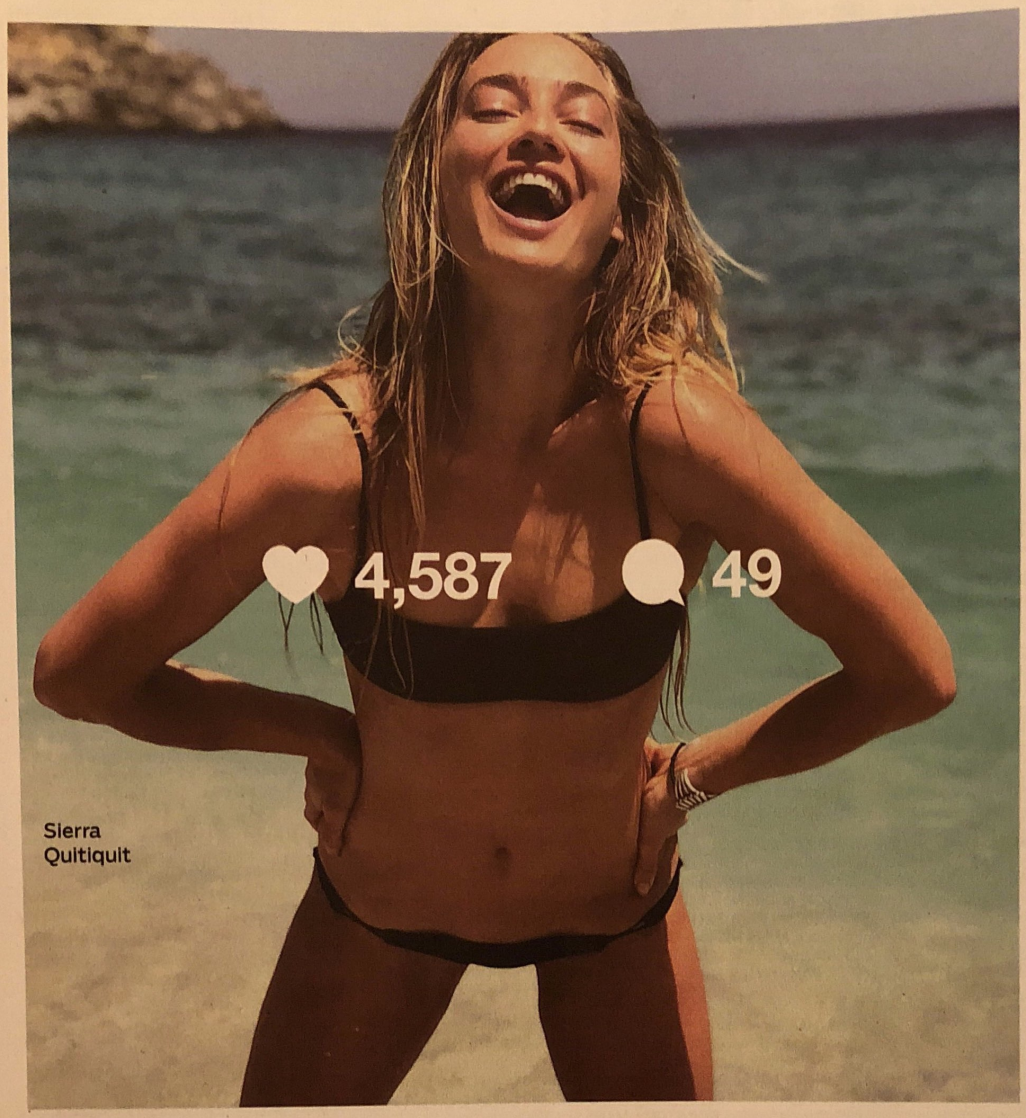


Sierra Quitiquit

Selfie Control

FEMALE ADVENTURE ATHLETES HAVE TAKEN CHARGE OF THEIR NARRATIVES THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA. THAT'S SOMETHING TO CELEBRATE—EVEN IF YOU THINK THOSE SEXY BIKINI PICS SEND THE WRONG MESSAGE.

BY MEGAN MICHELSON

I DON'T REMEMBER exactly when I started following Sierra Quitiquit on Instagram, but it was several years ago. Since then, I've occasionally found myself scrolling her feed in a trance, getting pulled dozens of photos deep by her seemingly charmed life. Quitiquit, a 29-year-old professional skier from Utah, appears to be a laid-back woman who's up for anything. One moment she's lounging in her Dodge Ram van on a road trip through the Rockies, the next she's playing a ukulele on a beach in Mexico or taking a cold plunge in a mountain stream.

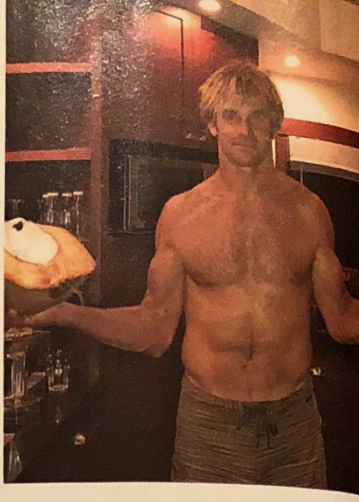
Not surprisingly, in the age of #influencers, these impressions are meticulously crafted. Quitiquit has more than 91,000 followers on Instagram, and like many other social-media personalities, she's paid to tag brands in some of her posts. As such, the more followers she attracts and likes she receives, the better her business does. This, one assumes, is a big part of the reason she frequently uploads shots of herself doing yoga in her underwear or running into the ocean for a skinny-dip. Quitiquit is gorgeous and has earned money as a model for nearly a decade. She's clearly comfortable showing her body, and she takes modeling gigs for bikini brands. Were she purely a model, the sexy shots wouldn't raise many eyebrows. But because she made a name for herself as a hard-charging freeskier in the early 2010s and has featured in ski films as recently as 2015, her skin-baring photos make her a target for scorn, especially among top athletes.

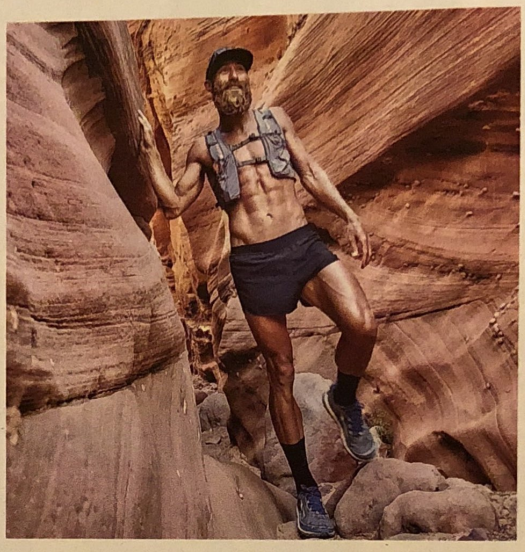
"She's better at modeling than skiing," one female professional skier told me. "Can she even ski?" asked another. This despite the fact that Quitiquit has competed on the Freeskiing World Tour and carved jaw-dropping lines down backcountry peaks in films from the likes of Warren Miller and Sweetgrass Productions. In her Instagram feed, some disapproving commenters have said, basically, that she should put her clothes back on.

I understand the resentment. For athletes who dedicate themselves to grueling training programs and skills development, the success of attractive self-promoters like Quitiquit—and there are plenty out there these days—can feel like cheating. A few years ago, climbing writer Andrew Bisharat published an essay on his website, Evening Sends, bemoaning the rise of the athlete-model in climbing, surfing, and skiing. "If the goal is lucrative sponsorship, then it appears that there are now two ways to achieve this," he wrote in the piece, which was widely shared. "You can work hard to become one of the best athletes in the world at your sport, or you can generate a large social-media following by looking good at doing whatever it is you like to do."

Professional skier Lynsey Dyer, a noted advocate for women in sports, told *Outside* last year that sponsors have come to value personality over talent. "There are a million pretty girls on Instagram being paid to hashtag a new brand every week in front of a pretty background," she said. "But there are very few who actually rip." (Dyer, like most of the athletes I reached out to, declined to be interviewed for this story.)

I'm not here to cheer Quitiquit's *Maxim*-ready images of herself. As a woman, mom, and dedicated mountain-sports athlete, I personally believe that those images can be detrimental. (More on that later.) But I'm also done with anyone—regardless of gender—telling women that there's a right way and a





Clockwise from top left: Instagram posts by Quitiquit, Laird Hamilton, and Tommy Puzey

wrong way to present ourselves. For far too long, female athletes have been forced to follow norms established by male-dominated sports federations and adhere to standards of beauty dictated by male-dominated media industries. In our current digital era, women still face enormous pressure from those industries, but they also have the ability to craft independent careers that enable them to enjoy a lifestyle of their choosing. Instead of shaming them for showing too much skin, we need to give them the freedom to be whoever they want to be.

We seem to be getting there when it comes to the very best female athletes. Olympic ski hero Lindsey Vonn's Instagram feed is loaded with revealing pics—couture, bikinis—but that doesn't appear to upset many people. Similarly, male stars like surf god Laird Hamilton and soccer icon Cristiano Ronaldo pepper their social accounts with gratuitous beefcake shots but seem to get a pass. I've also noticed that male athlete-models like Tommy Puzey—the former elite ultramarathoner who models for H&M and appears to have dedicated his Instagram to the glory of his glazed abs—rarely get tsk-tsked for going shirtless.

So why all the hate for women like Quitiquit? It's fair to say that they're using their sex appeal to gain attention they wouldn't get through athletic talent alone. But for female adventure athletes, the challenge of getting noticed has always involved a lot more than success in their sports. However, thanks to social media, it's now possible to monetize that attention. Women can interact directly with fans, style their own photo shoots, and act as CEOs of their personal brands. You don't have to like every photo they post to appreciate the significance of that change.

When I asked Quitiquit about the sexier shots in her feed, she told me that while she posts some specifically to highlight her bikini sponsors, others are to promote a strong feminine image. "I went through a huge personal challenge within the modeling industry, feeling unacceptable as a strong, muscular woman," she said. "I've worked through a lot of bullshit to come to a place where I'm really proud of the things that my body can do."

According to Mary Jo Kane, director of the Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport at the University of Minnesota, we are undergoing a generational shift in attitude about sexualized images. While Kane's research has shown that such images alienate an athlete's core audience and don't boost interest in sports, a growing number of women view them differently. "Female athletes—especially today's younger generation who are comfortable with social media—unapologetically say being beautiful is powerful," Kane says. "Older people tend to be more offended by images that sexualize female athletes, because of what it's meant historically for women to be marginalized in sports."

Quitiquit is the first to admit that she isn't the best skier out there. Her success hasn't derived from winning competitions or taking the riskiest lines. Instead, she says, it's come from being herself. "My approach has always been to work really hard, learn different skill sets, and use those to create something that's all my own," she told me.

That, ultimately, is what I find appealing about Quitiquit. When I'm thumbing through her feed, I usually skip right past the bikini photos. They're not the reason I follow her, but they don't stop me from falling for her larger story, one she's happily scripting for herself. Recently, I paused on an image she took of her friend while they were ski-touring across Norway with surfboards and wetsuits strapped to their packs. In the caption, she writes about eating cheese sandwiches and her fears of surfing in icy temperatures. Photos like that make me want to plan an adventure to a place I've never been.

Male athlete-models rarely get tsk-tsked for going shirtless. So why all the hate for women like Quitiquit?

And guess what? That shot got twice as many likes—and more than three times as many comments—as the one of her doing yoga in her underwear. O

Correspondent Megan Michelson (@skiing megan) is based in Tahoe City, California.