher's portrayal of femininity reveals four main discourses that drive her negotiation: Femininity as Sexiness, Femininity as Empowerment, Femininity as Subversion, and Femininity as Emotional Vulnerability. Through these discourses, Maher both reinforced and challenged traditional gender norms. She strategically used sexiness both on and off the dance floor to enhance her performance and increase the visibility of femininity, which aligns with Butler's theory of gender performativity. Maher's song selections for the competition and her social media audio choices are key elements in her discourse of femininity as empowerment and as a way of affirming her identity. She subverts traditional gender roles and redefines strength as a feminine trait through displays of physical power and by reversing gender roles with Bersten. Furthermore, Maher's partnership with Bersten plays a crucial role in femininity as subversion, particularly through Bersten's embrace of femininity alongside Maher. Lastly, in the discourse of emotional vulnerability, Maher's emotional expression and openness showcase affective labor as a central part of her feminine performance. The combination of these discourses highlights how Maher intentionally performed, negotiated, and reimagined femininity on *DWTS* and through her social media presence. To further explore how Maher challenges media representations of gender norms related to femininity, this section will address RQ2.

RQ2: How does Ilona Maher's performance of her gender challenge media representations of the norms of femininity?

To better understand how Maher performed gender identity by challenging norms of femininity and to address RQ2, this subsection examines discourses of femininity that Maher receives from the judges and hosts of *DWTS*. Banet-Weiser's concept of "popular feminism" discussed earlier in this chapter when exploring Femininity as Subversion can also be applied when analyzing the findings related to RQ2. Again, popular feminism emphasizes media visibility, leading to popularity through branding and likability. In Maher's case, her increased visibility and likability in media representation and branding as a social media influencer directly influence how she challenges gender norms on a large scale. Thus, Maher's link to popular feminism is a key driver in exploring her performance of femininity in the media arena and the lasting impact that Maher's branding has on the representation of femininity in media. Examining judges' and hosts' discourses around Maher's performance of identity on *DWTS* examining three main themes of femininity: Maher's Femininity, being an Agent of Change, and Strength and Power, in relation to femininity discourses. First, this subsection looks at Femininity as Integration, which centers on how outward audiences perceive Maher's expression of femininity. Second, emphasizing Maher's use of strength and power was crucial for judges and hosts to understand how Maher performs gender identity; it will be seen as Femininity as New Forms of Strength and Power. Lastly, this sub-section dives into Femininity as Possibility, referring to Maher as an agent of change surrounding the conversation of femininity and feminine identity.

Femininity as Integration

Maher's performance of femininity on *DWTS* tests media representation of gender norms through her articulation of her feminine identity. Analyzing judges Bruno Tonioli, Carrie Ann Inaba, Derek Hough, and co-hosts Alfonso Ribeiro and Julianne Hough reveals how Maher maintains her feminine identity for a wider audience. The judges and hosts used their time with

Maher to address her performance femininity. Inaba, in episode two, “Oscar Night,” explained how Maher is changing the entire perspective on what femininity is:

That was amazing! Listen, listen, seriously. Like, not only was that a moment people will be talking about for years to come, but you are restructuring the whole conversation. You are leading this conversation on what femininity is, and that is the important aspect of it. (E2, Inaba)

The judges and hosts on *DWTS* often addressed Maher’s performance of femininity by verbally expressing certain feminized words and phrases after Maher’s dance performances and directly discussing Maher’s time and growth on the show.

The judges and hosts used words and phrases throughout the season to highlight Maher’s performance of femininity during her physical dances in the competition. The judges and hosts continuously addressed Maher’s performance of femininity by reinforcing her feminine identity. Throughout multiple episodes, the judges referred to Maher and her dance abilities as “beautiful,” which often occurred after dances focused on elegance, smoothness, and romance. For example, in episode three, “Soul Train Night,” where Maher and Bersten danced a Foxtrot, judges D. Hough and Inaba use “beautiful” to refer to Maher’s performance and describe Maher. However, being called “beautiful” was also directed towards Maher when having dance styles that were not directly related to elegance. In the first episode “Premiere,” Tonioli addressed Maher as “beautiful” when dancing the Cha-Cha, an energetic dance. Thus, all three judges at some point or another referred to Maher and/or her dancing skills as “beautiful.” While “beautiful” was used a lot by the judges to describe Maher on the show, her femininity was also referred to as “delicate,” “graceful,” “soft,” and “vulnerable.” Much like Maher was called “beautiful” when dancing a more elegant style, she received the most feminine-directed comments on herself and her dancing during episode nine, “Semi-Finals” Dance 2, when dancing

the Viennese Waltz. After her Viennese Waltz, the judges all had comments that reflected femininity and Maher's portrayal of it. D. Hough and Tonioli both listed words that would seemingly fit a feminine description, such as "tender," "stunning," "graceful," "radiant," "soft," and "vulnerable." The language used by the judges directly addresses ways to perform femininity, which further validated Maher's personal performance of gender identity. Using synonyms that tie into femininity in their language of Maher's performance, the judges validated that femininity is an identity that thrives from concepts regarding beauty, elegance, and other aspects of gentleness. The judge's using such rhetoric to interpret Maher's dance identity was more than just a reaction to Maher; it was a discursive negotiation of ideal femininity.

Furthermore, Inaba metaphorically referenced Yin and Yang, suggesting that Maher embodies significant Yang energy (masculine and strong); however, throughout *DWTS*, she embraces Yin energy (feminine and gentle):

Watching you come from like...you know, everybody has Yin and Yang right? And you came into this competition with a lot of Yang energy and it was so powerful and beautiful to see. But what is so... I'm just so honored, I feel so honored to have watched that dance and to see you dance fully in your Yin energy and just be completely present. You are changing people's lives. You have changed my life. This has been amazing. (E9, Inaba)

Inaba's comment expressed Maher's challenge: being seen as feminine while having masculine parts to her identity. The judges' comments right after Maher danced clearly connect to Maher's gender performance and the judges' larger understanding of how Maher fits into norms of femininity.

There were several moments throughout the show where the judges got to work directly and/or comment on Maher during the show. The first time a judge interacted with Maher outside of the after-dance critiques was when Inaba worked one-on-one with Maher before performing

the Rumba in episode five, “Dedication Night.” When meeting with Maher, Inaba expressed that the most challenging part of dancing an elegant dance like the Rumba for Maher will be her ability to “allow her fullest femininity to shine” (Inaba, E5). Inaba practiced with Maher to perform her dances in a feminine manner. By the end of Maher’s official dance, Inaba said that Maher had met her true femininity through her vulnerability and gentleness in the dance. The next time a judge gets to comment on Maher’s time competing on the show directly is Tonioli in the show’s last episode, “Finale.” Tonioli praised Maher’s blend of strength and softness in her dances. Through moments when the judges get to converse about Maher on the show, there is a clear addressing of Maher’s femininity, her ability to perform it well in her dances, and validation of Maher’s identity. The judges seemed to admire Maher’s challenging gender performance and her evolution into a more expressive feminine identity.

Femininity as New Forms of Strength and Power

Through Femininity as Integration and Femininity as New Forms of Strength and Power, Maher produced a normative negotiation. There is a tension identified between Maher’s alignment with and challenge to traditional gender scripts through her performance of femininity. Considering that judges praised her femininity as “graceful” and “vulnerable,” and her use of strength in a dance, there is a precise instance of negotiating femininity. This contradiction of femininity connects to postfeminism and the understanding of construction of gender relations that are articulated and repudiated (Gill, 2007). Considering Mead’s Symbolic Interactionism, Maher redirected the societal boundaries and construction of acceptable femininity by playing into known feminine identity and her new form. Thus, Maher’s performance of femininity is a driving factor in furthering the understanding of and new forms of femininity.

Considering that Maher was the first women’s rugby player to compete on *DWTS*, there were a lot of comments from the judges and hosts related to Maher’s strength and how it related

to her power when performing her dances. Maher's strong performance actively challenges the lack of media representation of strong and muscular women. However, even with the societal rejection of physically strong women, the judges and hosts expressed positive feedback regarding Maher's use of strength and her muscular body. In the last episode of the season, Tonioli went as far as to say that Maher "may be the most powerful female star" that the show has ever had compete in its 33-season series. Maher received comments from the judges throughout the season, discussing her strength and use of it by lifting and spinning multiple people during the show.

Maher's ability to lift other dancers was important in the discussion surrounding her strength. Most notably, Maher's ability to lift her male dance partner Bersten was of special interest to the judges. In episode two, "Oscar Night," Maher became the first woman in the show to lift her dance partner as part of their performance. The judges and hosts reacted with delight when Maher showed off her ability to lift and spin Bersten while continuing to dance. Inaba explained that Maher is rewriting how people view femininity by displaying strength. After Maher received her comments from the judges, J. Hough addressed Maher by saying,

J. Hough: "Ilona, you were literally just saying 'I'll be honest, I don't get lifted very often.' So who came up with that idea of 'you lift, then he lifts?'"

Maher: "Well, everyone online has been saying that they want me to lift Alan. And I think he was like 'Let's do it.' But truly in our sport we do lifting, but I never get lifted, so it was a lot of trust to put into him to get lifted. So it was tough but very fun" (E2, J. Hough & Maher)

Luckily, Bersten seemed to encourage Maher to use her strength when competing. Bersten supported Maher in episode four, "Hair Metal Night" when he explained that the Jive dance style requires "pumping iron," then proceeded to accompany Maher to the gym to prepare her for the

week's dance. Through the encouragement and support from the judges, hosts, and Bersten, Maher could perform against societal norms and show off her strengths.

When discussing Maher's use of strength as a performance of her identity, episode six, "Disney Night," is crucial to how Maher presents her strength through a feminine lens. For "Disney Night" Maher, in the words of D. Hough, embodied Lusía Madrigal from *Encanto*, a character who portrays a powerful woman. In the dance for episode six, Maher lifts Bersten two times during the performance. In response to Maher's dance and lifts, Tonioli exclaimed:

Mirror, mirror on the wall who is the strongest of them all (points at Maher). I'm telling you, no pressure on her. She could lift a rhino with a finger Totally true to character, I love your determination. How focused you are in doing well (E6, Tonioli).

Tonioli intertwined the feminine nature of dance and Maher's use of strength in a positive response to her performance. Additionally, Inaba related Maher's power and dance skills by deepening the connection between her performance to the larger impact of showing strength and femininity in the same context. Thus, while Maher's performance of gender challenges media representation of feminine norms, Maher can redirect the way that those norms are expressed to a broader audience.

Femininity as Possibility

Maher's expression of femininity was primarily discussed among the judges and hosts, portraying her as a role model and an agent of change for young women through her likeability and branding skills. Maher's popularized feminism regarding visibility in media plays a crucial role in her ability to act as a role model and agent of change. From the very first dance that Maher competed with on the show, J. Hough had a conversation on how Maher's confidence makes her a role model for self-love:

J. Hough: “Hello beautiful people. Alright Ilona, you are such a role model. You have shown women everywhere not only to just love them, their bodies, but themselves. How did you harness that confidence within yourself?”

Maheer: “Um, I don’t know if it came from myself. I think it came from my teammates, the friends and family around me. I think being around strong women, being around confident women, it kind of trickles down into you. And so, I’m running a pyramid scheme that my teammates are giving me confidence; I want to give other people confidence and hopefully they can give other people confidence.”

J. Hough: “I think that’s the best scheme I’ve ever heard.” (E1, J. Hough & Maheer)

With J. Hough’s comment in mind, the way that Inaba and J. Hough, the only two women among the judges and hosts, praised Maheer’s role as an agent of change many times throughout the season played a crucial part in understanding Maheer’s motivations behind challenging gender norms. Through a female empowerment lens, Maheer, as an acting agent of change for both the show’s viewers and the women connected to *DWTS*, plays into the challenging gender norms that Maheer showcases through the media representation from the show.

Maheer competed in ten full episodes of *DWTS*, leaving a lasting impression of her femininity on the women involved in the show.. Inaba’s comments towards Maheer being an agent of change for women often referred to Maheer’s impact on Inaba as a whole. As the season was ending, Inaba, in episode nine “Semi-Finals” and episode ten “Finale,” mentioned Maheer’s life-changing empowerment and impact on her:

Ilona! Oh, my God! My mind is blown, blown, blown, blown. Femininomenon-n-n-n-non! You are all that and then some. But wait... Look. This is the freestyle moment, it’s all about the impact you leave. You leave me feeling so empowered. That’s the magic of dance. Thank you for doing that. (E10, Dance 2, Inaba)

Additionally, considering the one-on-one conversation that Inaba and Maher had in episode five, “Dedication Night,” about living up to one’s fullest femininity, Inaba responded to Maher’s dance that night in a crying tone and admiring Maher’s femininity. This connection to Maher’s femininity had a lasting impression on Inaba and how Maher presents her feminine identity to the larger audience.

To reference the show’s viewers, episode six, “Disney Night,” Inaba commented on Maher’s ability to change other women’s minds about femininity through performing it differently:

When you dance, what is so spectacular about you is you change the storyline in other young ladies’ heads. You are telling them a different story and that is so impactful. A dance is not just a dance, like you have impact in this world. (E6, Inaba).

Thus, Inaba explained that Maher’s impact goes beyond the influence over the judges and hosts of the show. Considering the lack of media representation surrounding women who perform their gender like Maher, it is essential to note that Maher had such an impression on Inaba. Although Maher is celebrated as a role model for young women, her visibility is shaped by platform dynamics that favor palatable, aestheticized forms of empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Her displays of strength and confidence are still required to perform in alignment with beauty, charisma, and relatability. Therefore, there should be a push to visualize women’s performing femininity outside the everyday context.

RQ2 Finding Summary

Maher’s performance on *DWTS* challenged traditional media representations of femininity by expressing a gender identity that combines strength, vulnerability, and empowerment. This portrayal both reinforced and challenged gender norms. Through discourse analysis, three main discourses of femininity were identified in response to RQ2: Femininity as

Integration, Femininity as New Forms of Strength and Power, and Femininity as Possibility.

Maher's physicality, personality, and strong public identity redefine conventional and accepted notions of femininity. Judges consistently used feminized language to validate Maher's performance of femininity and highlight her contradictory identity, which embodies both gentleness and power. Her conflicting identity disrupts traditional gender expectations both on and off the dance floor, offering a new perspective on feminine identity at a broader level. Additionally, Maher's visibility and branding as a media influencer position her as a role model and catalyst for change. As a role model and agent of change, she inspires others and reimagines what femininity can be, as reflected in the praise from judges and hosts of *DWTS*. Overall, Maher's gender performance on *DWTS* demonstrates that media figures like her challenge, negotiate, and reshape representations of femininity in media.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Conclusion

Key Findings

The application of Mead's symbolic interactionism and Butler's performativity guided the research conducted in this study, further legitimizing the valuable information discovered about Maher's performance of femininity as a negotiation strategy in wide-scale media. Maher aligns with Mead's symbolic interactionism through multiple facets, the notion of the "*looking-glass self*" and *significant symbols*. The concept of the "*looking-glass self*" explains that identity is shaped through the ways individuals perceive themselves as being perceived by others. Through the "*looking-glass self*," Maher co-constructed her feminine identity through public expectation and feedback, such as from the judges, hosts, and audiences. Furthermore, Maher shaped the way that she is perceived and how her femininity is interpreted at the societal level through *significant symbols*. Significant symbols are understood as "symbol significant for the person who sets, introduces, and uses it for the purpose of communicating with another person as well as for the person who perceives it and responds to it" (Wagner, 1974, p. 103). In the case of this study, for example, *significant symbols* related to Maher's gendered expression include her muscular body, emotional vulnerability, and choreography, which all function as a cultural symbolic negotiation for reimagining femininity. Using each of these ideals highlighted in Mead's symbolic interactionism, Maher's gender identity is not just an expression. Still, it reveals how femininity is shaped in and through interactions, responses, and interpretations of mediated gender performance.

Accompanying Mead's symbolic interactionism, Butler's concept of performativity assisted this study. Butler (1990) explained that gender is not a fixed identity, but rather an ongoing discursive act. In alignment with the frameworks in this study, Maher illustrated the way non-traditional female athletes engage in performativity to negotiate and recognize gender

identity. In this case, Maher's femininity was not only expressed but also shaped through repeated gender performance, which demonstrates Butler's concept that gender identity is performed through "stylized repetition acts" (p. 140). Moreover, this study provides a crucial understanding of the role that media and social media play in negotiating the societal conceptualization of traditional gender identity for female athletes in male-dominated sports. This research contributes to understanding how female athletes perform femininity to negotiate their gender identity at the societal level. Overall, Maher's unique perspective of gender performance while competing on *DWTS* provided a clear and direct insight into how non-traditional female athletes negotiate their feminine identities through utilizing media outlets to visualize new forms of femininity.

The primary focus of the first research question was to explore Maher's identity negotiation as it relates to her performance of femininity through her social media posts and media visualization of Maher while competing on *DWTS*. Through conducting discourse analysis, this study found that Maher's discourses highlighting femininity were performed by both reinforcing and challenging gender norms. The clothing Maher wore, the audio choices for dances and Instagram posts, the display of physical strength, and the ability to openly express emotion all played important roles in the way Maher expressed her feminine identity to her large-scale audiences. Through each of these actions, Maher addressed the larger negotiation of gender identity by her ways of performing femininity relating to sexiness, empowerment, subversion, and emotional vulnerability.

The second research question aimed to examine the ways that Maher challenged media representation of gender norms by directly analyzing judges' and hosts' responses to Maher's performance of femininity. The discourse analysis conducted in this study found that Maher challenged and enhanced societal scripts for gender surrounding femininity. The judges provided

positive feedback that highlighted Maher's femininity as a genuine expression of a traditional feminine identity. In addition to the judges agreeing with Maher's expression of traditional feminine identity, it was also found that Maher challenged traditional gender assumptions by allowing for new forms of femininity to be performed which could guide newer generations of female athletes in their negotiation of gender identity. Ultimately, Maher's discursive performance of identity revealed femininity as a form of integration, new sources of strength and power, and potential.

Through analyzing Maher's performance of femininity while competing on *DWTS*, this research reveals how gender can be strategically negotiated and reimaged when performed in media. Maher's performance of gender while competing on *DWTS* offers insight into how gender is traditionally understood, constrained, and further negotiated within the context of competition reality television, sports, and digital media. Maher's mediated performance highlights the visibility and legitimacy of non-traditional female sports athletes in the media, which are often underrepresented. While Maher made individual choices to express her femininity, each decision ultimately shaped cultural expectations on how gender scripts are performed regarding female athletes in male-dominated athletics. Often, Maher exceeded gender expectations by reinforcing and challenging traditional gender standards. Maher's ability to strengthen and challenge conventional gender scripts acts as a continuum that occasionally occurred simultaneously and independently, thus furthering her visibility and legitimacy. For instance, Maher often wore feminine clothing, jewelry, and make-up while also displaying her muscular physique and actively used her strength; in this way she strategically negotiates her identity by not conforming or resisting traditional femininity. Thus, Maher's gender performance both disrupts and strengthens conventional identity limits for women in male-dominated institutions. Through analyzing Maher's case, this study highlights the importance of displaying diverse performances

of gender that promote identity beyond traditional societal norms and understandings. Widely viewed non-traditional athletics for women embrace, encourage, and challenge broader representations of femininity in media.

Theoretical Contributions

This thesis offers three main theoretical contributions. First, Maher's performances across various media reframe femininity in different ways by highlighting how non-normative athletic bodies (e.g., those that do not conform to traditional ideas of femininity) strategically negotiate visibility through stylized gender performances. Second, Maher's emotional expressions on *Dancing with the Stars* serve as a form of gendered vulnerability that both reinforces and challenges traditional scripts of femininity, especially in relation to her dance partner. Finally, drawing on symbolic interactionism, the analysis shows how Maher's visibility, popularity, emotional labor, and branded identity collectively create a unique "root image" that offers new ways to understand femininity, athleticism, and popular feminism.

Reframing Femininity in Non-Traditional Athletic Bodies

Previous literature has established femininity, in both body and action, as a feminized manner relating to emotional expression, gentleness, and dependency, while also being characterized by small stature and thinness (Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2004). Drawing from Butler's (1990) argument that gender is a repeated and discursive act, Maher's performance of femininity is strategic and necessary for navigating gender performance in non-traditional athletics. Through discourse analysis of Maher's visualization in media, she challenged societal ideals of what femininity looks like, while also performing femininity in alignment with previous understanding. Considering that Maher is a tall, muscular individual, she does not necessarily conform to the traditional notion of femininity as it is often perceived on the exterior. This is due to Maher's actively choosing to enhance her athletic abilities rather than falling into the

traditional understanding of what a female body looks like (Appleby & Fisher, 2005). While Maher's physical body challenges conventional understanding of femininity, her mediated gender performance outlined how female athletes gain visibility. Maher's strategic use of costume aesthetics, emotional vulnerability, and other discourses of femininity not only expresses feminine identity but also negotiates cultural understandings that reward women for conforming to traditional norms. From this, Maher's performance is shaped through a broader understanding of gendered media visibility and popular feminism which is expressive while also being constrained (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Gendered Vulnerability and Emotional Performance

The study's findings showed that while competing on *DWTS*, Maher's emotional expression served as a form of public performance vulnerability and aligned with traditional gendered expectations of feminine authenticity and emotional openness. Taking the instance where Maher openly cried to the audience on episode 4, "Hair Metal Night," and again on episode 5, "Dedication Night", Maher's reaction reinforced that emotional expression is a repetition of normative femininity (Butler, 1990). Considering Maher's expression of vulnerability in a televised and public setting, her emotional labor and marketable authenticity develop into a branded persona that visualizes empowerment through popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Thus, Maher's vulnerable crying acts as a significant symbol (Mead, 1934) and follows traditional scripts of emotional openness, which are highlighted when performing femininity.

Additionally, one of the key aspects of Maher's subversion and reinforcement is her interdependence with her dance partner, Bersten. Maher's and Bersten's partnership enabled audiences to observe Maher's femininity in relation to her reliance on her partner, while also offering insight into Bersten's gender performance in line with Maher's overall negotiation.

Bersten's performance is more than support for his dance partner; he also actively reinforced traditional heteronormative scripts of gender. Considering that Maher's and Bersten's partnership was formed through a conventional heterosexual pairing, Bersten's role as the masculine counterpart positions the partnership in a normative gender understanding, which can further legitimize Maher's feminine performance. Moreover, Bersten's encouragement of Maher's physicality in competition dances challenged normative gender roles. Through Bersten's choreography, which promoted Maher's athleticism and strength, he highlighted gender performance from a non-traditional lens. Thus, through Bersten's reinforcement and subversion of gender performance, he further validates Maher's expression of femininity.

With Maher's physical body falling outside of traditional norms of a feminine body, especially within the hyper-feminized sport of dance, she overperforms her external femininity to her audience. In Maher's social media posts and *DWTS* media, she was frequently seen wearing makeup, jewelry, and feminine clothing, such as dresses and heels, in the majority of her content, often conveying sexiness and elegance, much like how Sisjord and Kristiansen (2009) found that female wrestlers express their feminine identity by overly performing femininity through fashion choices. Maher's excessive display of femininity through her appearance serves as a negotiation strategy, allowing her feminine identity to outweigh her athletic identity (Craig & Liberti, 2007) during the competition. Considering that non-traditional female sport athletes often wrestle with societal expectation between athletic identity or the feminine self (Royce et al., 2003), and that dance is a space that promotes feminine expression (Hanna, 2010), Maher's ability to choose being a dancer over a rugby athlete for the sake of her competition on *DTWS* showed her intentional actions of performing her femininity.

Symbolic Interactionism and the Cultural Work of Visibility

With Maher's femininity in mind, a guiding factor for her negotiation was her role as a "root image" and popular feminist influencer. Maher's expression of femininity was more than a solitary and self-focused behavior; instead, her performances acted as a socially constructed identity that is formed through her interactions with Bersten, hosts, judges, and both television and media audiences. In alignment with Mead's symbolic interactionism, Maher can be observed as a "root image," which in this case can be understood as human actors within societal interactions that further negotiate gender ideologies. During the competition, Maher was continuously praised by the hosts, judges, and Bersten for her ability to position herself in a way that positively influences other women and girls, ultimately reinventing the way femininity is culturally viewed. In this case, Maher not only shifted the perspective of femininity related to female athletes' identities (Mean & Kassing, 2008), but also reconstructed societal views beyond sports, creating a ripple effect in many aspects of life (Napoli et al., 2024). Maher, as a root image, acted as an agent of change within society's understanding of how femininity is performed.

Furthermore, Maher's star and influencer status puts her in the position to create difference, change, and visibility, connecting her to Banet-Weiser's (2018) ideals surrounding popular feminism. Relating popular feminism to Maher's femininity — specifically regarding her marketability, visibility, and emotional openness — allows for Maher's branded identity to strengthen and disrupt traditional gender scripts. Therefore, Maher's connection to popular feminism opens a discussion about how Maher's empowerment narrative creates feminist possibilities related to the role of strength and athleticism in femininity.

Media played a crucial role in Maher's ability to bring visibility to non-traditional female sports, which are often underrepresented in sports media due to the lack of athletes who do not

conform to a heteronormative standard of attractiveness (Markula, 2016). Maher's visualization through social media and televised media not only reclaims media as a space for female athletes in male-dominated sports to be seen but also reflects the conditional terms under which female athletes outside of normative beauty standards can access visibility. Such visibility demands that gender performance be legible, visual, and further negotiated in both athletic and digital contexts. Maher utilizes her social media platforms as part of her negotiation strategy to establish her identity among her followers (Yau et al., 2017). Specifically, in the case of this study, Instagram enabled Maher to engage in gender performance that is depicted authentically and through the way she wishes her audience to perceive her femininity (Nichols et al., 2021; Reade, 2020). Maher's visualized femininity in media is an arena for empowerment and change, which encourages the understanding of strength and vulnerability through normative scripts of femininity (Butler, 1990).

Practical Application

Men dominate the athletic world. However, since the creation of Title IX in 1972, ensuring female athletes' equal access to equipment, quality coaches, scholarship funds, practice fields, and facilities to their male counterparts in any given sport (Huffman et al., 2009), female athletic participation has been on the rise. It is working to close the gender gap in athletics. Even with Title IX's encouraging equal opportunities for female athletes, there is still an underrepresentation of female athletes and female coaches in athletics. Specifically, in sports that require increased strength and competitiveness, the work to close the gender gap is progressing, albeit slowly, behind many other sports. This study's wide application is directed towards athletics and the advancement of women's participation in sports; however, in a specific context, this research can be applied in alignment with media representation, female athletes within sports, and digital content creators. Considering the various levels of athletics (e.g. youth,

college, professional, .) and the diverse arenas that sports promote, this study reaches a broad array of demographics.

While non-traditional female sports athletes have long been underrepresented, those currently competing in these sports are crucial for expanding female participation. With the continued growth of female participation in non-traditional athletics, it is crucial to acknowledge public feminist figures who are helping to make athletics a space for all to contribute and feel welcome. Maher is a key influencer for the expansion of young girls choosing to compete in underrepresented women's sports and for understanding the negotiation that goes into being a woman in male-dominated arenas. This study's findings provide a deeper understanding of Maher's strategies for resisting stereotypical gender expectations by performing femininity through empowerment, subversion, and reinvention, which current athletes can use as a framework for negotiating gender through the performance of identity. Maher's negotiation does not stop on the *DWTS* stage or the rugby field; she has expressed her gender performativity through various media contexts, including *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*, *People* magazine, the House of Maher podcast with Olivia and Adrianna Maher, and her personal content on all social media platforms. Thus, Maher's visualization is aimed towards demographics that fall outside of an athletic context, making her gender expression recognizable to more than just athletes.

Future Research

The research in this study provides valuable insight into Maher's negotiation of femininity through her gender performance across social and televised media. However, future research could expand the contents of this study in several ways. Firstly, future research would greatly benefit from exploring the ways that intersecting identities, such as race, sexuality, class, and body size, shape non-traditional female sports athletes' performance of gender and negotiate

femininity in media. While Maher's identity as a white, heterosexual woman does not lessen the impact of Maher's influence or experience, her experience does not contain the full range of possibilities and challenges that athletes from marginalized backgrounds may be faced with. Seeing that Maher does not identify as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, addressing her identity in a queer context did not seem fit for this research out of respect for her sexual identity. Nevertheless, the hyper-masculine and combative nature of male-dominated sports like rugby forces female athletes to experience gendered perspectives, sexualized assumptions, and are often stereotyped as queer (Kauer & Krane, 2006), which may not always be the case for female athletes. To deepen the understanding of the negotiation strategies used by female athletes regarding gender performance in media, expanding research to explore intersectionality in alignment with gender performance in sports would allow future research to investigate systems of empowerment and oppression that thrive in sports.

Secondly, the methodological approach of this study could be modified in future research to gain a deeper understanding of the audience perspective by examining audience feedback, interpretation, and reactions to female athletes in masculinized sports and their negotiation of femininity through digital spaces. This study primarily investigated judges' and hosts' responses to Maher's gender performance; however, incorporating an analysis of viewer and audience comments via media platforms could further uncover how gender performances mediate, reinforce, and challenge mediated gender scripts within digital cultures. Through understanding all aspects of audience engagement, whether supportive or opposed, the performance of femininity by non-traditional female sport athletes provides a broader societal meaning to gender, athletics, and visibility in media. Ultimately, expanding future research to include an intersectional lens and audience-driven perspective on gender performance in traditionally male

sports deepens societal understanding of the large-scale perspectives, negotiation strategies, and gendered athletic identities within the large and powerful arena that sports promote.

Conclusion

This study examined Ilona Maher's performance of femininity as a strategic means of challenging gender norms in the media. Conceptualizing Maher's motives behind her performance of her feminine identity ultimately furthers societal understanding of how gender is performed by non-traditional female athletes in media spaces, thus justifying the need for the research conducted in this study. Through an in-depth discourse analysis of Maher's media presence, this study discovered that she negotiated her femininity by performing gender that reinforces and subverts traditional gender expectations. Overall, Maher is a key figure in the media who represents non-traditional female athletes who perform gender, specifically femininity, both during and outside of athletic competition.

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Appendix A - Research Question Table

Research Question	Data Collection Strategies
RQ1: In what way(s) does Ilona Maher negotiate her identity through her performance of femininity during her time competing on <i>DWTS</i>?	• Maher's identity in media and her social media • Appendix C ○ Maher's posts show a negotiation through performance of femininity • Appendix D ○ Media shows Maher's negotiation of her femininity.
RQ2: How does Ilona Maher's performance of her gender challenge media representations of the norms of femininity?	• Appendix D ○ Analysis of judges' response

Appendix B - List of Instagram Posts

POST 1- September 4, 2024 (Announcing *DWTS*)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/C_gEIDOtYP_/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 2- September 5, 2024 (Showing off *DWTS* outfit and rugby)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/C_jEzCSQrW/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 3- September 7, 2024 (Discussing nervs about *DWTS*)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/C_oqUHqS5Pe/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 4- September 9, 2024 (Sex appeal)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/C_tORTlyWA5/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 5- September 17, 2024 (Hair and makeup)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAB260JSzbB/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 6- September 18, 2024 (Dance 1)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAFQXR_vULI/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 7 – September 22, 2024 (Lifting Alan)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAOUQ3cP507/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 8- September 24, 2024 (Flip- “Did you see my coochie or my butt”)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAU3_IYR5z5/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=7MzRlODBiNWFIZA==

POST 9- September 25, 2024 (Getting hair and makeup done)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAV2iycPUDR/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFIZA==

POST 10A- September 25, 2024 (Second Dance; Flipping partner Alan)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAWgJhXSxXp/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFIZA==

POST 10B September 29, 2024 (Second Dance; Flipping partner Alan)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAbobVcS55v/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFIZA==

POST 11- September 26, 2024 (Tiktok trend substituting sexiness with athleticism)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAY2kZpS_2u/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFIZA==

POST 12- September 27,2024 (Wearing a ballroom skirt for the first time)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAbobVcS55v/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFIZA==

POST 13- October 3, 2024 (Getting Alan flowers)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAqXgXjA70Q/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFIZA==

POST 14- October 3, 2024 (Not being delicate and tiny)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DArbLFRSQdL/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFIZA==

POST 15- October 4, 2024 (“Mama said it was okay” TikTok trend)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAtHtLIy3eY/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==

POST 16- October 5, 2024 (Pole Dancing to show sexiness)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAvzlsyPWPW/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==

POST 17- October 6, 2024 (Lifting Masterclass)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAyn1EYysMM/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

POST 18- October 7, 2024 (Long pink dress)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DA1mFJgp1EU/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==

POST 19- October 7, 2024 (Thirst trap in costume)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DA2T8wnA3tG/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==

POST 20- October 8, 2024 (Dance 3)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DA2dAQWRc7m/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==

POST 21- October 11, 2024 (“Made you look” TikTok trend)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBARU2EyENw/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==

POST 22- October 15, 2024 (Dedication dance declaration)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBKIra7JRTn/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==

POST 23-October 15, 2024 (Feeling sexy and pretty)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBKQFfhJpZs/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 24A- October 16, 2024 (Dance 4)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBMPRMwP3ti/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 24B- October 18, 2024 (Dance 4)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBP3mmTpw9U/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 25- October 16, 2024 (Practicing in a bikini)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBM3gd-PSgJ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 26- October 22, 2024 (Showing off muscles for Luisa Madrigal)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBcI_6Qp4lR/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 27- October 22, 2024 (Showing muscles and picking up Alan)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBcb_-8Sg6Z/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 28- October 23, 2024 (Dance 5)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBe8CJ6y4aD/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 29- October 27, 2024 (Alan wearing a skirt)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBpeg0ASRoK/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 30- October 28, 2024 (Diamonds are a girl's best friend)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBr00lmJ8oK/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 31- October 29, 2024 (Guess whose costum is whose)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBuTDwjJLZx/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 32A- October 30, 2024 (Dance 6)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBuTDwjJLZx/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 32B- October 31, 2024 (Dance 6)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBzK2RDuw9x/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

POST 33- November 10, 2024 (Wrestling Alan)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCMvnVnyrpx/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 34- November 13, 2024 (Dance 7)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCUcH3EyFPU/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 35- November 35, 2024 (Showing off pant suit)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCSVbUWpj2E/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 36- November 15, 2024 (Dance contest)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCXnAmMpVrg/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

POST 37- November 18, 2024 (Dancing sexy)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCh0leCJxUr/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

POST 38- November 19, 2024 (#womeninmalefields)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCIdke1RhQK/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

POST 39- November 19, 2024 (Alan wearing makeup)

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCkTi8ppVYX/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

FIGURE 4.1- September 17, 2024 (Cha-Cha Photos)

https://www.instagram.com/p/DACdrLOSdiV/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

FIGURE 4.2- November 26, 2024 (Freestyle Photos)

https://www.instagram.com/p/DC3BcEQJ0_t/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

FIGURE 4.3- October 7, 2024 (Foxtrot Photos)

https://www.instagram.com/p/DA18UfsySFA/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

FIGURE 4.4- October 15, 2024 (Rumba Photos)

https://www.instagram.com/p/DBKrqrJSJ6E/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

Appendix C - Social Media Posts Coding Sheet

POST#	Dancing	Clothing	Physical Strength	Verbal expression	TikTok trend
POST 1					
POST 2					
POST 3					
POST 4					
POST 5					
POST 6					
POST 7					
POST 8					
POST 9					
POST 10					
POST 11					
POST 12					
POST 13					
POST 14					
POST 15					
POST 16					
POST 17					
POST 18					
POST 19					
POST 20					
POST 21					
POST 22					
POST 23					
POST 24					
POST 25					
POST 26					
POST 27					

POST 28					
POST 29					
POST 30					
POST 31					
POST 32					
POST 33					
POST 34					
POST 35					
POST 36					
POST 37					
POST 38					
POST 39					

Appendix D - *Dancing with the Stars* Episode Coding Sheet

Episode	Dancing	Clothing	Physical Strength	Verbal Expressions	Judges Response
E1 - Premiere					
E2- Oscars Night					
E3- Soul Train Night					
E4- Hair Metal Night					
E5- Dedication Night					
E6- Disney Night					
E7- Halloween Nightmares					
E8- 500 th Episode					
E9- Semi- Finals					
E10- Finale					