

Sexualization and Objectification of Female Athletes on Sport Magazine Covers: Improvement, Consistency, or Decline?

Cynthia Frisby, Ph.D.

University of Missouri
School of Journalism
140B Walter Williams
Columbia, MO 65211
United States

Abstract

A content analysis was conducted based on 109 photographs of female athletes found on the cover of two magazines popular among sports fans: Sports Illustrated and ESPN The Magazine. We were interested in determining the extent to which portrayals of female athletes have improved, stayed consistent, or decreased in the last five years. Building on prior research, analysis revealed that female athletes depicted on the covers of sports magazines are still being sexualized and objectified, depicted in seductive poses and scantily clad clothing while male athletes are often seen in their team uniforms depicted in active, game playing athletic motions associated or related to his sport ($p < .0001$). Statistically significant data led us to conclude that female athletes continue to be frequently sexualized and/or featured in ways that emphasize physical and bodily features, thus continuing to enhance cultural notions regarding gender roles and that female athletes are women first, athletes second.

Keywords: Male and female athletes; Media sexualization of female athletes; sports journalism; mass media and athletes; depiction of female athletes; female athletes; coverage of female athletes

1. Introduction

While several research studies find notable differences in the way female and male athletes are discussed in media coverage, the purpose of the present research is to determine the amount of progress in sports media in terms of the representation of female athletes. In other words, will the covers of popular sports magazines show female athletes in more positive depictions other than the usual sexualized and feminized objects as research has previously demonstrated? Martin and McDonald (2012) found that a majority of females were portrayed in passive poses and were frequently sexualized, ultimately trivializing their athletic prowess and accomplishments. The main goal of the current study was to determine if pressures emanating from a plethora of research studies have improved and are currently portraying female athletes in ways which showcase their athletic accomplishments (see Bishop, 2003; Duncan & Messner, 2005; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Duncan, 1990; Hardin, Dodd, & Lauffer, 2006; Kuhn, 1985; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Messner & Cooky, 2010; Messner & Duncan, 2005). It is hoped that data collected in this study will show that print media are beginning to give female athletes the respect they deserve.

1.1 Project Goals and Rationale

The present study questions whether or not portrayals of female athletes on the cover of mainstream sport magazines have improved over time or if they have stayed the same or even declined in frequency. Research over the years continues to show that female athletes are often covered negatively in the media and are often targets for comments that are degrading to and demeaning, especially when compared to male athletes (Bishop, 2003; Duncan & Messner, 2005; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Duncan, 1990; Hardin, Dod, & Lauffer, 2006; Koivula, 1999; Kuhn, 1985; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Martin & McDonald, 2012; Messner & Cooky, 2010; Messner & Duncan, 2005; Salwen & Wood, 1994). Published scholarship-which will be discussed in the literature review below-shows that since the 1980s, much of the coverage surrounding female athletes is often framed in ways that distort, trivialize, and sexualize female athletes (Daniels, 2008; Daniels, 2009; Davis, 1997; Duncan, 1990.

Hardin, Lynn & Walsdorf, 2005; Kane, 1996; Koivula, 1999; Lapchik & Mathews, 1999; Leath & Lumpkin, 1992; Leath & Williams, 1991; Messner, 2002; Perderson & Whisenant, 2003; Primm, Preuhs, & Hewitt, 2007; Urquhart & Crossman, 1999). Data presented in the current study is needed in order to provide quantitative results that can be used to confirm or disconfirm improvements in how female athletes are represented on the covers magazines.

Three research questions will be addressed in this study: Q1: When female athletes are placed on the covers of sports magazines, will the media focus on their physical attractiveness/sexualization or their sport-related activities and accomplishments? Specifically, how frequently will female athletes be found on the covers of sports magazines as sexualized and feminized objects? Q2: Will data reveal improvements, consistency or decline in how female athletes are portrayed, posed, and represented on the covers of two popular sport consumer magazines? And lastly, Q3: How frequently will sport magazine covers showcase female athletes of color, and, how are female athletes of color portrayed when compared to Caucasian female athletes? According to Primm, Dubois and Regoli (2007), sport magazines are important to analyze because evidence of inequality is unmistakable in media exclusively dedicated to sports. Therefore, *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* were strategically and specifically selected because both sports magazines have been identified as two of the most prominent sports magazines with the largest circulations (refer to Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2016; Circulation Trends and Data, 2016). These magazines have also been published continuously since 2000. Therefore, we concluded that due to their longevity and substantial readership base, data obtained might be used to provide insights into their potential to be powerful vehicles for perpetuating specific representations of athletes. The current research hopes to build on prior research (Primm, Dubois & Regolio, 2007), fill in gaps and obtain evidence that may support or disconfirm positive changes in the portrayals of female athletes. Specifically, the study sought to determine whether or not female athletes are portrayed as sexual objects as opposed to what she can do and her strengths and abilities as an athlete. Using a content analysis, data obtained will be used to identify common portrayals of female athletes found in print media, and, more importantly, will indicate if the portrayals have improved, stayed the same, or declined. In other words, will images found on the covers from 2012-2016 reflect change and showcase a female athlete's athletic prowess, accomplishment, and her sport, or, will we continue to find sexualized and scantily clad images on the covers? In order to specifically detail the gap that this study fills, the literature review will discuss scholarly research that explores how media portrayed female athletes over the years.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research on Sexualization of Women in Sports

Subsequent to the passage of Title IX's inception in 1972, women's participation in sports has reached unprecedented highs (Acosta & Carpenter, 2008; Bell, 2008). A review of the literature on women in sports shows that media coverage of female athletes still lags behind that of male athletes (Duncan, Messner, & Williams, 1991; Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Fink, 2015; Frisby, 2017; Martin & McDonald, 2012; Tuggle & Owen, 1999). Additionally, research over the years continue to show that coverage of men's and women's sport is inequitable (Gray, 2016; Messner, Duncan, & Cooky, 2003; Fink, 2015). One issue, according to scholars, has to do with the fact that sports media tend to view female athletes as sex objects rather than as powerful and accomplished athletes (Halbert, 1997; Krane, 2001). An example of how sport media sexualize and trivialize female athletes can be found in the coverage of the 1999 women's soccer world cup competition when Brandi Chastain won the final round for the USA by scoring on a penalty shot—a defining moment in women's soccer. Instead, "*Sports Illustrated*" chose to emphasize on its cover a photo of Ms. Chastain removing her jersey in celebration while also focusing her abs and sports bra. At the time, media hype and coverage centered solely around the fact that a female athlete removed her shirt on the field. The media hype and focus clearly was not on the fact that they women's soccer team won the world cup. Ultimately, it is believed that media hype surrounding Ms. Chastain's removal of her jersey encouraged sexual overtones that ultimately may have distracted readers from what could have been revered as the women's soccer team's greatest triumph—winning the world cup.

Fink and Kensicki (2002) found that a majority of photographs in *Sports Illustrated* were of female athletes in non-sport settings such as at home with their family (55% compared to 23% of similar photographs of male athletes), about a third depicted female athletes performing a sport (34% compared to 66% of similar photographs of male athletes), and 5% of photographs were considered pornographic or sexually suggestive (compared to 0% of such photographs of male athletes).

Sports Illustrated for Women depicted more images of female athletes performing a sport (56%), but 24% of images showed female athletes in non-sport settings, and 2% were pornographic or sexually suggestive. Of particular note, this study was conducted after the highly publicized success of U.S. women athletes in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, yet female athletes were still depicted in sexualized and non-sport roles at high rates. Have images of female athletes changed since 2002? Taken together, an exhaustive review of this research on female athletes in sports media led to the development of the study's first and primary research question:

RQ1: When female athletes are placed on the covers of sports magazines, will sports media focus on their physical attractiveness/sexualization or their sport-related activities and accomplishments? Specifically, how frequently will female athletes be found on the covers of sports magazines as sexualized and feminized objects?

Although a great deal of research has documented the presence of narrow and limiting images of women in mainstream media, we hope to find evidence that will support the idea that sports media have changed the way they portray female athletes. We hope to discover that sport media have begun to emphasize more empowering images of women athletes in today's media environment. Given the plethora of research on female athletes and the vast disparities in how these athletes are portrayed when compared to men, we expect to find increased media attention of female athletes and emphasis on their accomplishments. (e.g., Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles [AAFLA] & ESPN, 2001; Kane, 1996; Messner, Duncan, & Cooky, 2003; Pedersen & Whisenant, 2003; Vincent, Imwold, Johnson, & Massey, 2003). Building on the published research, this study will determine whether female athletes are now being portrayed in ways that show their athletic accomplishments, strengths, and chosen sport. In other words, will the portrayals of female athletes show that they are indeed athletes or will they be depicted in ways that show them as athletes and representatives of the respective sport? Or, will portrayals of female athletes on the cover feature sexualized, objectified, and images of the female athlete's sexuality and attractiveness?

RQ2: Will data show improvement, consistency, or decline in how female athletes are portrayed, posed, and represented on the covers of two popular sport consumer magazines?

In sport media, women athletes are frequently portrayed in non-athlete roles (see Fink & Kensicki, 2002). For example, in 2002, Fink and Kensicki conducted a content analysis of *Sports Illustrated* (SI) and the now-defunct *Sports Illustrated for Women* (SIW) from 1997-1999 and data showed that; a majority of the photographs in *Sports Illustrated* were of female athletes in non-sport settings such as at home with their family (55% compared to 23% of similar photographs of male athletes); about a third depicted female athletes performing a sport (34% compared to 66% of similar photographs of male athletes); and 5% of photographs were considered pornographic or sexually suggestive (compared to 0% of such photographs of male athletes). *Sports Illustrated for Women* depicted more images of female athletes performing a sport (56%), but 24% of images showed female athletes in non-sport settings, and 2% were pornographic or sexually suggestive. Of particular note, this study was conducted after the highly publicized success of U.S. women athletes in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, yet female athletes were still depicted in sexualized and non-sport roles at high rates. The Fink and Kensicki (2002) study supports the significance of the current study in that data collected in this study can be used to either support or disconfirm improvements or changes in the frequency of sexualization of female athletes in sport media.

2.3 Coverage of African American Female Athletes in the Media

In sport media, this pattern of disproportionate and skewed portrays is especially problematic for women and athletes of color (Kane, 1996). In a study of *Sports Illustrated* magazine covers, researchers found that African-American women were depicted on only 5 of 1,835 covers between 1954 and 1987; overall, women were depicted on only 6% of covers during this time period (Lumpkin & Williams, 1991). Feature articles about African-American women were also rare (Leath & Lumpkin, 1992; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991). Media coverage of other ethnic groups is similarly sparse. It can be argued that women of color and many other women are marginalized by dominant ideals and standards of what it means to be female in our culture that favor a heterosexual, white ideal body over other bodies. The white ideal body has been described as being thin and conventionally beautiful (Aulette & Wittner, 2009). In contrast, men who display dominant ideals and standards of masculinity have been known to be Caucasian, tough, dominant, and professional (Aulette & Wittner, 2009). This literature led to the development of the third and final research question:

Q3: How frequently will sport magazine covers showcase female athletes of color, and, how are female athletes of color portrayed when compared to Caucasian female athletes?

3. Method

The content analysis was based on photographs of individual male and female athletes on the cover of two magazines popular among sports fans: *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN The Magazine*. All issues and covers that could be obtained from January 2012 through December 2016. We relied on a content analysis so that we could readily answer questions that address how female athletes have been depicted on the covers of sports magazines over a span of ten years. Specifically, we were interested in addressing three research questions:

- Q1: When female athletes are placed on the covers of sports magazines, will the media focus on their physical attractiveness/sexualization or their sport-related activities and accomplishments? Specifically, how frequently will female athletes be found on the covers of sports magazines as sexualized and feminized objects?
- Q2: Will portrayals of female athletes on the cover show improvement or will they show continued portrayals of sexualized, objectified women athletes?
- Q3: How frequently will sport magazine covers showcase female athletes of color, and, how are female athletes of color portrayed when compared to Caucasian female athletes?

The unit of analysis for this study was cover of the magazine. Only photographs of individual athletes on magazine covers were included in the analysis. Similar to Baker's (2005) study of advertisements depicting sexualized images of women, the aim of the present study was to investigate popular sports publications within a specific timeframe to determine whether or not change in diversity on the covers has been achieved. Similar to other content analyses of media images, only large photographs on the cover were included in the sample (e.g., Baker, 2005). Cover photos that depicted teams, athletic duos, or sporting events were not counted in the analysis.

This study builds upon prior research conducted by Bishop (2003), Fink and Kensicki (2002), Kane (1988), Lumpkin and Williams (1991), and Martin and McDonald (2012). We specifically seek to look at the ways in which female athletes are portrayed on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine*. Specifically, we seek to determine if the ways in which female athletes are portrayed on these covers have improved in the last 5 years (i.e., 2012-2016).

3.1 Procedure

We drew the sample of cover photos from a listing of the top, most popular magazines in the sports industry from January 2012 through December, 2016. *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN The Magazine*. As mentioned earlier, these specific sports magazines were selected for investigation due to evidence from circulation data suggestion that these are the two most prominent sports magazines with the largest circulations (refer to Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2016; Circulation Trends and Data, 2016). To ensure representation of all covers under investigation, we chose every cover that had an individual athlete featured on the cover. Therefore, each magazine cover from was examined. We obtained all covers of each magazine published during the five-year (2012-2016) time-period and used criteria of "individual athlete" for each cover to be included in the analysis. In cases where there were pictures of a team or duo the cover was eliminated from the sample. But in a majority of cases, images of individual athletes had to be identifiable and available to be included in the analysis. This sampling strategy resulted in a total of 109 covers. Forty-four (40.3%) of the covers were from *Sports Illustrated* and sixty-five (59.7%) were from *ESPN the Magazine*.

3.2 Coder Training and Reliability

Three independent undergraduate students served as coders, two were Caucasian women, and one was of African American descent. The principal investigator along with an independent judge who was not familiar with the study's hypotheses also coded the magazine covers. Training took place over a period of three weeks; each weekly session lasted one hour. During these sessions, the coders practiced on several covers so that they and the investigator could identify and resolve problems with the coding scheme.

Coders met to discuss reasoning behind their choices and then made the code book more precise based on this discussion. After the coding scheme was modified on the basis of these practice rounds, coding was then independent. Intercoder reliability was measured using percent agreement (also called simple agreement). Pair wise agreements were calculated by coding agree or disagree. Since multiple coders were used in this study, we calculated the average pair wise agreement among all possible coder pairs across multiple observations.

According to Neuendorf (2002), “coefficients of .90 or greater are nearly always acceptable, .80 or greater is acceptable in most situations, and .70 may be appropriate in some exploratory studies for some indices” (p. 145). The categories that had an 80% similarity were: poses and type of clothing. The categories that had a 90% similarity included, ethnicity of athlete, type of pose and clothing. The categories that had a 100% similarity included gender, ethnicity of athlete and type of sport featured. Since each category had at least 80% similarity between coders, another inter-coder reliability test was not conducted and all three coders along with the author continued on to code the rest of the covers.

3.2 Coding Categories

Covers were examined under a variety of constructs. The first construct focused on whether or not the individual pictured on the cover was an athlete. If the image was not that of an athlete, then it was excluded from the sample. Coders were instructed to determine whether or not the image was an athlete and their respective sport by recording the associated story or lead-line that was connected to the athlete. This means that the athlete’s name, sport and exact appearance were coded. We chose to record those specifics to help us further understand how media professionals frame female athletes and if those portrayals differ in any way to the way they frame male athletes. Teams and duos, such as tennis pairs, were not coded nor were they included in the analysis. **3.2.1 Gender/Ethnicity of Athlete:** Coding for gender and race/ethnicity of the individual athletes featured in cover photos was done through a visual inspection of the covers. If questions and issues arose, the author and coders discussed them, and consulted additional published resources, such as books, magazines, and newspapers, in order to resolve any discrepancies. This method is similar to that used by Primm, DuBois, and Regoli (2007) in their examination of race on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* magazines. The coding categories for gender were (1) male and (2) female. The coding categories for race/ethnicity were (1) Caucasian, (2) Black/African American, (3) Other. These categories were chosen for the sake of simplicity in the coding and data analysis process. **3.2.2. Type of Sport Featured:** Each individual athlete on the cover was then coded for their sport, type of pose (in action, or posed), and type of clothing (in uniform or not in uniform). We were also interested in whether or not the athletes were in athletic gear or uniform or participating in their sport. Coders were also instructed to read the accompanying copy on the cover and determine if descriptions or headlines of the feature stories were mainly about the athlete on the cover, and if so, what were the stories were about. **3.2.3. Type of Pose:** Coders were then trained to analyze and code the pose of the athlete: 1= posed in uniform, 2= posed and not in uniform 3=athlete in action/sport context, 4 = athlete in sexualized/objectified pose. Athletes posing in their uniform or in any athletic clothing were considered to be posed in uniform. If the athlete was shown wearing some type of outfit other than a uniform and was made to appear sexy, provocative, or sexualized, then coders were trained to record that pose as a “4.”

3.2 Operationalization of Categorical Variables

Ethnicity/race was coded as: 1) White/Caucasian; 2) Black/African American; 3) Other. The athletes’ names, skin tone, and biography were used to validate the reliability and validity of race of athlete (i.e., we would conduct further research on the athlete to determine ethnic background). As a result, the level of agreement for race of the athlete was .90 and the level of agreement for gender was 1.0.

3.3.1 Poses.

Athletes were coded as in either an “active” or “non-active” poses. Active poses were defined as showing the athlete as a participant in his/her sport. For example, an active pose would be a football player on the field, catching, kicking, throwing, or tackling the ball. Or it might be a basketball player on the court and/or shooting a basket, or a swimmer about to dive, and so forth. Athletes were coded in “non-active” poses if they were in non-competitive settings and the photograph was a head-shot, a posed studio shot in uniform, or in the stands or at home. The level of agreement for the poses category was .90.

3.3.2 Clothing.

Images were classified as sexualized, performance, or unrelated to sport. Sexualized images included women who were scantily clad or nearly naked where there was no performance-related reason for their dress or lack thereof (e.g., a woman athlete topless holding a ball to cover her chest). Performance images included both active and static photographs of women. The active images depicted women engaged in an athletic activity where the focus was on the athletic pursuit (e.g., a woman playing soccer).

Static images of women were included in this category when the emphasis was on their athleticism (e.g., a professional soccer player in uniform standing still on a playing field). The unrelated to sport category encompassed images of elite women athletes not dressed in athletic clothing or in a setting that is not related to sport (e.g., with family or in a domestic activity such as cooking). The level of intercoder agreement in this category was .90.

3.3.3 Defining Sexual Objectification

First, an obvious way in which sexual objectification can be conveyed in pictures is through body exposure, as in the case of a person who is not wearing much clothing (Aubrey, Henson, Hopper & Smith, 2009). In essence, this operationalization reflects the amount of skin revealed by the artists. Indeed, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) specifically mention that sexual objectification entails the representation of a woman as a “collection of body parts” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 174), which might be contrasted with a visual portrayal of a woman as a total person. Thus, one indicator of sexual objectification was the extent to which the angle of the photo as well as the emphasis of the image segmented female athletes segmented into different body parts (i.e., cleavage/chest, butt, legs, stomach, and back). We coded this by noting whether the female athlete had a fully (e.g., abdomen not at all covered by clothing) or partially exposed (e.g., cleavage and breast tissue exposed by nipples covered) body part and whether the body part took up the majority of the cover of the magazine.

3.4 Data Analysis

To investigate differences in the categorical variables, the first step was to conduct two-way chi-square tests to determine whether there was a statistically significant relationship between ethnicity/race or gender of an athlete and the depiction on covers of sports magazines. A chi-square test was deemed appropriate for this study because the sampling method used was a simple random sampling and the variables under study were each categorical. If a statistically significant relationship was discovered between the variables ($p < .05$), then we followed up the analysis with pairwise comparisons. Thus, we conducted pairwise comparisons to analyze the differences in ethnicity and gender of the athletes based on frequency of appearance on the magazine and type of picture portrayed.

4. Results

This analysis yielded 109 covers featuring male and female athletes. Recall that ethnicity/race was coded as: 1) White/Caucasian; 2) Black/African American; 3) other. The “other” coding category included Hispanic/Latina; Asian/Pacific-Islander and Bi-racial groups. This procedure of combining categories was conducted to logically put together categories that had small numbers of observations (i.e., less than 5 observation) or zero-sum categories in terms of frequencies observed of athletes of other ethnic backgrounds. Unfortunately, athletes in the “other” ethnic group were found on less than five sport magazine covers. The researcher believed that collapsing the category and excluding the “other” ethnic group from data analysis a priori would affect the level of significance obtained and would help avoid the criticism that the data were manipulated just to get a certain result. Thus, it seemed reasonable to assume that removing the “other” ethnic group from analysis would not affect the overall nature of the study and research questions being addressed. It was determined that if the null hypothesis of independence of row and column variables is true for all categories of each variable, then combining categories will preserve that property.

4.1 Photographs of Women in Sport

Recall that research question one asks; When female athletes are placed on the covers of sports magazines, will the media focus on their physical attractiveness/sexualization or their sport-related activities and accomplishments? Specifically, how frequently will female athletes be found on the covers of sports magazines in sexualized poses representing feminized objects? Results revealed that overall there were very few images of

women across the sample of sport magazine photos. Data obtained in this study show that of the 109 covers analyzed, 88.1% (n=96) of the individuals found on the cover of magazines were men compared to 11.9% (n=13) of the covers featuring female athletes ($\chi^2 = 9.96$, $df = 1$, $p \leq .001$).

In addition, data obtained from this content analysis shows that female athletes are often times portrayed in sexualized poses, dressed in scantily clad clothing, and not pictured in their uniform or team sport. Female athletes on the covers of sports magazines between 2012-2016 show that more often than not, they were depicted in sexualized poses, presented out of their team uniforms, and, dressed in provocative, scantily clad outfits, $\chi^2 = 31.2$, $df=1$, $p \leq .0001$, a statistically significant result when compared to male athletes. In this instance, we found a significant relationship between gender and the provocative dress worn by athletes on the covers of sports magazines. In answering the research questions, Chi Square analysis was used to determine whether portrayals on the covers of sports magazines have significantly different options for male and female athletes. One purpose of the study was to know if there is a difference in the proportion of male and female athletes who appear on the covers of sports magazines. Data show greater differences between how female athletes are being featured on covers when compared to male athletes. Thus, in terms of the first research question, data suggest that female athletes are still being sexualized, objectified and/or treated in sexualized ways when compared to poses depicted by male athletes. (see Table 1)

Table 1 Results of Chi-square Test of Gender Differences in all Categorical Variables

<i>Categorical Variables</i>	Gender	
	Male	Female
<i>Featured on Cover</i> $\chi^2 = 9.96$, $df=1$, $p \leq .001$	96 (96.1%)	13 (11.9%)
<i>Posed</i> $\chi^2 = 72.0$, $df=1$, $p \leq .0001$	45(41.0%)	64(59%)
<i>Shown in action</i> $\chi^2 = 25.6$, $df=1$, $p \leq .0001$	86(37.6%)	27(15.0%)
<i>Pictured in Uniform</i> $\chi^2 = 31.2$, $df=1$, $p \leq .0001$	61(26.6%)	10(5.6%)
<i>Provocative/Scantily-clad dress</i> $\chi^2 = 31.2$, $df=1$, $p \leq .0001$	61(26.6%)	10(5.6%)

Research Question 2: Will we see improvement, consistency, or decline in how female athletes are portrayed, posed, and represented on the covers of two popular sport consumer magazines?

Research question two sought to determine trends or improvement in the manner by which female athletes are portrayed on the covers of two popular sport consumer magazines. Again, referring to the data obtained and presented in Table one, data found that consistent with prior research, male athletes appear on the covers of sports magazines at much higher frequencies than female athletes, $p \leq .0001$. In addition, data presented in table one show that female athlete are often shown provocative poses than their male athlete counterparts, and that relationship was also significant, $\chi^2 = 72.0$, $df = 1$, $p \leq .0001$. Thus, female athletes were more likely to be depicted in non-active poses that do not lend themselves to an “action-packed” cover photograph.

4.2 Female Athletes of Color

RQ3: How frequently will sport magazine covers showcase female athletes of color, and, how are female athletes of color portrayed when compared to Caucasian female athletes?

Photographs published on the covers of *ESPN the Magazine* and *Sports Illustrated* covers published from 2012 through 2016 found that only six covers featured a female athlete of color. We sought to compare the race of female athletes and types of poses and portraits found on the magazine covers. Unfortunately, chi-square tests

were unable to be performed because most of the cells contained values less than five and a couple of them contain values of 0. Since the expected counts (also called expected frequencies) for the cells were small, analysis and Chi-Square results on the race variable were deemed not valid.

However, the frequencies of the portrayals of female athletes of color are provided in Table 2. The small numbers should bring to focus disparate treatment that female athletes of color are receiving in popular mainstream sports media.

Table 3 Race Differences in all Categorical Variables

Categorical Variables	Gender (n=13)	
	Black	White
Featured on Cover	6	7
Posed	4	9
Shown in action	2	0
Pictured in Uniform	1	2
Provocative/Scantily-clad dress	5	5

4.0 Discussion

Three research questions were addressed in this study: Q1: When female athletes are placed on the covers of sports magazines, will the media focus on their physical attractiveness/sexualization or their sport-related activities and accomplishments? Specifically, how frequently will female athletes be found on the covers of sports magazines as sexualized and feminized objects? Q2: Will we see improvement, consistency or decline in how female athletes are portrayed, posed, and represented on the covers of two popular sport consumer magazines? And lastly, Q3: How frequently will sport magazine covers showcase female athletes of color, and, how are female athletes of color portrayed when compared to Caucasian female athletes?

4.1 Summary of Key Findings

Perhaps the most important finding of the present study was the pervasiveness of sexualization and objectification of female athletes found on the covers of popular sports magazines. The majority of sport covers in the present sample contained two indicators of sexualization and objectification; provocative poses and scantily clad outfits. There were no statistically significant differences by race of the female athletes and type of portrayal due to small observed frequencies, but there were differences in portrayals by gender. These results suggest that in the world of sports, a female athlete's role, as of 2017, is continually constrained to her sexuality. Table 3 reviews the major findings of the present study.

Table 3 A Review of the Statistically Significant Differences in Sexual Objectification Based on Race and Gender

Categorical Variable	Gender	Ethnicity
Featured on the Magazine Cover	Yes * Differences in frequency of appearance between male and female athletes, with male athletes appearing on the cover of magazines more than 90% of the time.	No *Sample size, observed and expected counts were less than 5
Posed versus in action shots or shown in athletic environment appropriate to his/her sport	Yes	No *No difference
Pictured in Uniform	Yes* *Male athletes more likely to be shown in team uniform	No *No difference
Provocative/Scantily clad Dress	Yes* *Female athletes more likely to be provocatively dressed.	No *No difference
Overall objectification/Sexualization	Yes *Female athletes are more likely to be shown in objectified/sexualized poses	No *No difference

Gender differences. One of our primary goals in the current study was to measure gender differences in portrayals of female athletes on the cover of sports magazines. Surprisingly, despite research which suggests that female athletes continue to be subjected to myriad sexual stereotypes (e.g., Stephens, 2007), by the measures utilized in the present study, the findings suggested that not only have we seen improvement in the portrayals of female athletes on the cover of magazines, but, little to no improvement has been made in terms of sexualization and objectification of female athletes, particularly when compared to male athletes. In addition, we did not find increases or improvement in portrayals of female athletes of color featured on the covers of sports magazines. If as a culture we think of clothing and dress to be a fundamental styling decision, the difference in how female athletes are portrayed (i.e. sexually provocative dress) depicting women in their athletic clothing is necessary and needed. If the clothing of female athletes continues to be provocative and sexualized body movement, it is possible and reasonable to conclude that these depictions will continue to feed into stereotyped notions of female sexuality, femininity and gender roles. Notwithstanding the gender differences on magazine covers, the big picture of the results suggests that sexualization and objectification in female athletes on sports magazine covers continues to be normative. Rather, it may be reasonable to conclude that continued exposure to these incredibly sexualized images of female athletes may encourage fans to demean, devalue, and completely disregard female athletes and their sports, particularly if the female athlete engages in a sport perceived to be more masculine (i.e., football, basketball, wrestling, and weightlifting).

In terms of depictions of women on magazine covers, nothing has changed in the portrayals since 2000. Although a great deal of research has documented the presence of narrow and limiting images of women in mainstream media, data obtained in this study can be used to support the idea that in today's current media culture, there are few, if any, empowering images of women—namely of female athletes. Given the increase in women's professional sport leagues and the explosion in female sport participation since the passage of Title IX, we expected increased media attention of female athletes, yet we found little. Results add to existing research on sport-specific media (e.g., *Sports Illustrated* magazine and *ESPN* television) and clearly indicate that female athletes appearing on cover pages is minimal compared to the extensive coverage of male athletes and their sports (e.g., Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles, 2001; Kane, 1996; Messner, Duncan, & Cooky, 2003; Pedersen & Whisenant, 2003; Vincent, Imwold, Johnson, & Massey, 2003). Data also show that women athletes are frequently portrayed on magazine covers in non-athlete roles. Analysis revealed that a majority of the photographs used for the cover of sport magazines tend to be that of male athletes active in their sport settings. Recall that Fink and Kensicki (2002) found that the majority of the photographs in *Sports Illustrated* were of female athletes in non-sport settings such as at home with their family (55% compared to 23% of similar photographs of male athletes), about a third depicted female athletes performing a sport (34% compared to 66% of similar photographs of male athletes), and 5% of photographs were considered pornographic or sexually suggestive (compared to 0% of such photographs of male athletes). Similar to findings obtained in the Fink and Kensicki (2002) content analysis, the data obtained in the current study of sports magazine covers accomplished its purpose by showing that photographs on the covers of magazines fourteen years after the Fink and Kensicki (2002) work show no improvement in the photos- we still see media images that depict male athletes in uniform while showing female athletes in non-sport settings or in sexually suggestive poses.

4.1 Future Directions in Media Effects Research

Researchers can obtain data that show how media can help determine public perceptions of female athletes and sports simply by covering female athletes of all shapes, sizes, and ethnicities. It is possible that a program of research in this area along with increased media coverage of these types of stories and images of female athletes might possible start new dialogues about the different types of women that exist and are successful in today's culture and society. Research in this area does suggest that once this shift in media images and coverage occurs, significant change can occur in the self-esteem of young women (Daniels, 2012; see Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, Bodey, Middendorf, & Martin, 2012).

Another possible area of research would be to determine how readers perceive cover shots of female athletes like Simone Biles, Gabby Douglas, Clarissa Shields, and Katy Ledecky that depict athletic abilities and prowess, and not their chest, attractiveness or abs. Future research should explore the idea of equal treatment in sexualization of male athletes in media and determine fan reaction to the depictions. For example, how would audience members react to cover photos of LeBron James on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* naked, holding a basketball with the Nike swoosh in front of his genitals?

With the increasing number of female athletes, the selection of who to feature on covers or in news stories must start featuring and showing images of women engaged in active, contact and non-contact sports. The present study provides empirical data that adds to the published research on media, sport, race, and gender. Currently female athletes have many opportunities to engage and participate in sports, yet as the data show in this study, media seem to be dropping the ball in terms of how they continue to show female athletes in popular sports media. Data obtained in 2017 show that female athletes are still being treated significantly different than their male counterparts on the covers of sports magazines. Though the data in the present study does not offer “new,” innovative, or shocking evidence, the data obtained in this study shows that a female athlete’s sporting achievements are still being de-emphasized in this day and age, and their depictions still lag behind male athletes both in quantity and quality. Findings obtained in the current study conducted in early 2017 are telling and should be disconcerting, especially when one considers the aspirations of young girls who may interpret the images of scantily-clad female athletes as the “thing to do” in order to gain media attention. The media need to be made aware of the trivializing and marginalizing way that these images are presented and consider the impact that the images may have on young girls. Media need to make a dedicated and conscious commitment to change the way female athletes are portrayed so that they can begin to send clear messages that female athletes can be competitive, attractive, and valued. In light of the research conducted by Fink and other academics in recent years, just think of the negative effects these marketing images have had on how we, as a society, view women’s sports. As journalists and social scientists, we must share ideas showing that all athletes have special qualities that make them or her great. News stories should focus on athletic qualities regardless of gender or ethnicity.

Athletic qualities such as focus, determination, competitiveness, consistency, dedication, and commitment, confidence, skill, focus, determination, and pride just to name a few. In their research, Hardin, Shen and Yu (2008) argue that the framing of sports is so firmly entrenched as a male domain in U.S. culture that the acceptance of such has largely become taken-for-granted. Sports and athletic events that are sex-typed as “feminine” have traditionally been individual sports that emphasize grace and glamour, such as gymnastics or figure skating (Pedersen, 2002; Tuggle & Owen, 1999; Vincent, Imwold, Johnson, & Massey, 2003). The highest growth in sports among women, however, are team sports such as soccer, and the most frequently found college varsity sports for women include basketball, volleyball, softball, tennis, track, and swimming – none of which is an aesthetically oriented, “feminine” sport (Acosta & Carpenter, 2004) but are (with the exception of tennis) sports in which women’s performances are generally marginalized by the sports/media complex (Pedersen, 2002; Pedersen & Guerin, 2007; Vincent, Imwold, Johnson, & Massey, 2003). Scant coverage of the U.S. women’s soccer team in 2007 World Cup competition is one recent example (Vescey, 2007).

5.0 Conclusion

5.1.1 Equitable Coverage of Race and Gender in Sports Media

Equitable coverage can be defined in several ways. First we can define equity in sports coverage by understanding that equity is not saying that there are equal number of articles and photographs of male and female athletes. Instead, equity can be achieved by simply portraying female athletes as powerful and talented just as they do men (see Fink & Kensicki 2002). Equitable sports coverage could also be taken to mean equal coverage in news media given all types of sports. For instance, females participating in sports deemed by society as masculine (i.e., rugby, basketball, soccer) should be covered at the same rates as sports considered feminine (i.e., golf, tennis, swimming) (Kane, 1996). Even more important when discussing equitable sports coverage is the idea of considering the type of coverage. One implication of the research presented in this study is to provide an opportunity for readers to consider the idea that “equitable sports coverage” involves stories and media portrayals that are based on showcasing athletic accomplishments and qualities. This is important in that we know from research in this area that the media impacts the preferences of fans by not only the amount; but the type of coverage provided (see Messner et al. 1996). Acknowledgement of the differences in how female athletes are portrayed is the first step sports communication professionals could take to overcome faulty images of and disparities among athletes. Media scholars, editors, journalists, strategic communications practitioners and others interested in this topic must advocate for a change in the content of media, especially media targeted at adolescent boys and girls. An increase in positive media images of women athletes in uniform, for example, could be used to change perceptions of the sexualized and overly-thin standard portrayal of females currently dominating our media.

Future studies in this line of research is much-needed and incredibly important in that it will determine the extent to which long-term exposure to and consumption of the depictions of female athletes as sexualized objects might actually lead girls and young women to self-objectify themselves, have lower self-esteem, and focus too much on their own physical appearance. Researchers interested in sports journalism and mass media should study the facts that are responsible for the resistance in our culture and in sports journalism to improve the depiction of female athletes as the athletes that they are, as well as the overall coverage of female sports.

References

- Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles, & ESPN. (2001). *Children and sport media*. Los Angeles, CA: Author.
- Aubrey, J. S., Henson, J., Hopper, K. M., & Smith, S. (2009). A picture is worth twenty words (about the self): Testing the priming influence of visual sexual objectification on women's self-objectification. *Communication Research Reports*, 26, 271-284.
- Audit Bureau of Circulations (2016). *Consumer magazine circulation averages*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.abcas3.accessabc.com/ecirc/magtitlesearch.asp> (February 16, 2017).
- Baker, C. N. (2005). Images of women's sexuality in advertisements: A content analysis of Black- and White-oriented women's and men's magazines. *Sex Roles*, 52, 13-27.
- Bell, R. (2008). "A History of Women in Sport Prior to Title IX." *Sports Management, Women and Sports*. (14 March 2008) <http://thesportjournal.org/article/a-history-of-women-in-sport-prior-to-title-ix/>
- Bishop, R. (2003). Missing in action: Feature coverage of women's sport in Sports Illustrated, *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 27, 184-194.
- Daniels, E. A. (2012). Sexy versus strong: What girls and women think of female athletes. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 33(2), 79-90.
- Daniels, E. A. (2008, March). *Athlete or sex symbol: What girls think of media representations of women athletes*. Paper presented at the Biennial Society for Research on Adolescence Meeting, Chicago, IL.
- Daniels, E. A. (2009). Sex objects, athletes, and sexy athletes: How media representations of women athletes can impact adolescent girls and young women. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 24, 399-422.
- Davis, L.R. (1997). *The swimsuit issue and sport: Hegemonic masculinity in Sports Illustrated*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Duncan, M. (1990). Sports photographs and sexual difference: Images of women and men in the 1984 and 1988 Olympic Games. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 7, 22-43.
- Duncan, M. & Messner, M. (2005, July). Gender in televised sports: News and highlight shows, 1989-2004. Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles. [Online]. Available: <http://www.aafila.org/9arr/ResearchReports/tv2004.pdf> (October, 19, 2016)
- Fink, J. S., & Kensicki, L. J. (2002). An imperceptible difference: Visual and textual constructions of femininity in Sports Illustrated and Sports Illustrated for Women. *Mass Communication & Society*, 5, 317-339.
- Fink, J. (2015). Female athletes, women's sport, and the sport media commercial complex: Have we really "come a long way, baby"? *Sport Management Review*, 18(3), 331-342. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2014.05.001>
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T-A. (1997). Objectification theory: Toward an understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 173-206.
- Frisby, C. M. (in press 2017). *Williams and Kerber Re-Match: A content analysis of racial and sexist microaggressions in print news stories about Serena Williams and Angelique Kerber*, Manuscript accepted for publication.
- Gray, E (2016, August 8). "Stop Attributing the Success of Olympian Women to Men." *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/women-olympians-dont-need-men-to-be-badass_us_57a87489e4b03ba68012ccbb
- Halbert, C. (1997). Tough enough and woman enough: Stereotypes, discrimination, and impression management among women professional boxers. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 21(7), 7-36.
- Hardin, M., Lynn, S., & Walsdorf, K. (2005). Challenge and conformity on "Contested terrain": Images of women in four women's sport/fitness magazines. *Sex Roles*, 53(1), 105-117.
- Hardin, M., Dodd, J., & Lauffer, K. (2006). Passing it on: Reinforcement of male hegemony in sports journalism textbooks, *Mass Communication and Society*, 9, 429-446.

- Kane, M. J. (1988). Media coverage of the female athlete before, during, and after title IX: Sports Illustrated revisited, *Journal of Sport Management*, 2, 87-99.
- Kane, M. J. (1996). *Media coverage of the post Title IX Athlete*. *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy*, 3. [Online]. Available: <http://web/lexis-nexis.com/universe/printdoc>. (July 16, 2016).
- Koivula, N. (1999, October). Gender stereotyping in televised media sport coverage. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 33, 543-557. [Online]. Available: <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mim2294/is1999Oct/ai59426460>
- Krane, V. (2001). We can be athletic and feminine, but do we want to? Challenging hegemonic femininity in women's sport. *Quest*, 53, 115-133.
- Kuhn, A. (1985). *The power of the image: Essays on representation and sexuality*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Leath, V. M., & Lumpkin, A. (1992). An analysis of sportswomen on the covers and in the feature articles of Women's Sports and Fitness magazine, 1975-1989. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 16, 121-126.
- Lumpkin, A., & Williams, L. D. (1991). An analysis of Sports Illustrated feature articles, 1954-1987. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 8, 16-32.
- Martin, A. & McDonald, M. G. (2012). Covering Women's Sport? An analysis of Sports Illustrated Covers from 1987-2009 and ESPN the Magazine Covers from 1998-2009, *Graduate Journal of Sport, Exercise & Physical Education Research*, 1, 81-97.
- Messner, M. A. (2002). *Taking the field: Women, men, and sports*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Messner, M. A., Duncan, M. C., & Cooky, C. (2003). Silence, sports bras, and wrestling porn. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 27, 38-51.
- Messner, M. A., & Cooky, C. (2010, June). Gender in televised sports: news and highlight shows, 1989-2009. University of Southern California Center for Feminist Research. [Online]. Available: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/cfr/html/documents/tvspor ts.pdf> (Nov. 9, 2016).
- Neuendorf, K. A. (2002). *The content analysis guidebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Pedersen, P. M., & Whisenant, W. A. (2003). Examining stereotypical written and photographic reporting on the sports page: An analysis of newspaper coverage of interscholastic athletics. *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 12, 67-86.
- Primm, E., Preuhs, R. R., & Hewitt, J. D. (2007). "The More Things Change the More They Stay the Same: Race on the Cover of *Sports Illustrated*." *The Journal of American Culture*, 30(2), 239-250.
- Primm, E., Dubois, S., & Regoli, J. D. (2007). Every Picture Tells a Story: Racial Representation on *Sports Illustrated* Covers." *The Journal of American Culture*, 30(2), 239-250.
- Salwen, M. B., & Wood, N. (1994). Depictions of female athletes on Sports Illustrated covers, 1957-1989. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 17(2), 98.
- Steinfeldt, J. A., Zakrajsek, R. A., Bodey, K. J., Middendorf, K. G., & Martin, S. B. (2012). Role of uniforms in the body image of female college volleyball players. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 4(5), 791-806.
- Urquhart, J., & Crossman, J. (1999). The Globe and Mail Coverage of the Winter Olympic Games: A Cold Place for Women Athletes. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 23, 193-202.
- Vincent, J., Imwold, C., Johnson, J. T., & Massey, D. (2003). Newspaper coverage of female athletes competing in selected sports in the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games: The more things change the more they stay the same. *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*, 12, 1-21.