

# Female Identity in Sports: A Discourse Analysis of Eileen Gu's Narrative

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## Abstract

Sport is considered to be mainly dominated by male in the general perception, while female athletes have historically been in a 'disadvantaged' position. Eileen Gu, a promising young female skier, has shattered this stereotype to some extent by demonstrating her female power. This paper takes the narrative model as the theoretical framework to analyze the self-narrative in Gu's interview, aiming to decipher the significance beyond the literal by examining brief words, phrases, or sentences, and explore the process of constructing her female identity as a female athlete as well as the factors that influence her.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, narrative model, female identify, sports

## 1. Introduction

After 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, Eileen Gu, a promising young female skier, has become a social media trending topic. The young Asian-American woman with a mixed face has garnered multiple accolades: an Olympic champion in athletics, a year ahead of schedule academically with a spot at Stanford University, a model and face of various fashion businesses, and a sought-after ambassador for several businesses in the fashion industry. Despite her several identities and positions, it is her identity as a female free skiing athlete that obtains the most attention at the present. Due to the perception that sport is controlled by male, female athletes have historically had a 'disadvantage' position and many female athletes struggle to create their feminine identity in this patriarchal setting. Eileen Gu, on the other hand, constructs her gender identity in a

non-traditional manner. Given the female empowerment in Gu's experience and female inspiration she conveys to the public by media, she is a point of penetration for the exploration of the construction of female identity through linguistic narrations.

At the beginning of 2022, Eileen Gu was interviewed as the ambassador for the watch brand IWC. Since the interview covers a significant chunk of her self-narrative, guided by the interviewer's few questions, this paper will employ Labov and Maletzky's narrative model as a theoretical framework for conducting a discourse analysis of Eileen Gu's interview in order to examine the process by which she constructed her female identity as a female athlete and the factors that influenced her.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Female Identity in Sport

Thomas et al. (2013) illustrated the idea of 'identity' through the word's origins in the Latin noun 'identitas', which means 'same' in English. As a result, we may deduce that female identity is the mental image that women have of themselves, which implies a certain degree of similarity to others. Over the last half-century, enormous progress has been made in reawakening a sense of feminine identity. For instance, the sensational MeToo movement of 2017 (Bhattacharyya, 2018), which provided many women with an opportunity to speak out against injustice, was a watershed moment in the awakening of female identity consciousness. Gender stereotypes persist, however, and tend to link males with attributes such as competitiveness, ambition, assertiveness, and competitiveness, while women are associated with supporting, caring, warm, and emotional qualities. In other words, the stereotype presupposes that males are eternally autonomous while women are perpetually communal (Williams & Best, 1990). Indeed, sport, as a male-dominated field (Anna, Tatiana, & Stiliani, 2015), is a frequent target of gender stereotypes (Matteo, 1988), with female athletes frequently being referred to for their physical beauty, femininity, and sexuality rather than their athletic abilities. According to Plaza, Boiché, Brunel, and colleagues (2017), the more women who participate in a sport, the more likely it is to be seen as suited for women, and vice versa. Clearly, one of the reasons for the prevalence of gender stereotypes in sport is the fact that female athletes outnumber male players. This scenario frequently obstructs the development of a female athlete's gender identification. The purpose of this article is to examine how Eileen Gu, a well-known female free skier, builds a feminine identity in this context.

## 2.2 Discourse Analysis and Narrative Model

### 2.2.1 Discourse Analysis

Blommaert (2005) defines discourse as 'meaningful symbolic conduct' that includes both written and spoken communication. According to Harris (1981), discourse analysis (hence referred as DA) is a method for the analysis of connected speech or writing. The enormous surge of interest in DA in recent years is both a result of and a manifestation of the 'turn to language' that has happened across the arts, humanities, and social sciences (Gill, 2000). As a qualitative research method, DA studies languages in the everyday meaning in which the

word is used by the majority people (Johnstone, 2012). It examines what occurs when people communicate using linguistic information derived from their own experiences. Johnstone (2012) argues that analysts should abandon their perspective of DA as a theory and instead seek to address concerns about language, speakers, society, and culture in as many ways as feasible. Clearly, DA transcends the literal meaning of words and language, compelling analysts to go beyond the meaning of words or phrases in order to comprehend our subjective experience of the world. Additionally, Johnstone (2012) emphasizes that DA investigates how language creates meaning by evaluating the organization of analytic information bits inside a succession of sentences. Analysts employ DA to demonstrate how individuals convey their semantic intents and how individuals interpret what they hear, which demonstrates how individuals think about signals. These features make it possible and accessible to deconstruct or analyze Gu's female identity through her narrative discourses in the public media, as well as the decoding processes the potential audience may undergo.

### 2.2.2 Narrative Model

As the primary focus of discourse analysis research (Schiffrin, Tannen & Hamilton, 2008), narrative is a tale comprised of a succession of events that are significant to both the storyteller and the listener (Denzin, 1989). According to Wortham (2001), story is a critical component of the process of meaning formation. It serves the purpose of describing, disclosing, or lighting oneself or one's surroundings. When the narrator tells a tale, he or she frequently demonstrates a specific self, and the self may be partially built in the narrative. In this way, the analyst may follow the process through which the narrator's identity is constructed in his or her discourse. Initially, oral tale was analyzed as one of the first discourse genres to include a recurrent set of structural slots (Johnstone, 2012). Despite its shortcomings, Labov and his pupil Waletzky's narrative model (Labov & Waletzky, 1967) remains one of the most resilient systems for analyzing oral narratives. Labov (1972) proposed the model's six components: abstract, orientation, difficult action, assessment, outcome, and coda, with abstract and code omitted sometimes.

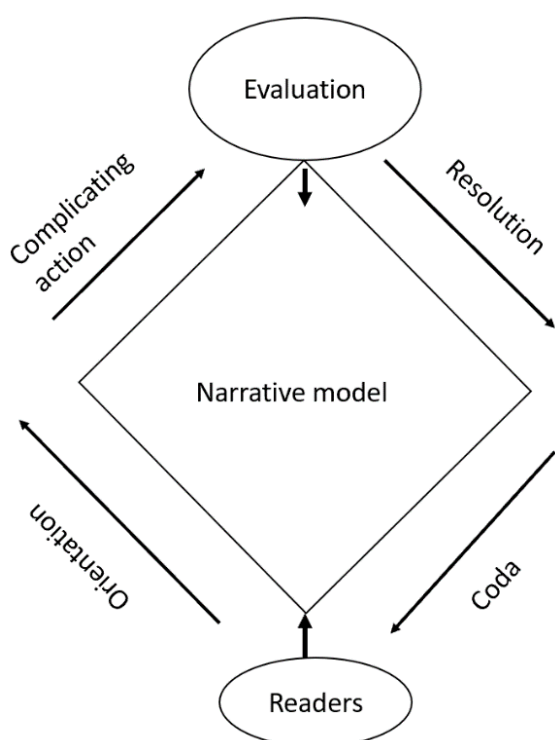
Although many opponents have claimed in recent decades that the story model has

limitations, such as the fact that not all speech fits into Labovian categories, the narrative model is a precise and rigorous method in general. The discourse analysis, which is based on Labov and Waletzky's narrative model, is well-structured. In general, the model provides a great foundation for analyzing many sorts of texts. It enables comparisons of the number of assessments, their types and differences, changes in the narrative or evaluation of events through time or in the environment, and changes in the characteristics of different audiences.

### 3. Methodology

The text for this paper is drawn from the narrative of Eileen Gu in an interview with her as an ambassador for the watch brand IWC. In this paper, the Labov and Waletzky's narrative model will be adopted as the theoretical framework for the analysis of Eileen Gu's narrative.

#### 3.1 Labov and Waletzky's Narrative Model



**Figure 1.** Narrative Model

As shown on the Figure 1 above, there are six components of the Labov and Waletzky's narrative model:

1) Abstract: This optional component is always placed at the start of the tale. It begins the story by summarizing the topic or formulating a

broad notion that the tale will illustrate.

2) Orientation: This part frequently includes characters, tenses, and places that establish the story's setting.

3) Complicated action is sometimes composed by many narrative phrases, primarily recounts the story's important events. It typically incorporates turning moments, crises, and issues and serves to develop tension, suspense, and maintain the listener's attention. It demonstrates the narrator's comprehension of these components.

4) Evaluation: Emphasizes the narrative's most salient parts. It explains why the audience feels compelled to continue listening or why the storyteller is compelled to continue speaking.

5) Result: the outcome of events or the resolution of an issue.

6) Coda: signifies the conclusion of a transition or the return of discourse to the present tense.

#### 3.2 Data Collection and Data Processing

The IWC company shared the interview on its official YouTube channel. Although IWC may have smoothed down the interview in post-production, the final product shown to the viewer appears to be primarily self-narrated by Eileen Gu. As a result, the video becomes a text deserving of analysis. Due to the narrator's lengthy narrative replies to the interviewer's queries, this video is illustrative of how she portrays the creation of her own feminine identity and hence a viable sample for research.

The author has transcribed parts from the video into text to aid in this study. The essay will examine brief words, phrases, or sentences in order to decipher their significance beyond the literal. It will look at how the narrator conveys her creation of female identity using a variety of discursive methods, with a particular emphasis on the function of repetition, the significance of the vocabulary used, the role of rhetorical questions, and parallelism.

#### 3.3 Genre and Register

The genre of the text is an interview, which Thornbury (2005) refers to as 'a loaded text'. The conversation involves two participants in the positions of IWC's chief marketing officer and Eileen Gu, the brand's spokesperson. These two female leaders from disparate disciplines spark an enlightening discussion about women in sports. This interview followed a narrative

structure. It is directed by simple questions posed by the moderator, which operate as an 'abstract' in Labov and Waletzky's narrative model, leading to the topic's growth. The interviewee, Eileen Gu, relates her personal narrative, which is the interview's primary focus.

Thornbury (2005, p. 91) asserts that three contextual variables affect the register of the produced text: field, tenor, and mode. Obviously, the field in which the text is positioned is an interview. The tone is casual but intimate, as the two conversationalists maintain a comfortable demeanor, a calm tone, and eye contact throughout the talk. This is also one of the mode's features, which is face-to-face communication. In this scenario, it may be presumed that the text is written in an informal

spoken register. As is the case with the majority of 'on-line' talks (Thornbury, 2005), the narrator may have little time to prepare in advance. Regardless of whether the film was edited, the key characteristic of spontaneity is its transparency. Four performance characteristics provide the primary evidence for spontaneity: filled pauses, repeats, incorrect starts, backtracking, and unfinished utterances (Thornbury, 2005, pp. 64–65).

#### 4. Analysis and Discussion

The text contains two stories. Here, Labov and Waletzky's narrative model is used to discursively analyse the narratives of these two different topics respectively.

##### 4.1 After the 1<sup>st</sup> Victory

Narrative Category	Content	Linguistic Form
<b>Abstract</b>	In response to an interviewer's question about what happened after the 1 <sup>st</sup> victory, Eileen Gu replied that a lot has happened fast and funny since then.	A short summarizing and positive evaluative statement, provided before the narrative commences.
<b>Orientation</b>	Time: after the 2019 World Cup victory; Space: not specified as there are multiple locations involved in the narrative, but it can be speculated that China is one of them; Characters: although there are brief references to her mother, coach and sponsors IWC, the protagonist in the narrative is herself.	Eileen Gu, the protagonist in this narrative, emphasises her personal identity through the following two linguistic discourse strategies:  Parallelism: five utterances beginning with the first-person pronoun 'I' in a parallelism form  Repetition: the first-person pronoun 'I' is repeated five times.
<b>Complicating Action</b>	Eileen Gu mentions her three goals. The first goal is to inspire young girls, especially young Asian-American girls like her; the second goal is to encourage young people to make change and not use age as an excuse; the third goal is to change the stereotype that people always associate with an older white man when they talk about free skiing, hoping that she herself, a biracial girl who is bubbly, can become one of the icons of the sport.	Repetition: the word 'goal' is repeated four times in this story.  Contrast: The last two goals are introduced by way of contrast. The second 'goal' contrasts two different ideas — young person always uses age as an excuse for not making the effort in time versus she thinks young people should make change while young; the third 'goal' contrasts the before and after of the stereotype of the person who represents skiing in the minds that she wants to change: an older white man versus a biracial girl who is bubbly.
<b>Resolution/Result</b>	Free skiing has been transformed in China by the influence of Eileen Gu. From the	Contrast: before and after the change of free skiing in China with the lexical

	beginning when there were only about 20 or 30 people in the country who knew about the sport, there are now countless people who have taken up the sport. Recently when she goes to a ski resort there are queues of people with their families and friends.	choice of 'handful' versus 'exploding', which suggests, to some extent, her influence in China.
<b>Evaluation</b>	Firstly, Eileen Gu believes that the victory has created a healthy competitive mindset for her; secondly, she understands that her achievements would not have been possible without the people around her, such as her family, coaches and sponsors IWC. She is grateful to them for providing a healthy and supportive environment for her to grow up in.	The lexical choice: the function and extent of the evaluation is reflected here through many positive adjectives and adverbs of degree. For example, the adjectives 'healthy', 'mind-bending', 'fast', 'grateful', 'supportive' and the adverbs 'really', 'very' etc.
<b>Coda</b>	End the story on this theme in a positive evaluative tone.	The lexical choice: 1). 'really glad': Acknowledging the positive impact she has had. 2). 'small impact': On the one hand, it is a modest way of saying that her impact has not yet been great; on the other hand, it implies that she hopes to have a greater impact in the future.

The first story focuses on the change of mentality of Eileen Gu after she achieved her 1<sup>st</sup> victory in 2019, as well as her three goals. The narrative of Eileen Gu shows that she is a very confident woman with a strong self-awareness. This is reflected in the orientation section where she uses five utterances beginning with the first-person pronoun 'I' to clarify her identity:

I have won X-Games. I've won world championships. I've made history as the first person of Chinese descent to ever win X-Games. I'm the first female rookie to ever win three medals at X-Games. I'm the first female rookie to win ski halfpipe.

On a macro level, this section consists of five utterances beginning with the first-person pronoun 'I' in a parallelism form. Apart from fulfilling the function of cohesion, parallelism also serves the purpose of persuading, motivating, and eliciting an emotional response from the audience, as well as maintaining their attention. On a micro level, attention can be paid to the repetition of pronouns, where 'I' is repeated five times. The first three progressively emphasise the high degree of her achievement, illustrating step by step the extraordinary nature and historical value of her achievement. The

latter two repetitions are strongly gender-oriented, where she explicitly emphasizes the 'female' role. It is possible to see her sense of female identity and pride, and it implicitly reveals her ambition to work towards the empowerment of women in the sporting community or even in social history.

In addition, as a young female athlete, she expresses three goals that involve two key words: young and female athletes. The key word 'young' suggests that Eileen Gu wants to encourage young people, especially young girls or young biracial girls like her, who feel lost in the status quo, to find confidence and regroup after seeing her achievements; from the key word 'athletes', it seems that Eileen Gu seems to be dissatisfied with the entrenched ideology of patriarchal sport. Therefore, as a female athlete, an 'underdog' in the sporting world, she is committed to making change through her influence. This manner, perhaps more young women will abandon their belief that sport is exclusively for males and become willing participants. Here Gu is not only calling for a transformation for the young female population; it is, in some ways, a revolution in athletics.

#### 4.2 Empowering Women



Narrative Category	Content	Linguistic Form
<b>Abstract</b>	Introduction of her upbringing in an all-girl's K-8 school.	The evaluative opening shows that she has a positive attitude towards her experience.
<b>Orientation</b>	Time: when she started free skiing; in the seventh grade Space: In addition to all girl's K-8 school, which is explicitly mentioned in the story, another location is presumed to be at the ski training base Character: Eileen Gu	Past continuous verbs and adjuncts of time and place.
<b>Complicating Action</b>	When she first started skiing, Eileen Gu shifted back and forth between the different situations of 'being with all girls' and 'being the only girl'. It created a strong culture shock and dichotomy for her and made her raise questions within herself about her female identity.	Contrast: 'being with all girls' versus 'being the only girl'. Rhetorical questions: Eileen Gu presented six rhetorical questions to express the confusion of her then incompletely constructed female identity. Repetition: four repetitions of 'Should I...?' and two repetitions of 'Would that make me ...?' Parallelism: the rhetorical questions mentioned above are represented in parallel form.
<b>Resolution/Result</b>	Despite the confusion, Eileen Gu eventually embraced her identity as a woman with open arms and pride. Instead of crushing it down, she learned to celebrate differences and led discussions and workshops for women in sports.	Contrast: 'crushing it down' versus 'celebrate differences'.
<b>Evaluation</b>	She comments that she owes the construction of her female identity from confusion and bewilderment to openness and acceptance to a super strong and empowering educational environment, and expresses her gratitude for this.	The lexical choice: 1) Positive comments on the environment of upbringing through degree adverbs and adjectives: 'super strong' 'empowering educational'. 2) Identification with female identity: 'embrace' rather than 'accept' Contrast: 'super strong and empowering educational environment' versus 'pretty detrimental', emphasising the importance of the environment.
<b>Coda</b>	End the story on this theme with an evaluative summary of the importance of these issues about women.	The lexical choice: 'important'.

The second story describes Eileen Gu's journey in constructing her female identity, from a

period of confusion to the final formation of a strong sense of female identity. As an all-girls high school student, the early stages of her exposure to free skiing left her in deep confusion about the construction of her female identity. From Monday to Friday, she was surrounded by girls at school, while at the weekend she was the only girl on the slopes. After experiencing the frequently shifting of these two different situations for a long time, the following six questions started to come to Eileen Gu's mind:

Q1: Should I be ashamed of my femininity?

Q2: Should I try to be more like the boys?

Q3: Should I dress like them?

Q4: Should I talk like them?

Q5: Would that make me more accepted?

Q6: Would that make me better at skiing?

These questions revolve around a core idea: Does female have to imitate male behaviour in order to succeed in a male-dominated field? At the climax of the story, these questions serve to carry the story forward and engage the audience's curiosity. This stage can be seen as Eileen Gu's journey of constructing a female identity, where she passes the straight line of being 'hyper aware of my gender' and then hits a fork in the road where she is confused about her choice of expression. Among these questions are four 'Should I ...?' and two 'Would that make me...?'. Q1 is a highly explicit expression of her confusion in this male-dominated environment. This is a question that would have been shared by many female athletes engaged in traditionally male-dominated sports, for example, weightlifting and boxing. Why do they decide to emulate men to achieve victory? Since the most successful figures in this field are men, people have subconsciously formed stereotypes to associate the image of muscularity with masculinity. Q5 and Q6 highlight the contrast between the first three rhetorical questions and serve as the 'punchline'. To some extent, these two questions can be seen as her guideposts at the fork in the road, helping her to answer the first three questions.

Instead of using 'acceptance', Eileen Gu chooses to use the word 'embrace' to articulate that she has transcended her confusion and eventually developed a strong sense of accurate femininity. Even though the word 'embrace' encompasses acceptance, it is more reflective of her attitude towards femininity as positive and active.

According to Wortham (2001), autobiographical narrators often tend to relate to their audience in a particular way when telling their stories. In fact, those young women and young female athletes who were not present are Eileen Gu's subconscious preconceived audience. It seems that there are only two participants in this interview. In reality, it is an implicit interaction between Eileen Gu and the pre-determined audience in her mind. Having 'come out of the woodwork', Eileen Gu uses her power by delivering speeches on topics related to female athletes in an attempt to convey her ideology to the potential audience and to channel the power of more female sports.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper theoretically uses Labov and Waletzky's narrative model as a framework to decode and discursively analyse two stories excerpted from the IWC interview with Eileen Gu. The narrative model helps the analyst to visualise the process by which Eileen Gu constructs her identity, as well as the discursive strategies she uses to express her strong self-awareness. Discourse analysis, which tends to seek the deeper meaning beyond the language itself, reveals that the text embodies the interactional function of the narrative model, as Eileen Gu's narrative is not only a description of her self-presentation, but also an underlying representation of her implicit interaction with a pre-determined non-present audience.

Despite being labeled as a variety of things-Asian-American girl, female athlete, model, and so on — all of these terms overlap with the term 'female'. On the one hand, as a female athlete competing in the male-dominated sport of free skiing, Eileen Gu, like many other female skiers, has struggled with her gender identity in this patriarchal context. On the other hand, even if they leave this male-dominated sport, the majority of female athletes may continue to live in patriarchal families or societies. The distinction is that she grew up in a female-dominated atmosphere with her mother and grandmother, attending a girls' school and wearing her mother's surname. Additionally, we are unable to locate any information regarding her father. These environmental circumstances substantially contributed to her developing an ideology distinct from that of the majority of female athletes.

There is no denying that in contemporary

society, where men are more likely to have access to sports than women, stereotypes make it easy to strip female athletes of their opportunities. It is clear from Eileen Gu's discourse that she is acutely aware of this, and is therefore always looking for possibilities to make a difference to this phenomenon. Gender is the beginning of each individual's journey to know themselves and discover their own particularity. Each woman, each individual, is three-dimensional and diverse, with her own unique strengths. Female athletes should not be defined and bound by any single label. In the process of becoming a woman, one must be brave enough to break the rules of traditional gender stereotypes and embrace more opportunities in life by using the inherent power of women.

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## Appendix 1: The link of the interview video

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpMe8ADa2\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpMe8ADa2_E)

Story 1: 2:05-5:13

Story 2: 6:32-8:52

## Appendix 2: Transcription

Abstract

Orientation

Complication (narrative clauses)

Evaluation

Result/resolution

Coda

Serves as evaluation

Serves as orientation

F: You achieved your first World Cup victory in Italy in 2019 when you were only 15. What has happened since then?



E: Wow... A lot has happened since then. I would say, I think what's really fun is ... because things have happened so fast. I definitely still have the kind of underdog mentality in the sense that I now have enough confidence to enter any competition and have the intention to win. But also not really the age or the time experience to really expect it. So what that means is I feel like it's created a really healthy mindset for me competitively. I have won X-Games. I've won world championships. I've made history as the first person of Chinese descent to ever win X-Games. I'm the first female rookie to ever win three medals at X-Games. I'm the first female rookie to win ski halfpipe. One of my biggest goals in skiing has always been to inspire young girls, especially young Asian-American girls or young girls who don't really see representation in our sport yet. And so that is really exciting to me because I've always has that as a goal. But being able to see those records being broken and see myself taking those steps towards it is kind of a mind-bending moment for me. So, it's happened really fast but I'm really grateful for all the people who've been around me — my sponsors IWC, my family, my mom, my coaches who have supported me the whole time. Sometimes you feel like as a young person, you feel like, oh I have to wait until I'm order before I can really make change or before I can really do thing that are important and impactful to the world. But really, I think it's important to be a young person and to show that age doesn't dictate capability and that experience teaches more than anything else. And so, yeah, I think that is my biggest goal. And it's something that I wish I has more of growing up. But also, I'm really grateful because I grew up in a very healthy and supportive environment with my mom and my grandma, who are both incredibly empowered women and who served as the role models that I didn't really see on TV or in this sport or other extreme sports, for that matter. So I wanted to be kind of the one to introduce skiing to people, to show people the joy of it. And so that when people think of free skiing, they don't think of an older white man. They think of a young, worldly biracial girl who is bubbly and likes to do a bunch of different things and has this genuine passion for the sport. And that was probably my biggest goal. And now, you know, looking in China, it absolutely has paid off. Before there was nobody at the ski resorts. I

know everybody who free skied in China because there were only a handful of them. There was probably 20 or 30 people in the whole country who knew about it and who were really doing the sport. And now, you know, I could never count. I show up to a resort and there are just lines everywhere and people are with their families and their friends, and everyone's having a great time. And so it's really exploding. So I'm really glad to have even made a small impact in that.

F: What does empowering women mean to you?

E: I grew up in an all-girl's K-8 school. And I love my experience there so much. When I started free skiing, I was the only girl on my team. And it was such an incredibly harsh culture shock and dichotomy when from Monday through Friday, I would be with all girls. And on Saturday and Sunday, when I went skiing I would be the only girl. And so in that sense, I became hyper aware of my gender and my expression. Because I felt like in the beginning, all of a sudden everybody around me was male. And when I looked at the great idols of skiing, all of them were male too. And so kind of feeling, should I be ashamed of my femininity? Should I try to be more like the boys? Should I dress like them? Should I talk like them? And would that make me more accepted? Would that make me better at skiing? You know, these kinds of questions went through my mind at a very young age. And I'm really grateful that I had that super strong and empowering educational environment during the weekdays because I think that it could have been pretty detrimental to my kind of esteem as a female if I hadn't that foundational support, but I did. And so instead of kind of crushing it down, I learned to celebrate differences and to kind of communicate and make friends and use skiing as a way to create bonds and create friendship. And so that was a big learning opportunity for me. And it was also a way for me to kind of embrace being a woman and to embrace the innate power that we have as individuals. And so it has always been really important to me. In seventh grade, I gave my first speech on women in sports. It later got used as a voiceover for an international brand for their international Women's Day commercial. And since then, you know, in high school, I've

led workshops for women in sports. I've led discussions and workshops about female athletes and their portrayal in the media and how that affects people's perception of female athletes. I think that these are all really important questions that now more than ever, we should be asking ourselves. And questions about inclusion and diversity should always be involved in that conversation as well.