

## Social media and community building in competitive women's road cycling

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### Abstract

Social media has become a central part of the modern-day broadcasting of women's sports, and it is argued to be of great importance to the development of women's sports (Vann, 2014; Thorpe, Toffoletti & Bruce, 2017). However, the relationship between digital and social media and the development of women's sports is complex (Sherwood, 2020). In this paper, we explore social media narratives in competitive women's road cycling. Digital and social media are a central communication center in cycling, and self-tracking technologies and associated media are imperative to cyclists' socializing and cycling practices and identities (Duggan, 2020; Lamont & Ross, 2019). Few studies have focused on social media and its narratives in a competitive road cycling field. The paper considers an autoethnographic account of the first author in the local bike racing scene of Melbourne, Australia. The paper reflects on the role of social media in gaining access to road cycling, bypassing structural and social barriers, and community building in the field of women's racing.

**Keywords:** social media, women's sport, competitive road cycling, ethnography

### 1. Introduction

Traditional media, such as newspapers, radio, and television broadcasting, have significantly shaped the history and practice of competitive road cycling. The first bike races were organized by newspapers to increase sales, and radio and television broadcasting increased the popularity and demand of the sport. However, women's road cycling has not enjoyed the same media privileges as the men's side. Despite the existence of early women's cycling records and races, these have largely been ignored (Gilles, 2018; Bootcov, 2019); women's participation in races

was often denied and no separate races were organized (Kierwsnowa, 2019); and currently, the elite women cycling races do not have the same (live) media coverage (Van Reeth, 2021). With the advent and growth of digital and social media, a hopeful alternative to the male-dominated traditional media narratives found its way into women's cycling, and women's sport at large.

### *1.1. Women's sport and the hopeful alternative of 'new' media*

The exceptional growth in the number of women entering into sport has challenged hegemonic discourses around the meaning and practice of sport and has subsequently created alternative beliefs and practices where women in sport may find legitimation, new forms of empowerment, and a place to belong (LaVoi & Calhoun, 2014). However, women continue to have less opportunity and power to effectively change male-dominated ideologies and power structures, nor are women taken seriously as athletes (LaVoi & Calhoun, 2014). The symbolic annihilation of women athletes and women's sport in sports media is part of this continued struggle to change the power structures in which men control sport and male hegemonic ideology rules (Messner, 2002). With the increased digitization of the media landscape, scholars and activists have argued for the potential of digital, particularly social, media to counteract the lack of positive presentations of women in traditional forms of media (Hardin, 2009; Vann, 2014).

The rise of internet-based news and social media has changed the field of representation, including an expansion of public voice and information sharing on social networking sites (Bruce, 2016). Toffoletti, Ahmad and Thorpe (2022) argue that the rise of sport and fitness culture for women has coincided with the growing popularity of social media, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The narratives created through the use of these digital media platforms in women's sport include those of empowerment and increased visibility, however they can also be spaces of surveillance and anxiety (Toffoletti *et al.*, 2022). Nonetheless, access to digital media creates the opportunity to bypass gatekeepers to traditional sport media, for women to gain some control over how they are represented, and potentially build new audiences (Toffoletti *et al.*, 2022; Bruce, 2016). As Toffoletti *et al.* (2022) argue, "social media have become an important site for women in sport and fitness cultures to represent their experiences, promote their achievements, and create shared networks and communities of practice" (p. 30).

### *1.2. Social media and promoting women's sport communities*

Social media platforms impact the relationships of active women with their social environments (Toffoletti *et al.*, 2022). The interactive and creative features of social media, and the ways that like-minded women engage with these mediums, support the formation of "collective sporting identities in digital spaces" and facilitate creative forms of digital production (Toffoletti *et al.*, 2022, p. 34). Women regularly use blog networks to document personal experiences of participation in sports and to provide resources for others about physical activity, health, and

fitness, often with the goal of organizing and building community, and (re)conceptualizing sport and sportswomen differently from traditional media (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; MacKay & Dallaire, 2013; Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). Even though the blogosphere is not inherently feminist, it allows women to share their experiences without gatekeepers to frame their accounts (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013). This uninterrupted sharing of women's sporting experiences on accessible blogs, social networks, and user-produced content is imperative to the promotion and celebration of women and sport and it offers the opportunity for women to challenge and rewrite gender and sport identities (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013). Where most popular (mainstream) sport blogs revolve around covering professional sports, women can use digital and social media as a space for resistance against the masculine hegemony of sports (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013). In their study on women sports' bloggers, Antunovic & Hardin (2013) found that "more than one-third of the bloggers stated or implied that their blog's purpose was to provide resources and information or to create a space for community" (p. 1385). When women take the initiative to blog about sports, they create their own outlet and speak about experiences that might otherwise not be heard, challenging the marginal status they occupy in the dominant sport structure (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; Messner, 2002).

Cyclists have also taken up digital and social media to claim space in the sports landscape, and a gendered relation between the sport of cycling and the use of digital media exists. Social media is a late-modern site of social, economic, and gender power struggles (Lamont & Ross, 2020). Strava, often referred to as the Facebook of cycling (Sourri, 2021), is a strong example of how a social self-tracking digital technology affects road cyclists' gender performances by, for example, finding pleasures and pressures of winning according to patriarchal sporting values (Barrie, Waitt, & Brennan-Horley, 2019). Cyclists are also active on mainstream social media platforms. In Instagram-use among cyclists, some men are complicit in reproducing heteronormative masculinity, while some women use their social media posts to resist the male hegemony of cycling (Lamont & Ross, 2020). In a study on social media posts by women and men in South Africa in relation to racing events, Kim, Choi, Lappeman and Salo (2021) found that, in their sample, women tended to post more about relational aspects of cycling, such as riding with friends or family and about bike routes quality and the recreational aspect of cycling.

## 2. Methods

The varied research that examines cycling from a social perspective clearly indicates how broad the social world of cycling is (Lamont & Ross, 2020). Cycling is a practice that comes in many different forms: leisurely, (un)organized, tourism, commuting, competitive and couriering. So far, most studies have focused on leisure cyclists and their use of digital and/or social media (e.g. Duggan, 2020; Lamont & Ross, 2020; Barrat, 2017; Ross & Zappavigna, 2019). While some of the studies on social media and cycling have included women (e.g. Lamont & Ross, 2020; Duggan, 2020; Kim et al., 2021), no known studies have looked at how social media shape the narratives of women's participation in competitive road cycling. Besides, research on social media and sportswomen is often focused on online self-presentation, fit-spirational

media, marketing, sponsorship, and elite and professional sport. This paper focuses on how social media is used to create social networks and community in women's competitive road cycling. The central questions we will address are what is the role of social media in competitive cycling and the challenging of hegemonic sport discourses and empowerment of women? What is the role of social media in women's entry into the sport? What is the narrative of social media use in bypassing the gatekeeping to the traditionally male-dominated space of bike racing? In our exploration of these questions, we draw on the first author's (auto)ethnography on gender and labor relations in (professional) women's road cycling. Through witnessing, observing, participating, and imbedding oneself into a field of practice, the ethnographer can pay close attention to relationships, reciprocity, representation, and voice (Pillow & Mayo, 2012). In this way, ethnography allowed us to gain in-depth insights into how social interactions shape a women's cycling community, both on- and offline. Between 2017 and 2020, the first author conducted an ethnographic study on women's road cycling. The research methods included observations of professional women's road cycling in Europe, at the Women's WorldTour (WWT) and other UCI classed races; semi-structured interviews with 15 elite or professional women cyclists, of which 13 were Australian; and ethnographic participation in the local recreational road racing scene in Melbourne. The fieldwork in Melbourne included navigating the online and offline world of road cycling to access and remain in the field. While the offline fieldwork was discontinued due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the author continued to be part of the online cycling community. The first author was a member of two different cycling clubs, and she joined several social media groups that were related to women's cycling. She participated in many aspects that constitute the local scene of road cycling, such as outdoor and indoor velodrome rides, social rides, training rides, criteriums, handicap racing, a three-day Tour, coffees, brunches, barbecues, and more. The lived experiences and observations of the first author were systematically collected into fieldnotes. The extensive fieldnotes, and relevant interview transcripts, form the data that are used for this paper. For this paper, the data were analyzed through deductive coding in relation to gender and social media using NVivo analysis software.

### 3. The role of social media in shaping lived experiences in competitive road cycling

#### 3.1. *Becoming a rider*

Many women who are competitive in cycling have entered the field through a male relation, such as their father, brother, or partner (McLachlan & Trott, 2018; Ryder, 2021). These women often have experience in riding their road bike either by themselves, in duo's or in bunch rides. Despite this introduction by a male relation, women experience competitive road cycling as an intimidating field to enter (Rowe, Shilbury, Ferkins, & Hinckson, 2016; Ryder, 2021). Without that cycling experience and network, the first author turned to the internet to find a way into the field of road cycling. She googled cycling clubs and women's cycling groups and added existing social media accounts to her follow list. Over the time of her fieldwork, she found

several different women's cycling groups: SheRace, Wheel Women, GirdRide! Melbourne, Melburn Durt. Where possible, she also started following individuals who repetitively popped up in her searches or that were suggested by platforms' algorithms. After initial contact through club websites, phone calls, and emails, she was advised to first gain experience riding a road bike. She was directed to the websites of organized women's groups such as Breeze Rides and Wheel Women.

Using Facebook, the author contacted a group of diverse women who were welcoming women to participate in their casually organized outdoor velodrome trainings. These training sessions allowed for the initial offline contact with people in the field. Some of the participants and the male trainer of the group sent Facebook friend requests to the author. Through the group's Facebook Messenger group, the women updated each other on the sessions and other activities. During the velodrome sessions, the first author talked about her wish to become a racing road cyclist and the trainer sent a message on Facebook Messenger sharing information about a women's criterium she could participate in. In these messages, the trainer shared information about getting a racing license with Cycling Australia (now AusCycling), how to sign up for the race and the required material, such as cleats, a red back light and a helmet with a certified sticker.

About a year after those velodrome sessions, a criterium and attempts to go for lone bike rides, the first author connected to the newly established Facebook group called SheRace. The women behind the initiative wanted to create a group where women could find and offer support to get more women into racing. Since the group was new, the initiators hosted brainstorming sessions at the workplace of one of the women. In this way, the online group became an in-real-life setting. At the event, the first author met a representative from a cycling club that was located in the part of town that the first author lived in, and she said: "we are always looking for more women to join the club!". This club became the first club that the first author became a member at. In this paper, the club is called Old Time Wheeling (OTW).

After a break from participatory ethnographic research in Melbourne, and doing fieldwork in Europe, the first author returned to Melbourne. Before this break, she had crashed during a race, and she was anxious to return to riding and racing. To get back on the bike, she turned to the SheRace group and posted a message asking for help. She received eight likes and 21 comments in which several women offered help to get back into riding: track sessions on an indoor velodrome led by a woman on alternating Sundays; an accompanied ride to the criterium track of Coburg cycling club to practice laps; an elite cyclist offering cornering skills on a parking lot. Importantly, a representative of a new cycling club mentioned their women-only training rides on Thursday mornings. The first author joined one of these rides, and she became a member of the club afterwards. This club is referred to as West Ride Club (WRC).

Throughout the first author's fieldwork in the competitive road cycling field in Melbourne, social media was a crucial part of her participation. Through the social media pages, she was informed about announcements and cancellations of races and events. She was able to follow other women's pages to see how they experience racing and riding and use that information to connect to them in real life at races or events. It allowed for finding photographs of races she participated in that added to experiencing what is appreciated in the field. Facebook was used



to introduce the author as a researcher on cycling and ask for informed consent. Through Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, the author was able to communicate directly with members and actors in the field to ask questions, agree to meetings, and continue a relationship. The social media connection worked both ways, as people in the field were able to contact her, such as a club member of OTW did, when she sent the first author a photo album of a race that was shared on Facebook.

### *3.2. The clubs' use of social media*

Most of the Melbourne cycling clubs have social media accounts, mainly Facebook. This section specifically focuses on the use of social media by OTW and WRC during the time of fieldwork in relation to women's lived experiences in the gendered reality of competitive road cycling. OTW is a race-oriented cycling club. OTW runs criterium series with an Open Grade system, where A grade lasts the longest (60 minutes) and D grade the shortest (40 minutes). When there would be two or more women participating, the commissaire (race official) would announce a "race within a race", meaning the women would participate in the regular grade and compete against each other for prize money. After every race, a club member would write race reports, publish these on the club's website and share the link of their Facebook page. The reports would include comments on how the race went, who attacked, who did a lot of work, who made mistakes, and the report would end with who got first, second, and third. The women's podium would be mentioned in these reports; however, a race report was not included.

Besides race reports, at some of their races, OTW would hold a prize ceremony. Officials would call placed riders to the front, hand out envelopes with money or a medal, and someone would take a photo that would be uploaded to the Facebook page. When a women's race was held, the placed riders would be included in these photo moments and their achievements would be mentioned online.

WRC was a newly established club and looking for members. A representative of the club that suggested the club's Thursday morning women's ride to the first author, was actively recruiting women on the social media groups. When women would ask questions about riding, she would write a comment and invite them to join the club's rides. WRC had a mission to be a women-friendly and encouraging club where women could find regular social riding, training, and like-minded people to race. As a member of WRC, you receive newsletters (e-mail) about the club's activities, you are part of WhatsApp groups where members and leaders can communicate directly to each other. The club also has an active Facebook and Instagram account where they post pictures of their rides, share information about upcoming cycling trips and events, and promote what their club has to offer to potential new members.

### *3.3. Connecting a community*

SheRace, Melburn Durt, Wheel Women, Girl Ride! Melbourne are all groups active on social media with the aim to attract more women to the sport and activity of cycling. It is unsurprising that the women behind these groups initiated social media accounts. Research shows that social

media platforms “serve as a virtual communication center underpinning a global social world of cyclists that enables members to interact with one another in a fluid, dynamic manner” (Lamont & Ross, 2020, p. 356), and many cyclists are highly digitalized using bike computers, supporting apps, and sharing their data online with other cyclists (Barrat, 2017; Barrie, Waitt, & Brennan-Horley, 2019). The aim of the different social media groups was to offer the chance for women to connect to each other in relation to bike riding and racing. The different components of cycling (riding, racing, track, cyclo cross, road) are closely related to each other, as most racers also ride socially, and social riders might pick up racing. This overlap results in many crossovers of members of these groups. For example, SheRace members would have dipped their toes in several groups and some members would encourage social riders to try out racing.

SheRace specifically aims to get more women into competitive cycling, into racing. This online community uses Facebook and Instagram to encourage women to ask questions and to connect women who do not want to show up at races and events alone. Similar to the young women from MacKay & Dallaire’s (2013) study on skateboarding, these groups share the collective identity of women cyclists, and have collectively organized online because the space of cycling has failed to welcome them. The aim to attract more women to the sport is to challenge the male-dominance and hegemony of the space and offers opportunities to reconstruct the gender order.

SheRace was founded in 2018 by five women from one of the Melbourne cycling clubs. Besides these five administrators, the other women who are very active on the SheRace Facebook page are often connected to cycling clubs, and specifically cycling clubs that organize women’s races. They are on the committee, or they are the women’s representative of their club. They use the SheRace page to post about race skill sessions, promote their club’s races or races they are associated with, and sometimes post about livestreams or TV screenings of professional women cycling races. Members will respond by sharing their experiences in the field of racing, often with encouraging language to convince women who have not participated before to sign up. Women without these experiences will ask questions about the events. SheRace members are grateful for the page because they learn about races and events they wouldn’t hear about through the usual channels. The usual channels are the organizational bodies such as AusCycling and its regional representative council, Victoria Cycling.

The in-real-life setting of bike racing is continuously referred to as “too intimidating” for women to feel comfortable enough to enter. With an online community of SheRacers, the group wanted to undermine this feeling of intimidation and offer a friendly entrance to racing. The goal was not to form solely an online community, but an online community that supports in real-life action, such as undertaking bike racing. While the initiators of the group created the group to help other women, they were also helped themselves if more women would take up bike racing. It would mean that when the number of racing women would increase, that their power as a group would grow, and they could make more demands for a change in culture and structure. From a competitive perspective, to have more women race means more competitors, bigger racing fields which results in more challenging races. More challenging races is often associated with a higher sense of achievement and satisfaction from their leisure activity. A

criterium with four A-grade riders is less challenging and less competitive than a field of at least 20 riders. The women who want to be the most competitive, at the top of their game, will currently race with men because those bunches are bigger which offers more opportunities to improve racing skills. However, when women race in their 'own' field, the racing is different as the field is smaller and the style of racing differs. The use of social media to create and/or support a community is viewed as a tool to increase competition in women's racing.

### *3.4. Getting the community to race*

Besides SheRace using the online space of social media to motivate women into racing, the established cycling clubs were looking for ways to get women to join their specific races. During her interview, elite Australian rider Maria (pseudonym) gave the example of racing at an Open Grade race at a club in the South of Melbourne. She described her style as aggressive, meaning

"You know, I'm gonna try and control this race for a little bit because I felt like I had the strength to do it, and I did, and it was funny because they kept letting other men go off the front and as soon as I attacked, even though it was probably the best attack of the night, everyone jumped on it!" (Maria)

Three days after her race, she received a phone call from a committee member who wanted to know what the club could do to get "more females" out to their races. Maria told the committee member "a lot of women are on social media; we just need to get it out on social media. Because the [club's] committee is mostly made up of older gentlemen, that aren't really great on social media. So, I said: hey, I'm good on social media and then hopefully more women will come out. And I did, so yeah". From this exchange, we gather that women's participation in racing is low and the club was looking for ways to change that by asking a female participant in their open grade for advice. The elite rider observed that many women who ride bikes are active on social media and that by "just getting it out on social media" would affect women's participation in the club's races. She observed that most committee members are "older gentlemen" who are not equipped to use social media and perhaps also not to use social media in a way that would speak to women participants. She offered to post about the club's racing and encourage her followers and the members of the specific women cycling groups to participate in the races. While this strategy might spark interest (an elite cyclist endorsing a race, specifically encouraging women to join while simultaneously affirming it is a male-dominated space), posting about a race-series once or a couple of times is unlikely to result in structural and cultural real-life changes.

SheRace is a bottom-up, self-initiated group that saw a gap in the field of cycling racing where women were led down. In an interview with elite Australian rider Camille (pseudonym), she discussed the likes of AusCycling and Victoria Cycling, and she brought up SheRace. She said:



“One thing I should note, is last year, there was some girls who started this group called SheRace or SheRides, and they said: hi, this a safe space where girls can join uhm and if they wanna race, we’re here for you to help and support. Anyway, they just they worked with [this] cycling club, got more races on ‘cause there was previously like five women’s races on a Wednesday night and this year they ended up having one every single week, like ten or twenty rounds or something, and then, with Cycling Victoria, they made a women’s only handicap race. And as I’ve said, most NRS races the female field would be like 30? Apparently, before I was cycling, in 2013, 2014, that number was like 50-80, so it dropped a lot. Now, they [the organizers of the Handicap race] ended up getting over 100 girls for this women’s handicap. Just because they kept posting it in this group, being really supportive, saying: girls, you know, there will be marshals, it’s all inclusive, don’t be scared, the girls just really felt really supported and safe in that environment. I felt that was so impressive! That they were able to get over a hundred girls. For this race, with people that had never raced before. Some people raced, uhm, whereas at a national level, you can’t get more than 50.” (Camille)

Women took matters into their own hands and were successful where the traditional institutions fail to deliver. The NRS, National Road Series, is the national road cycling competition, and the women’s field fluctuates in numbers over the decades. The different social media groups campaigned strongly online to raise the participation rates, while simultaneously setting up a real-life event where women feel respected and taken seriously.

### 3.5. *Safety*

The connectivity of women through the SheRace community, which is strongly linked to the members of the other social media groups such as GirlRide! Melbourne, goes beyond the collective courage of showing up at the intimidating spaces of bike races. The members of these online groups build relationships with one another through liking each other’s posts, commenting, asking questions, and discussing issues that arise. The following fieldnote shows how this online relationship building also translates into in-real-life community building regarding safety and care.

The first author participated in the Shimano super crit in 2018. This criterium was an important race on the local race calendar. Women’s C and B grade started at the same time, 07:30 am, which caused chaos and confusion once the commissaire gave the start signal. C and B grade riders were mingled and to race a crit, the bunches needed to split. The splitting happened with a group of B grade getting away, followed by a group of C grade and a continued mixed bunch of C and B grade riders. This chaos, confusion, and the bad weather from the week before brought a lot of tension into the field, and crashes happened in three consecutive laps in the same corner. The first author was involved in the first crash. After falling, a rider hit her from behind, flying and landing hard on the concrete. After the third crash, the race was neutralized,

and all injured riders were lined up on the curb waiting their turn to get medical assistance. The first author went to ask how the rider who hit her was and approached the group of women she was surrounded with. One of the women asked if the rider needed a ride home, and she added: “which might be weird because we only know each other from Instagram”. This interaction is an example of how women can connect through online community groups which can result in real-life actions and behavior that benefit their safety and care.

### 3.6. Resistance

Cycling activities are leisure/recreational by nature, they are essentially fun and entertaining, meaning that cyclists have entertaining experiences together in the field, which spill over to the online environment as well (Asan *et al.*, 2021). For women, the fun of their cycling activities can be taken away by the masculine culture of their sport, and it serves as a barrier to enter the sport. To undercut this, women cyclists take to the online groups which can lead to organizing new groups. Posting and commenting on the SheRace Facebook page about sexist regulations, decisions, and messaging in the field of road racing offers the opportunity to resist the male-dominance of competitive cycling by creating a collectively understanding and actions against these issues. Like Anutonvic & Hardin’s (2013) bloggers, the activities in the SheRace group reflect their own participation in the sport and their relationship to it. However, the group administrators try to keep topics related to their main goal of the group: women supporting women to race and sharing knowledge and information to make it easier to get into racing. On 13 May 2021, a member posted with outrage about how AusCycling announced the State Advisory Council appointments, which was symbolized by a stark gender imbalance in council members. Many SheRace members interacted by liking (60 reactions) and commenting (103 comments) on the post. A new Facebook group was initiated, the Cycling Equity Coalition, a private group where people can discuss and act on all things related to equity in cycling across Australia. The initiators wrote an open letter to the CEO of AusCycling that was signed by 119 people supporting the call for a 40% minimum representation of women on all AusCycling subcommittees. The representatives were invited to speak with the CEO, the letter was discussed in the next board meeting and work was commenced to ensure a more diverse mix of AusCycling community appointed in 2022. The existing social media community of SheRace and the other women’s cycling groups Australia-wide, enabled the mobilization, attention, and action for this letter to affect real-life promises, policy changes and initiatives.

### 3.7. Sponsoring

The first author was an active member of the WRC club for the second half of her fieldwork. This club offered many activities: two weekday morning rides, different distance rides on Saturday morning, coffee and brunch after the rides, family/social rides with barbecue’s, skill sessions, logistically organized rides further removed from Melbourne, weekends away riding

and/or training, and participating in and supporting race events with members of the club. One of the founding members had his own coaching business, and he and his wife had a strong influence on the club. Before the founding of the club, many members already participated in (training) rides organized by the coach or were already his client.

The first author's initial goal of joining WRC was to get back into riding and continue to stay in touch with the field of road cycling in Melbourne. However, the environment of WRC invited for the first author to regularly undertake rides (sometimes Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings) and partake in most of the club's social and cycling activities. The coach offered to take the first author on as a client. He worked with a tiered coaching package system: a bronze, silver, or gold deal. The gold deal included training schedules in the software Training Peaks, weekly update chats, massages, nutrition advice, and bike fits. He offered the gold package to the first author for a reduced prize if the author agreed to some low-key social media labor. This labor mostly meant to tag the coach and his business, post about the coaching she was receiving, and to be a representative of the coaching business at races, by wearing the club's kit that also carried the coaching business' name. During the discussion on his services and the proposed social media labor, he referred to a local recreational young woman cyclist who had a big following on social media, particularly Instagram (almost 11,5k followers in May 2022). The coach alluded to the fact that many men responded to her posts and that she would use her femininity to attract followers. It was unclear if the coach suggested for the first author to take a similar method concerning the discounted deal the coach offered, as the coach did not clarify whether he wanted her to post similar posts on social media. Nonetheless, the coaching was short lived as the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns started only two months into the agreement.

### *3.8. Social media during the Covid-19 pandemic*

The Victorian government enforced lockdowns to prevent or slow down the spread of Covid-19 starting in March 2020, limiting Melburnian cyclists to only cycle in pairs, indoors or within a 5km radius of their residence. As part of the coaching package, the coach had offered the first author to rent one of his indoor trainers for \$100 to also ride indoors. The coaching during the lockdowns was limited to indoor-training sessions, which were communicated via direct text messaging or direct uploads to the Training Peaks software.

The club, WRC, offered Zoom 'rides' to check in on each other and to stay connected to the club and fellow members. Most members had access to indoor trainers, but others would only join for the chat. Throughout the lockdowns, which kept changing in limitations, the club communicated with the members via email newsletters about the current situation and limitations and possibilities of riding.

During the beginning of the lockdowns in March 2020, a member of the SheRace community initiated what she called the Social Distancing Segment Series. Every week, she announced an in-real-life (IRL) and a Zwift (Watopia) Strava Segment, and participants could finish them within a week of the announcement. Women were encouraged to join a Strava club that allowed

for the initiator to view how participants did on the segments. At the end of each week, she would post the rankings of the different grades (A/B/C/D) on the SheRace Facebook page and name the winners. The participants had to undertake the segments solo and, in this way, not break the lockdown rules. For safety reasons, no descent segments were included. The series were positively received in the community and many women participated. In the presentation of the series, the assumption was made that the women in the group at least had a Strava account and that many women would have access to Zwift and indoor trainers. This assumption indicates the normalized relation between having Strava and being a cyclist. While there are gendered differences in the use of the self-tracking technology (Barrie, Waitt & Brennan-Horley, 2019), the use and access to Strava was so normalized that the use of the platform was utilized to continue some sort of relationship to other women cyclists and the sport that connected them all, both online and offline.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper set out to discuss social media narratives in competitive women's cycling in relation to community building. Through reflecting on these narratives, we aimed to understand more about the role of social media in the empowerment of women and challenging hegemonic sport discourses. We considered ethnographic lived experiences of the first author and collected fieldnotes from participatory observations in the local bike racing scene in Melbourne. The analysis of these data shows that women in competitive cycling use social media to form a community that enables them to participate more effectively in a male-dominated field. To be part of the different social media groups gives women access to information and the opportunity to ask for specific information they feel they need. Women connected with each other through many different platforms such as several Facebook pages and chats, Instagram, Strava, but importantly, these relationships took shape more strongly when women met each other in real life and translated their online acquaintances to offline practices.

The goal of the social media groups was to get more women into cycling, and specifically into racing. While getting more women into racing might not necessarily be reflected in membership numbers (Ryder, 2021), the women who are participating do so in a better informed, confident, and effective way. They can take the gathered information and translate those into in-real-life actions, such as going for women-only rides, sign up for skill sessions or participate in criteriums, handicap or other types of races. Clubs and in-real-life groups can effectively communicate about their activities to potential participants and the interactive features of social media allow for women to ask questions and receive answers. Social media provides a platform for women to see themselves back in the posts and pictures that are posted, which normalizes women's participation in cycling races. Our analysis also showed that social media in competitive women's cycling offers the opportunity for women to connect online and benefit from those relationships at cycling practices, such as care at crashes or low-key sponsor deals with other actors in the field (such as a cycling coach), albeit emphasized femininity can play a role in these types of arrangements (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018). Besides leaning on an online

community to participate in competitive cycling, women used the social media community to organize themselves to protest sexism, initiate in-real-life activism, such as an open letter to the CEO of AusCycling, and affect change.

This paper showed how the digital world and the offline body and environment came together for women to gain something online to use in their offline life in competitive cycling. Our findings support that “sharing in the real world and the online environment enhances one another” in cycling communities (Asan *et al.*, 2021, p. 12). While these effects of social media in community building can be considered positive and occasionally empowering, it is important to consider who has access to these groups, pages and eventually community. Social media have become mainstream and very integrated in day-to-day life, but they know many associated problems such as mis- and disinformation, social media addiction resulting in dissatisfaction with the quality of interpersonal relationships, and reduced mental health, (see for example Alcott, Gentzkow, & Yu, 2019; Bevan, Gomez, & Sparks, 2014; Sheldon, Antony, & Sykes, 2020). Not everyone has or wants a social media account, so when an in-real-life community, like the women’s competitive cycling community, moves mostly online to social media, this affects who has access to important information about racing and cycling practices.

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