Gender games. Gender roles in sport social media challenges: a content analysis

Juegos de género. Los roles de género en los retos de las redes sociales deportivas: un análisis de contenido

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Abstract

This research investigates the sport practice through the lens of gender on digital platforms. Since they are involved in the construction of corporeality, sports tend to reproduce socially dominant values about what being a woman, or a man means. Consequently, the idea that there are «feminine sports» and «masculine sports» is widespread. Specifically, sporting practices through the phenomenon of social media challenges are focused. These are highly correlated with concepts such as challenge and performance, in which gender, too, is enacted. The aim is to explore to what extent these sport challenges promote predominant ideas about femininity and masculinity, and in what cases they question them. To achieve these objectives, we used a dataset of about one thousand videos, shared on four social networking platforms during the period between 1 January 2020 and 31 January 2021. From this dataset, 136 social media challenges marked for «sport,» «physical ability,» or «fitness» were selected. Content analysis, chosen as the method of analysis, shows how through these new challenges traditional gender differences are perpetuated and promoted rather than challenged. In this regard, although digital platforms have created new symbolic and expressive spaces in which once unthinkable forms of self-representation and interaction can be implemented and new possibilities of agency are developed, sport social media challenges do not yet appear to be fully involved in that process.

Keywords: *social media challenge, digital culture, femininity, masculinity, sports.*

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Resumen

Esta investigación indaga la práctica deportiva a través de la lente de género en plataformas digitales. Al estar implicados en la construcción de la corporalidad, los deportes tienden a reproducir los valores socialmente dominantes sobre lo que significa ser mujer u hombre. En consecuencia, está muy extendida la idea de que existen «deportes femeninos» y «deportes masculinos». En concreto, nos centramos en las prácticas deportivas mediante el fenómeno de los retos en las redes sociales. Estos están muy correlacionados con conceptos como desafío y rendimiento, en los que también se promulga el género. El objetivo es explorar hasta qué punto estos retos deportivos promueven las ideas predominantes sobre la feminidad y la masculinidad, y en qué casos las cuestionan. Utilizamos un conjunto de datos de unos mil vídeos, compartidos en cuatro plataformas de redes sociales durante el periodo comprendido entre el 1 de enero de 2020 y el 31 de enero de 2021. De este conjunto de datos, se seleccionaron 136 retos marcados como «deporte», «habilidad física» o «*fitness*». El análisis de contenido, elegido como método de análisis, muestra cómo a través de estos nuevos retos se perpetúan y promueven las diferencias de género tradicionales en lugar de cuestionarlas. En este sentido, a pesar de que las plataformas digitales han creado nuevos espacios simbólicos y expresivos en los que se pueden implementar formas de autorrepresentación e interacción antaño y desarrollar nuevas posibilidades de agencia los retos deportivos en medios sociales, aún no parecen participar plenamente en ese proceso.

Palabras clave: retos en redes sociales, cultura digital, feminidad, masculinidad, deportes.

1. Gender, sports, and new challenges

Sport is one of the privileged social areas in which gender is defined, since it is the educational tool that enables socialization processes and contributes towards building identities, and in which the dominant values that support a binary and imbalanced classification of genders (Bifulco & Tuselli, 2017; Chalabaev *et al.,* 2013) tend to be reproduced. Thus, the different expectations linked to the differences between women and men, often attributed to the specific biological traits of the two sexes[1], influence participation in sport practices and their categorization as «feminine sports» and «masculine sports» (Channon, 2012, 2013; Channon & Jennings, 2014; Ferrero Camoletto & Topini, 2020; Matthews, 2011; Spencer, 2012).

In this regard, the direct link between sport and the construction of corporeality is relevant: the appropriateness of the disciplines is based upon the characteristics and aptitudes they require and upon the type of physicality that the training develops. Such qualities as strength, autonomy, perseverance, and leadership, exercised for instance in a contact sport like rugby or football, would be the domain of males (Bifulco & Tuselli, 2017); elegance, gracefulness, agility, harmony, and flexibility, developed through such sports as rhythmic gymnastics, aerobics, or pilates, would instead be appropriate characteristics for females (Chalabaev *et al.*, 2013; Connell, 1987; Weedon, 1999). In other words, for women, the work on the body is such as to limit the development of physical strength, since otherwise their appearance would show excessive musculature – an appearance far from the aesthetic standards related to fascination and sensuality, as described by a male perspective

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1 Sex, being a biological difference, has been shown to predict only 5 % of the variance in physical abilities (Eagly, 1995 in Chalabaev *et al*., 2013). Moreover, the differences between the genders in sporting activities do not inform us on their origin, which can be natural but also environmental (Wood & Eagly, 2012 in Chalabaev *et al*., 2013). In fact, starting from childhood, males are more encouraged to practise motor activities than females are (Hines, 2004; Knisel *et al*., 2009 in Chalabaev *et al*., 2013).

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(Bifulco & Tuselli, 2017); on the other hand, what is demanded of men is physical prowess and muscle power – typical cultural signifiers of virility (Evans, 2006; Hargreaves, 1994).

The choice by individuals to practice one sport discipline instead of another therefore tends to be influenced by gender stereotypes, in accordance with what Bem (1981) defines as a «gender schema»: based on this, people are led to interpret events and orient their behaviour as a function of the conventionally constructed distinction between men and women. This is true especially for «sex-typed» individuals – that is masculine males and feminine females (*ibidem*), who code and organize information by choosing activities conforming to their sex more than «non-sex-typed» individuals do (Chalabaev *et al.*, 2013).

The different social expectations linked to gender also influence the role that sport practices take on in society (Ferrero Camoletto & Topini, 2020; Messner, 1990). In particular, the sports traditionally considered under the male domain enjoy greater prestige in terms of visibility; female sports, on the other hand, still receive less media coverage in both quality and quantity (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Duncan & Messner, 2000; Eastman & Billings, 2000; EIGE, 2017; Kane & Lenskyj, 1998; Lee *et al.*, 2020; McKay, 1993; Messner, 2002). In the Western context, several years of sport media research have highlighted that broadcast media (such as print media and tv) tend to underrepresent sportswomen (Antunovic & Bartoluci, 2022; Braumüller *et al.,* 2020; Bruce, 2013; Lavoi, 2013; Toft, 2011). In this regard, female athletes receive far less day-to-day coverage across various media channels (Braumüller *et al.,* 2020). Several longitudinal studies have also underlined that media coverage of sportswomen has even declined in recent decades (Cooky *et al.*, 2021; Weber & Carini, 2013). Unsurprisingly, the coverage of sport traditionally considered within the male domain (e.g. those associated with traits such as strength or speed) but played by women is much less than coverage of female athletes in traditionally feminine sports (Kane, 1995; Lavoi, 2013). In addition, media tend to portray sportswomen as sexualized and objectified, perpetuating stereotypical images (Weber & Carini, 2013). In this regard, the little amount and the inadequate quality of sportswomen media coverage seem to be in line with the traditional idea that «sport media is a male domain that produces coverage by men, for men, and about men» (Bruce, 2013, p. 128).

Looking at the universe of digital platforms, a similar picture emerges: the accounts of major sports networks and public service in Europe, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom devote almost residual space to sports played by women compared to those played by men (Cooky *et al.,* 2021; Rojas-Torrijos & Ramon, 2021; Romney & Johnson, 2020; Sheffer, 2020); when female athletes are featured they are often shown alongside their male counterparts, as if female athleticism should be made authoritative by association with men (Burroughs *et al.*, 2022).

Altogether, this literature has shed light on the persistence of gender inequality and problematic patterns of representation in the media, which thus reinforce the idea that there are «feminine» sports and «masculine» sports and that the latter have more social prestige.

Despite this, recent years have seen several attempts to reduce gender disparities in sports, with the consequent diversification of the disciplines practised by women – including disciplines once considered strictly male (Bifulco & Tuselli, 2017; Ferrero Camoletto & Topini, 2020) – and the emergence of activities that base their training upon equal conceptions of men's and women's bodies, like CrossFit (Bifulco & Tuselli, 2017).

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Sport performance is, in this sense, to be considered an enactment that has not only physical value, but symbolic and social value as well. Sports, then, are configured both as *gendered institutions,* founded upon unbalanced gender relationships that, as such, are affected in their own structures by the dominant values and conceptions of masculinity and femininity, and as *gendering institutions* which, on the other hand, contribute towards defining the very concept of gender – and are thus capable of redefining it by overturning the dominant narratives (Messner, 1990).

If sport is to be considered as an enactment of corporeality, its representation today takes place through practices that exploit new expressive potentials provided by the digital platforms. Among the latest forms of online participation, social media challenges – a relatively new and little studied phenomenon where the concept of challenge is articulated through the lens of play and creativity – have been a focus of attention. More precisely, a social media challenge is a digital content built upon playful challenges and/or dares that encourage users, individually or in group, to creatively (re) interpret a performance and share it on their social network sites (Burgess *et al.,* 2018; Schlaile *et al.*, 2018).

The literature still offers no definition that frames them in generalizable fashion, nor a classification of the different articulations they take on in the universe of social network sites. In fact, the phenomenon of online challenges has seen a rapid, global spread (Burgess *et al.*, 2018; Schlaile *et al.*, 2018; Wombacher *et al.,* 2017) while taking on a variety of configurations: from playful challenges to risk challenges (which have attracted enormous media coverage); from solidary challenges (like the Ice Bucket Challenge) to those with commercial and marketing purposes (Schlaile *et al.*, 2018; Wombacher *et al.*, 2017).

Looking to the participatory dynamics, according to the (few) studies carried out thus far, the performance takes place via imitative mechanisms guided by a tension between the will to fit within a scheme of socially accepted normality and the desire to express ones individuality in a distinctive and original way (Burgess *et al.*, 2018). Challenges are interpreted as creative and inclusive acts described in terms of fun (Giordano *et al.*, 2016; Klug, 2020), happiness, and excitement (Burgess *et al.*, 2018). They are lived as collective experiences (Giordano *et al.*, 2016; Klug, 2020) through which to interact with others and to express – not always consciously (Giordano *et al.*, 2016) – one's own affiliation (Burgess *et al.*, 2018; Jarrar *et al.*, 2020; Wombacher *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, peer action as an incentive for participation operates more in terms of influence than of pressure (Branley & Covey, 2017; Branley & Covey, 2018; Wombacher *et al.*, 2017).

In this context, sport social media challenges are a particular type of challenge in which participants exhibit physical abilities cutting across various disciplines while engaging in activities attributable to specific sports. Considering this, it is important to investigate the relationship between sport and gender through the phenomenon of the social media challenges which, by their very nature, refer to concepts of challenge and performance in which gender (also) is enacted.

As stated by many authors, sport is perceived to be a «contested terrain» which involves traditional ideals of men and women's physical capabilities, with the result that participation in specific sports disciplines is still restricted by social norms and expectations (Sailors *et al.*, 2016). In this regard, the present article intends to explore whether or not sport social media challenges are spaces of and opportunities for agency where participants can reject narrow constructs of femininity and

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masculinity, subverting and even challenging gender stereotypes. We hope that addressing this issue will contribute to the current debate concerning the sociocultural relationship between sport, gender and influences of media and society on sports gender typing (Xu *et al.*, 2021).

2. Objectives and methodology: an analysis of the visual content

Based on the reference literature, the objective of our research is to investigate online sport challenges from the gender perspective, focusing attention on performance. Consequently, the questions to be answered with this paper are as follows: do sport social media challenges re-propose the dominant ideas on femininity and masculinity typically present in the sports environment? Are there cases where these assumptions are called into question?

With respect to this, the intent is exploratory, since the literature on social media challenges is still quite limited, and there are no indications on the role these performances might play as tools for (re) negotiating social gender norms.

To achieve these objectives, we chose to use as a starting base a dataset of about one thousand videos worldwide[2]. Shared on four social networking platforms – *Facebook*, *Instagram*, TikTok and *YouTube* – during the period between 1 January 2020 and 31 January 2021, the content was collected with «webscraping» technique, using the following English keywords: #challenge, #dares, #videochallenge, #viralchallenge, #socialchallenge, #socialdares, #viraldares, #viraltiktok, #tiktokchallenge, #riskychallenge, #dareschallenge, #challengeaccepted, #memeschallenge. From this dataset, only the social media challenges marked for «sport,» «physical ability,» or «fitness» were selected, for a total of 163 videos. This number was later reduced to 136 following a check that found the presence of seven contents not wholly consistent with the outlined objectives, and because twenty videos had been removed from the platforms and were therefore no longer available for additional analysis.

To investigate the corpus that was thus composed, the methodological choice was made to use content analysis, since it appears the most appropriate for «[...] un'analisi che tenti di cogliere eventuali pregiudizi o modalità stereotipiche di rappresentazione di specifiche realtà o categorie sociali»[3] (Losito, 1996, p.10). In line with this, content analysis represents an extremely versatile technique, which allows for qualitative research together with quantitative ones (Faggiano, 2016), within the same research experience. Indeed, the interpretative nature of this type of analysis allows «latent contents» of messages to emerge. The researcher is then left with the task of penetrating the sphere of more complex meanings, whatever the type of message and whatever the communicative codes that generate it (Losito, 1996).

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2 The data were gathered as part of a broader research – conducted at the Department of Communication and Social Research (CORIS), Sapienza University of Rome, principal investigator Professor Paola Panarese – aimed at framing the phenomenon of social media challenges in a sociological perspective.

3 An analysis that attempts to grasp any prejudices or stereotypical modes of representation of specific realities or social categories.

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A data collection sheet was then created, through which the audiovisual content was coded by type of sport and challenge and by number, age and gender of participants, along with a brief description of the creative performance (cf. Appendix 1).

In particular, with reference to type of sport, we conducted an initial content analysis of the videos based on a primary classification scheme. To reach a reasonable degree of agreement on the classification procedure, we first cross-checked the categorization process for videos related to different sports disciplines, discussing the coding of different types of videos. For instance, we modified and extended the initial sport categories during the coding process based on the presence of specific sport practices. Although some sport categories such as tennis, basketball, or football were relatively straightforward to classify, we reclassified some videos after an extra check based upon a subsequent overview of the sport categories.

As far as participants' gender is concerned, this was determined by visually assessing gender expression and examining the pronouns used by the participants to describe themselves, together with the title and description of the videos, keeping in mind that users' gender could not be conclusively verified as we were not able to ask them about their gender. As a result, we adopted a female/male binary coding, albeit knowing that this is partial and not fully representative.

The analysis made it possible first and foremost to map the sport practices that were enacted and (re)interpreted in the four social network sites taken into consideration, highlighting the presence of a multiplicity of categories ranging from group disciplines like football or basketball, to activities focusing on the individual's physical endurance or agility.

Although there are some obvious limitations with the chosen sample (for instance, the small number of content items analyzed), these videos allow us to explore and describe a phenomenon still under-investigated, fulfilling the purpose of this specific study.

Analyzing these challenges in depth on the basis of the participants' gender allowed correspondence with, or deviation from, the findings in the literature in terms of «masculine» and «feminine» sports (Channon, 2012, 2013; Channon & Jennings, 2014; Ferrero Camoletto & Topini, 2020; Matthews, 2011; Spencer, 2012) and, consequently, the reading of sport social media challenges as *gendered* and/or *gendering institutions* (Ferrero Camoletto & Topini, 2020; Messner, 1990), to be verified. In presenting the main results, particular emphasis will be given to the (few) cases of interest in which females are taking on «male sports» and vice versa.

2.1. Online sport challenges between old and new representations of masculinity and femininity

The analyzed videos show a prevalence of male participants. In most of the cases (83), the challenges are in fact undertaken by men, while videos enacting performances by women (33) or by people of both genders (20) are less frequent. At the same time, a predominant number of cases is recorded in which those who take part in the sport challenges decide to do so individually (89); this is followed by videos with two participants (30) and performances in which three or more persons are present (17). In this regard, it is interesting to note that when the videos portray two or more individuals, there

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are (albeit rare) cases in which not all the filmed subjects take active part in the challenge, appearing on the scene as spectators.

Taking into consideration the sports disciplines at the centre of the examined online challenges, the data show that the most-represented sport is fitness (58), followed by basketball (18), football (16), practices requiring specific physical or acrobatic abilities (14), and tennis (12). Also present with decidedly lower numbers (from 5 to 1) are challenges connected with other sporting activities or practices, like snowboarding, parkour, martial arts, and so on (cf. Chart 1)[4].

Chart 1.
Number of videos for sports represented in online sport challenges (absolute values; N=136)
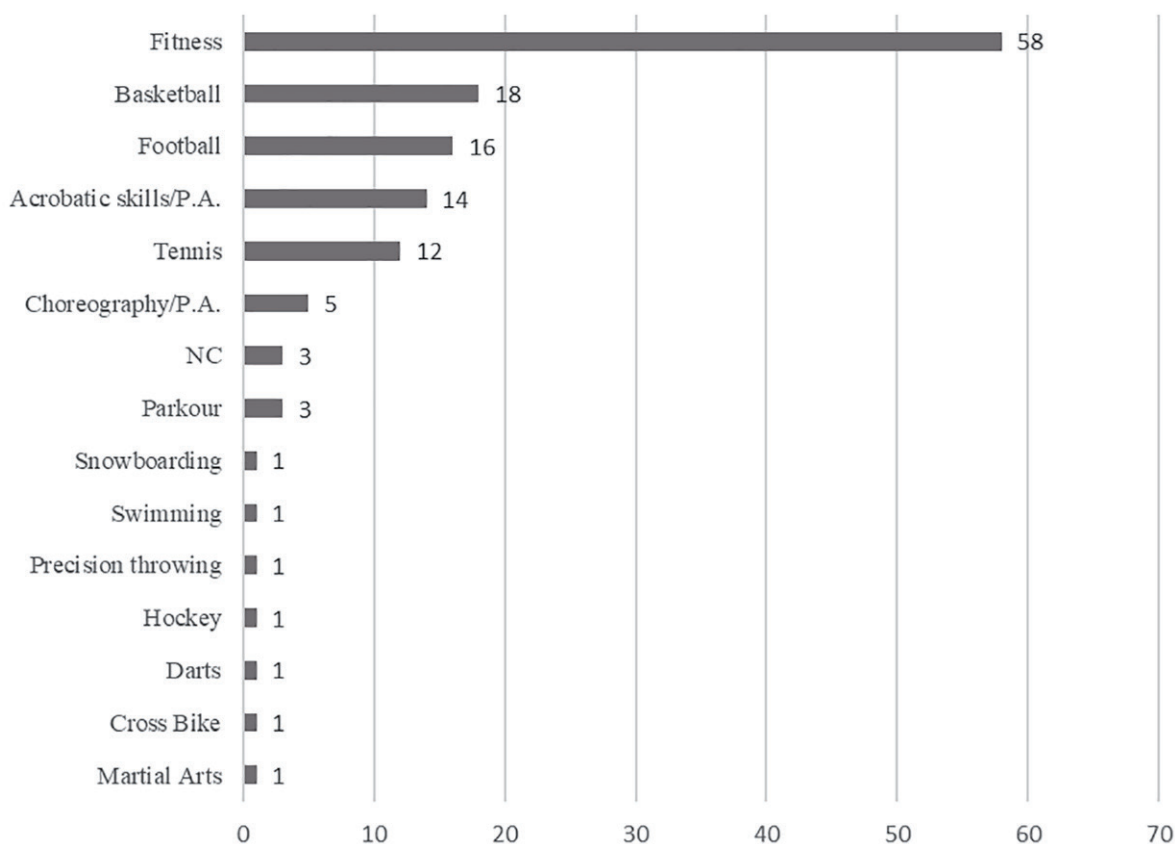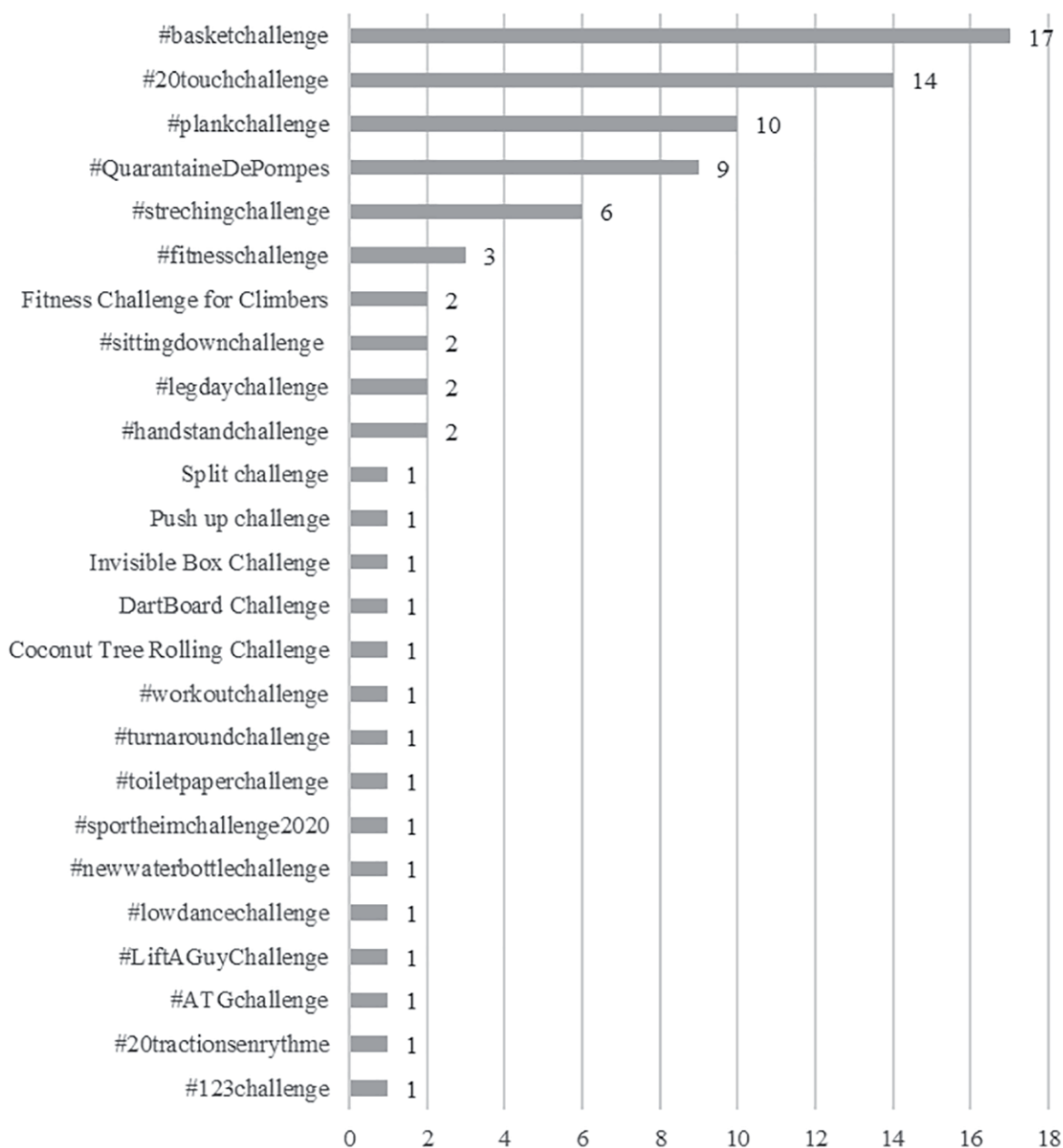

Source. Our processing.

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4 In the «Acrobatic skills/P.A.» and «Choreography/P.A.» categories, we included social media challenges related to practices requiring physical or acrobatic abilities that are cross-sectorial and not attributable to a specific sports discipline. Moreover, the category «N. C. (Not Classifiable)» refers to videos in which participants perform a series of exercises relating to different sports.

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Chart 2.

Number of videos for particular named challenges (absolute values; N=82)5

Source. Our processing.

The analysis appears to show that sport social media challenges are more common on digital platforms like *Facebook* (49), TikTok (38), and *YouTube* (37), contrary to what takes place on *Instagram* (12). Lastly, participatory practices of this type show no particular distinctions as relates to age, thus being a transversal phenomenon, involving a public of adults, youths, and adolescents, as well as boys and girls.

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5 Please note that, in this case, the total number of videos does not match the total number of analyzed videos, due to the fact that not all the videos reported specific hashtags or titles explaining the challenge performed. Furthermore, the hashtag «#20touchchallenge» is related to both tennis and football videos.

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With the aim of more deeply examining the relationship between the dominant models of masculinity and femininity (Bifulco & Tuselli, 2017) and the sport-related online challenges, the data were analyzed on the basis of the protagonists' gender. As concerns the social network sites on which the videos were posted, some differences are found while the videos uploaded onto *Facebook* and *YouTube* show sport challenges performed by an overwhelming male majority (37 *vs* 8 and 27 *vs* 2, respectively), those posted on TikTok show a higher number of performances enacted by female participants (18 *vs* 12). Meanwhile, on *Instagram*, the number of videos with male (7) and female (5) protagonists is more or less equal. The data that emerged as to the gender of the videos' protagonists appear to be in line with the findings about social media and gender users: *Facebook* users are prevalently men (56.6 % *vs* 43.4 %) and TikTok's are predominantly female (57 % *vs* 43 %), while *Instagram* shows only a slight difference between male and female users (51 % *vs* 49 %) (We Are Social, & Hootsuite, 2022).

By observing the sport disciplines from the gender perspective, light may be cast on the presence of «sports considered more male or more female (or deemed more suited to male or female participation)» (Ferrero Camoletto & Topini, 2020) in the sport social media challenges as well. In fact, our analysis reveals that nearly all the participants in the online challenges relating to sports like football and basketball are men (with very rare exceptions), confirming that these sports continue to be viewed as «masculine sports» in digital environments as well. To the contrary, the case of the sport challenges focusing on exercises connected to tennis[6], a practice traditionally considered «gender-neutral,» which is to say suited to both men and women (Monaci & Veronesi, 2019), appears rather unusual: all of tennis-related videos (12) show exclusively male participants.

However, beyond the gender differences linked to sports in general and to the specific disciplines in particular, a higher presence of male protagonists in the examined videos might be a consequence of the fact that, as various studies have shown, men tend to accept a challenge more easily since they present higher levels of competitiveness and domination (Pellegrini & Archer, 2005).

A sport practice that emerges as more balanced in male and female participation is fitness. Though it is not our intention within the framework of this article to start a discussion about the notion of fitness, it is important to underline that fitness represents a blurry concept, difficult to define in a unanimous manner as the term is used in different disciplines (such as medicine, biology, sociology, economics, etc.) with specific meaning (Scheerder *et al.*, 2020). For the purpose of this study, we intend fitness as:

> a general term embracing physical exercises, being either individual programmes or in-group classes […] with the aim to train, develop and maintain the body and muscle groups in order to improve one's physical condition, health and performance. Fitness includes different activities ranging from classic fitness variants, such as aerobics, spinning, cardio, strength, and figure training, together with a number of relaxation activities variants like massage and yoga. […]. Together with outdoor activities, fitness activities constitute the so-called sub-sector of 'active leisure', which in turn is a sub-set of the sports sector (Scheerder *et al.*, 2020, pp. 11-13).

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6 In our research all the tennis-related content are videos depicting the so-called #20touchchallenge – a challenge in which participants have to bounce a roll of toilet paper on their tennis rackets twenty times.

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In fitness-related performances, exactly the same number of videos with male (25) and female (25) protagonists is recorded, in addition to eight more performances in which subjects of both genders are present. In this direction, although fitness has played anything but a secondary role in the significant increase in female sporting activity in recent decades (Bifulco & Tuselli, 2017), the analyzed videos cast light on the existence of established models of appropriateness or inappropriateness linked to the practiced disciplines. In this regard, it is noteworthy that, in the context of the online sport challenges connected to fitness, some challenges named #stretchingchallenge (6) or #legdaychallenge (2), marked by a clear reference to such «typically feminine» properties as agility and elasticity, are the exclusive domain of women, contributing towards the stereotypical representation and the perpetuation of a female aesthetic standard (*Ibidem*). At the same time, fitness challenges linked to muscular strength and physical endurance - qualities that are known to be included among the «typically male» properties - see a clear predominance of male participants. Such challenges are, for instance, the #pushupchallenge (1) or the #QuarantaineDePompes (9) in which participants are required to perform forty consecutive push-ups to a musical beat, and the «Fitness Challenge for Climbers» (2) – one hundred pull-ups, one hundred sit-ups, one hundred push-ups, and one hundred squats performed as quickly as possible.

In spite of the persistence of gender distinctions in the area of fitness-related online sport challenges, light can also be cast on the presence of an activity that appears to break with the pattern, calling into question the preponderant conception of exclusively male possession of specific bodily abilities. This is the case of the so-called #plankchallenge (10) – a set of challenges that propose performing a series of exercises whose objective is to maintain the body in prone position, horizontal, supported by one's forearms, elbows, and feet – where men and women compete on an equal footing, with a neutral approach to strength and endurance, and at times performing together in pair or group. Based on these characteristics, «planking» appears to be genderless, contributing towards a redefinition of the concepts of masculinity and femininity that persist on the sports landscape to this day (Bifulco & Tuselli, 2017).

In keeping with this possible opening towards new horizons, the analysis emphasized the presence of eight performances in which the subjects taking part in an online sport challenge show an unconventional approach to the relationship between sport, body, and gender roles. More specifically, there are six cases in which female subjects take part in challenges connected to sports traditionally considered as male, such as football, basketball, and the martial arts (Chalabaev *et al.*, 2013; Connell, 1987; Weedon, 1999), or in practices typically associated with male qualities and abilities like strength and power (*Ibidem*). It is interesting to note how, in the performance relating to football, the video shows a young man and a young woman performing the same exercises together, offering a glimpse of a non-asymmetrical relationship between the genders. Another particularly significant case is that relating to the video showing a man and woman engaged in a gymnastic exercise requiring specific physical abilities, in which the female participant must maintain her male partner balanced on her knees, thus demonstrating an explicit overturning of gender roles and models. Equally indicative is the performance showing a young woman engaged in performing a «plank» exercise with another female subject placed on top of her, thereby transmitting an idea of strength and an image of physical endurance typical of male imagery. In all six performances, the female protagonists manage to successfully complete the challenge, demonstrating that men and women are capable of achieving the same results (also in given sport disciplines), beyond the presumed characteristics and abilities associated with their own gender.

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Lastly, there are two performances in which some male participants take on the so-called #stretchingchallenge which, as already mentioned, has a strong «female connotation» since it is associated with such characteristics as agility and elasticity. While in one case the challenge sees the participation of a group composed of two young women and three young men taking turns to perform the exercise, in the other the participant appears to accept the challenge with a sense of «irony» since, being unable to perform the required exercise (raising his leg as high as possible), he relies on an apparatus to help him complete it.

These examples, although in the minority on the landscape of sport social media challenges analyzed, contribute towards highlighting the fact that sport is not just an arena where gender stereotypes are proposed and reproduced, but also an environment in which forms of change can be built, by enacting new ways of understanding gender and the very concepts of femininity and masculinity.

3. «This challenge is for boys»… or maybe not?

An overall reading of the data shows that sport social media challenges appear to be configured more as *gendered* than as *gendering institutions.* In fact, in the examined videos, the traditional gender differences that may be encountered in sports appear perpetuated rather than called into question by participation in the various challenges, at times also explicitly through the comments of the protagonists themselves. This is what takes place, for instance, in one of the analyzed videos, in which girls are almost forbidden to take part in one of the challenges, with the statement that «this challenge is for boys»[7].

In this sense, although digital platforms have permitted the creation of symbolic, expressive, and narrative spaces in which once unthinkable forms of self-representation and interaction (Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Farris *et al.*, 2020; Mowlabocus, 2010) can be implemented, and in which new possibilities of agency (Burgess *et al.*, 2016; Scarcelli *et al.*, 2021) are developed, sport social media challenges do not yet appear to be fully involved in that process. Although it is a new phenomenon that originates from these platforms, the data actually show forms of participation and representation of sport challenges that in fact do not deviate greatly from the traditional gender stereotypes.

However, in a framework that appears to reflect what is documented offline, there is some element of novelty. In fact, within the context of fitness, the #plankchallenge – which, for its required qualities, might be included among the activities seen as «male» – appears instead to be configured as neutral ground in which both men and women compete, at times challenging one another, thus pointing to a partial opening towards new concepts of corporeality.

Moreover, although extremely limited in number (8 videos out of 136), there are cases characterized by the attempt to call the classic gender norms into question, providing points for reflection and opening various scenarios for investigation. It bears emphasizing that there are more cases in which women are making forays into sports with a traditional male prevalence (football, basketball, martial arts) than the other way around, perhaps also in connection with the widespread association between sport and the male universe (Bifulco & Tuselli, 2017). In this direction, as made clear by the

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7 «Last to fall in the pool wins $10,000 challenge **freezing**»: https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=aFXhBpz6RHo

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GENDER GAMES. GENDER ROLES IN SPORT SOCIAL MEDIA CHALLENGES: A CONTENT ANALYSIS
Vittoria Azzarita / Maddalena Carbonari / Marta Grasso / Cosimo Miraglia

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European Institute for Gender Equality, sport can also be used as a means to reduce gender gaps, for example by increasing opportunities for women and girls to access public spaces where they can meet, develop new skills, be supported by others, and enjoy freedom of expression and movement (EIGE, 2017). Sport's connotation as a *gendering institution* is reflected, for instance, in what is taking place in the area of women's football, in which the discipline practised by women is seeing ever-greater acceptance and becoming increasingly widespread, due to the combined presence of three factors that feed off one another: growing interest from the various audiences, higher numbers of professional female athletes, and greater media coverage. The sold-out women's football match played between the Real Madrid and Barcelona teams at Camp Nou (even if perhaps still limited to a specific territorial context); the recent news of the completion by the *Federal Council of Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio* (FIGC) of the rule changes permitting passage to professional status for women's Serie A starting next season[8]; or the extensive coverage dedicated by the media to the 2019 Women's World Football Cup, which was held in France, are all relevant in this connection.

These findings are at any rate to be read while taking account of the limitations of the research. First of all, the issue was not investigated using specific keywords relating to the sports challenges, since a dataset relating to a broader investigation was employed, aimed at more deeply analyzing the online challenges in their general connotation. This results in a vision that is partial and non-representative of the phenomenon in its entirety, thus raising the need for more targeted censusing. In particular, the data on the challenges relating to tennis (#20touchchallenge), which here, unlike what was found in the literature, appears as a «male sport,» might be a distortion caused by the fact that the specific hashtag was not used in gathering the videos, or might equally derive from men's greater propensity to enact their gender identity through the dimension of the challenge (Messner, 1990; Pellegrini & Archer, 2005).

Another aspect that would require more attention is the presence of men taking on sports traditionally seen as «for females,» since it leaves open certain questions as to the possibility that sport social media challenges might also yield phenomena of both *mansplaining9* (Solnit, 2014) and *menspreading10* (Jane, 2017), as opposed to an effective questioning of gender norms. However, the extremely limited number of content items (two videos) that we surveyed does not allow reflection as to the meaning that this apparent role «reversal» might have to be expanded upon here; it is a direction that might be interesting to follow in future research efforts.

Lastly, starting from the awareness that, through analysis of content, only a partial vision of the phenomenon in question is obtained, it appears necessary both to read the gathered analysis units in greater depth, and to broaden the study with reference to the reading that the various audiences make of this content. Precisely to overcome this limitation, the next step in the research will focus on the audiences' reactions, with particular attention to the videos in which the gender order is called

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8 In this regard, see «Ufficiale: il calcio femminile passa al professionismo», SkySport, 04/26/2022, https://sport.sky.it/calcio/femminile/2022/04/26/calcio-femminile-italia-professionismo

9 The term *mansplaining* refers to the act of explaining something in a patronizing and arrogant way. In most cases, it is the man who plays the role of expert, feeling himself to be more competent and qualified, and therefore authorized to impart unsolicited explanations and teachings to women (*Joyce et al., 2021; Reagle, 2016; Weatherall, 2015*).

10 Understood as symbolic for «what is argued to be men's tendency to take up more than their fair share of literal and meta-phorical social space» (*Jane, 2017*, p. 460).

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into question, in order to verify whether or not there are sexist or micromachist[11] elements, and also in cases where there are no forms of scornful and derisory denigration towards the participants in the challenges. The intent is to understand to what extent, in these new participatory practices, we are witnessing a transformation and rearticulation of the meanings and of the very concepts of femininity and masculinity.

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11 The term «micromachismo» is understood as a set of subtle, imperceptible and invisible attitudes of sexism and inequality with respect to women (Bonino, 1996; Sue, 2010).

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