

# Sacrificing Dignity for Publicity: Content Analysis of Female and Male Athletes on “*Sports Illustrated*” and “*ESPN the Magazine*” Covers from 2012-2016

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## Abstract

The purpose of the study was to assess changes in how often female athletes were portrayed on the cover when compared to male athletes. A content analysis of the manner by which male and female athletes were depicted on sports magazine covers from 2012-2016 was performed. A total of 245 cover pages taken from two top sports magazines, *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN*: The magazine were used to analyze depictions of individual male and female athletes. Despite females' increased participation in sport since the enactment of Title IX and calls for greater media coverage of female athletes, women appeared on just 10 percent of the covers compared to male athletes. Data show that the percentage of female athletes on the sports magazines covers did not change significantly over the span of five years and were comparable to levels reported by other researchers. Beyond the limited appearance on sport magazine covers, female athletes were shown in sexually objectifying poses, seductive eye gazes, scantily clad clothing, and sexy/inviting body poses while male athletes are often seen in their team uniforms depicted in active, game playing athletic motions associated or related to his sport. It is concluded that male athletes are still portrayed in ways which support hegemonic ideas of masculinity.

## 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

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## 1. Introduction

The objectification and sexism faced by women in the media, and particularly

powerful women and women in leadership—like those competing in the Olympics—has serious implications. News stories that focus on the supposed “diva” behavior, outfits, hair and parenting of female athletes trivialize their athletic accomplishments and make them seem less powerful—and ultimately less valuable. While many studies have been conducted that show notable differences in the way female and male athletes are discussed in media coverage, we were interested in determining if sports media pay attention to these commentaries and as a result have changed the ways in which female athletes are depicted on their magazine cover. In other words, in present day media, will data show that female athletes appear equally on the covers of popular sports magazine as male athletes?

### 1.1. Significance of the Research

Data obtained in this study is significant in that it can be used to determine trends and/or improvement (or the lack of) 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? In a study on sports illustrated covers, [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. Since media serve to reflect and shape our culture ([Kane, 1988](#)), the main goal of the current study was to determine if pressures emanating from a plethora of research studies showing that female athletes are framed in ways which down play 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](#)), have improved. An exhaustive search of published literature on this subject clearly shows that up through the year 2012, sports media continue to sexualize and demean the treatment and athletic accomplishments of female athletes. Thus, we sought to determine if *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* (the two magazines that have been consistently analyzed in scholarly research) have improved their portrayals of female athletes on the covers of their magazines

Athletes all have special qualities that make them great. From determination, focus, competitiveness, confidence, skill, and pride, therefore, it is hoped that print media are beginning to give female athletes the respect they deserve. Prior research shows that media outlets frequently exclude female athletes from lead stories and headlines found in national sports media ([Daniels, 2008](#); [Daniels, 2009](#); [Duncan, 1990](#); [Hardin, Lynn, & Walsdorf, 2005](#); [Kane, 1996](#); [Koivula, 1999](#); [Lapchik & Mathews, 1999](#); [Leath & Lumpkin, 1992](#); [Leath & Williams, 1991](#); [Messner, 2002](#); [Perdersen & Whisenant, 2003](#); [Primm, Preuhs, & Hewitt, 2007](#); [Weber & Carini, 2012](#)). In spite of the all-pervasive nature of sports in American culture, media seem to ignore the significance, contribution of, and

importance of inclusion for women athletes (Davis, 1997; Urquhart & Crossman, 1999).

## 1.2. Project Goals and Rationale

The present study analyzes improvement in how female athletes are portrayed on the cover of sports magazines. In a culture where the female body is always being critiqued, female athletes often seem to have to stand up to and challenge norms concerning their sexuality and gender identity. Research 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.

While sport participation continues to grow for female athletes, we were interested in determining if popular sports media outlets have begun to show that growth. Recent scholarship—which will be discussed in the literature review below—shows that since the 1980s, shows that even though female athletes are receiving media coverage, much of the coverage is framed in ways that distort, trivialize, and sexualize female athletes. Data presented in the current study is needed in order to provide quantitative measures that can be used to confirm or disconfirm improvements in how female athletes are represented on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* since the Martin and McDonald 2012 and Weber and Carini 2012 studies.

Four research questions will be addressed since 2012, the year that provided statistics on coverage and portrayals of female athletes on the covers of magazines. Q1: Have images of female athletes improved on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* since 2012? Q2: Have the portrayals of female athletes increased or decreased on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* since 2012? Q3: Will these sport magazine covers show female athletes in active roles and poses in approximately the same frequency as male athletes? And, lastly, Q4: Will we see any trends or changes in how female athletes are portrayed, posed, and represented on the covers of two popular sport consumer magazines?

As highlighted in the Primm, Dubois and Regoli (2007) study, sport magazines are important to study because evidence of inequality is unmistakable in media exclusively dedicated to sports news coverage. Therefore, magazines such as *ESPN the Magazine* and *Sports Illustrated* are perfect resources for examining visual images because of their potential to be powerful vehicles for perpetuating specific representations of athletes (Weber & Carini, 2012).

Since prior research suggests that sports and its media play a crucial role in developing sexual perceptions and ideologies, particularly those surrounding female athletes, this study hopes to build on prior research (Primm, Dubois, & Regolio, 2007) and determine if frequency and type of portrayals of female athletes have changed over time. We examine specifically 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. Most literature on sport media coverage

tends to focus on televised media, this study provides a content analysis to identify trends and common portrayals of female athletes found in print media, specifically two popular print magazine covers. In order to demonstrate the need for this study, the literature review will discuss scholarly research that explores how media portrayed female athletes over the years.

## 2. Literature Review

Many researchers have found women's sports to receive strikingly less coverage than men's, even when women happen to constitute the majority of a sport's participants (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; Weber & Carini, 2012). When media comment on women's sports, female athletes may well be referred to in either a sexual manner or demeaning manner (Kane, 1988). According to research, media tend to praise men for their athletic ability in sports, but then seem to praise women only for physical attractiveness (Duncan, 1990; Messner & Cooky, 2010). A perfect example of this can be found in the magazine "*Sports Illustrated*." A long established leading magazine for sports fans (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2016), "*Sports Illustrated*" is also known for its frequent use of women portrayed as sexual objects, in its popular swimsuit edition (Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Kane, 1988; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Martin & McDonald, 2012).

In a review of over 1700 covers, Martin and McDonald (2012) found that 6% of the images on the covers of magazines were of female athletes. These researchers concluded that neither magazine, *Sports Illustrated* or *ESPN the Magazine* were found to improve the number of female athletes featured on the covers. In fact, these researchers found that the number of female athletes on the cover actually declined by nearly 50% since 1989 (Martin & McDonald, 2012). Further, these researchers also found male athletes were portrayed at much higher percentages than female athletes, further indicating a lack of improvement. Taken together, the Martin and McDonald study (2012) along with previous published literature led to the development of research questions one and two:

Q1: Have images of female athletes improved on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* since 2012?

Q2: Have the portrayals of female athletes increased or decreased on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* since 2012?

In sport media, women athletes are frequently portrayed in non-athlete roles (Fink & Kensicki, 2002). For example, in a content analysis of *Sports Illustrated* (SI) and now-defunct *Sports Illustrated for Women* (SIW) from 1997-1999, 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 sim-

ilar 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 current study seeks to build on the (Fink and Kensicki, 2002; Martin & McDonald, 2012; Weber & Carini, 2012) studies by investigating more recent sports magazine covers in order to determine if female athletes are now being portrayed in ways that show their athletic accomplishments, strengths, and sports. 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? Data obtained in the present study hopes to further research on poses of female athletes by investigating the extent to which the active roles and poses have changed or stayed the same.

Q3: Will sport magazine covers show female athletes in active roles and poses in approximately the same frequency as male athletes?

Q4: Are there noticeable trends or changes in coverage of female athletes on the covers of sports magazines?

### 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 were analyzed from the years 2012-2016. 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 four research questions:

Q1: Have images of female athletes improved on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* since 2012?

Q2: Have the portrayals of female athletes increased or decreased on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* since 2012?

Q3: Will these sport magazine covers show female athletes in active roles and poses in approximately the same frequency as male athletes?

Q4: Will we see any trends or changes in how female athletes are portrayed, posed, and represented on the covers of two popular sport consumer magazines?

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 publica-

tions 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.

The study builds upon 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

In an effort to select popular sport magazines, 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* were examined because they 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.

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 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 an individual athlete was identifiable and available to be included in the analysis. This sampling strategy resulted in a total of 245 covers. Forty-four (17.9%) of the covers were from *Sports Illustrated* and two hundred and one (82.1%) were from *ESPN the Magazine*.

### 3.2. Coder Training and Reliability

Nine independent undergraduate students served as coders, four were Caucasian women, three were of African American/Latino descent, and two were African American males conducted the content analysis. In addition to the eight coders, the principal investigator along with an independent judge who was not familiar with the study’s hypotheses also coded covers.

Training took place over two 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 sim-

ple agreement). Pairwise agreements were calculated by coding agree or disagree. Since multiple coders were used in this study, we calculated the average pairwise agreement among all possible coder pairs across multiple observations. According to Neuendorf (2002), “coefficients of 0.90 or greater are nearly always acceptable, 0.80 or greater is acceptable in most situations, and 0.70 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. 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 coder one, the author, continued on to code the rest of the covers.

### 3.3. 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.

The covers were coded on the type of photo depicted on the page. Each cover of the two magazines was coded for “identifiable individuals.” Covers that featured more than one identifiable person were excluded because more than one person or a team would distract from concise analysis. Teams and duos, such as tennis pairs, were not coded and included in the analysis. Thus, we did not include sport covers that were of teams, duos, or coaches.

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 additional published resources, such as books, magazines, and newspapers, were consulted 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 a) Caucasian, b) Black/African American, c) Other. These categories were chosen for the sake of simplicity in the coding and data analysis process.

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 de-

scriptions or headlines of the feature stories were mainly about the athlete on the cover, and if so, what were the stories were about.

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.”

### 3.4. 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 1.0 and the level of agreement for gender was 1.0.

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.

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).

### 3.5. 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 ( $p < 0.05$ ), 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 245 covers with individual 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.

#### Photographs of Women in Sport

Results revealed that overall there were very few images of women across the sample of sport magazine photos. Although not statistically significant, research shows that of the 245 covers analyzed, 88.1% ( $n = 216$ ) of the individuals found on the cover of magazines were men compared to 11.9% ( $n = 29$ ) of the covers featuring female athletes. Images of female athletes made up only 6.1% ( $n = 15$  out of 245) of the photographs of women. Table one provides the cross tabulations of images of male and female athletes by type of pose and photograph for the covers of sport magazines.

**Table 1** reports the percentages of males and females found on the two mainstream sports magazine covers. As is immediately apparent, there are still far fewer females than males on the covers of sports magazines (25 females compared to 220 males). Chi-square analysis reveal that the relationship between gender and depiction on the cover is statistically significant,  $X^2 = (1, N = 245) = 11.88, p = 0.003$ . Sixty four percent of female athletes compared to 88.1% of male athletes were depicted on the covers of sports magazine covers. The relationship between gender and depiction on the cover of a sport magazine is significant at the  $p = 0.003$  level.

Data obtained and revealed in **Table 1** further highlights the percentages of male and female athletes engaged in active poses on the covers of sports maga-

**Table 1.** Gender differences in all categorical variables.

Variable	Male athletes (%) (n = 220)	Female Athletes (%) (n = 24)	Total (n) (N = 245)
Featured on the Cover			
Present	88.1	64.0	220
Absent	11.9	36.0	25
$X^2 = (1, N = 245) = 11.88, p = 0.003 V = 0.21$			
Posed			
Present	79.6	96.0	191
Absent	20.4	4.0	54
$X^2 = (1, N = 245) = 20.1 p = 0.01 V = 0.18$			
Shown in action			
Present	24.6	16.7	58
Absent	75.4	83.3	187
$X^2 = (1, N = 245) = 1.3 p = 0.97 V = 0.05$			
Pictured in team uniform			
Present	66 <sub>a</sub>	20.8 <sub>b</sub>	150
Absent	34 <sub>c</sub>	79.2 <sub>d</sub>	95
$X^2 = (1, N = 245) = 26.1 p = 0.002 V = 0.21$			
Provocative dress			
Present	11.9 <sub>a</sub>	83.3 <sub>b</sub>	46
Absent	88.1 <sub>c</sub>	16.7 <sub>d</sub>	199
$X^2 = (1, N = 245) = 91.6 p = 0.000 V = 0.40$			
Focus of Lead Story			
Yes	86.8	62.5	213
No	13.2	37.5	32
$X^2 = (1, N = 245) = 10.9 p = 0.20 V = 0.15$			

*Note:* Subscripts differing in the same row differed at  $p < 0.05$ . Pairwise comparisons were conducted via contrasts. Pairwise comparisons were not conducted on models in which the omnibus  $X^2$  test was not statistically significant.

zines. Since there were far more male athletes on the covers than females, it is not surprising that females were shown more often in posed covers than were male athletes, and that relationship was also significant,  $X^2 = (1, N = 245) = 20.1 p = 0.01$ . **Figure 1** shows the poses that female athletes were most likely to be depicted in. It should be noted that these non-active poses for the female athletes do not lend themselves to an “action-packed” cover photograph as do the poses for male athletes (see **Figure 1** for sample covers).

Data analysis also examined the type of clothing worn by male and female athletes depicted in the cover photos. It is no surprise that female athletes were shown out of team uniforms,  $X^2 = (1, N = 245) = 26.1 p = 0.002$  and in provocative, scantily clad outfits,  $X^2 = (1, N = 245) = 91.6 p = 0.000$  when compared to male athletes (see **Figure 1**). In this instance, we found a significant relationship between gender and the provocative dress worn by athletes on the covers of sports



**Figure 1.** Sample sport magazine cover photographs of male and female athletes.

magazines. This finding supports the hypothesis that female athletes are objectified or at least treated in sexualized ways when compared to poses depicted by male athletes.

Photographs published on the cover of ESPN and Sports Illustrated covers published from 2012 through 2016 found that only 18.8% ( $n = 24$ ) of the covers featured a female athlete on the cover, and only 6 featured a female athlete of color.

## 5. Discussion

According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation, *Sports Illustrated* reaches over 4 million readers while *ESPN the Magazine* reaches close to 3 million subscribers (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2016). The reach of these magazines alone can indicate a powerful impact their images and content have on its subscribers. Mass communication, communication, sports psychologists, sociologists and others interested in media effects recognize that these images have a global reach. As this content analysis has documented, both *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* continue to emphasize male athletes and male sports while showcasing female athletes in more sexual and provocative portrayals, emphasizing their subordination and inferiority as athletes. This is an important implication for media: if the role of journalism and its media is to serve, reflect and shape our understanding of the world around us (see Kane, 1998), then we can argue that these images enhance and support attitudes and values that our society hold about male and female athletes, their role, and their “place” in our

culture.

Data obtained in this study demonstrates that female athletes continue to receive strikingly less coverage than male athletes (Koivula, 1999; Leath & Lumpkin, 1992). The main objective of the current study was to determine if there has been a market shift in showing female athletes picture on the covers of sports magazines. In terms of depictions of women on magazine covers, nothing has changed in the portrayals since 2004. 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.

### 5.1. Study Limitations

The results should not be overgeneralized due to other factors that may have contributed to the findings, such as sample size. The relatively small sample size may be somewhat of a limitation to this study. The fact that 245 covers were found with individual athletes on them, future research might try to include a larger sample including Internet images found on landing pages of traditional mainstream sports media. This may also eliminate categories such as race of the athlete that proved to be either non-existent or occurred sparingly. A larger

sample could be drawn to include a more diverse group of sports.

We did not code the content of the feature articles found on the covers of the magazines. It is possible that in coding the content of feature articles, we may have uncovered if the image found on the cover was unrelated to the feature story. In other words, to what extent will cover photos use a “sex sells” strategy in order to grab reader attention only to have the article focus on the female athlete’s training and athletic accomplishments? Future research could build on this study by coding poses of the athletes and themes found in the feature articles about the featured athlete. This line of research could be used to determine if the information written about an athlete is personal or factual.

While this study helped to provide a better understanding of the messages sent by photographs on magazine covers, it did not examine the effect of that exposure, as content analyses cannot predict how the audiences interact with the images being analyzed. Studying the effects of exposure to these covers will provide information that a content analysis lacks such as eye gaze, response and reaction times, and how long participants remain engaged with images on the covers. This information could help draw broader connections between the analyzed content and readers.

## **5.2. Future Directions in Media Effects Research**

Others building on this type of research should plan a study that seeks to determine the effects of long-term exposure to non-lean sports female athletes and involvement and interest in female sports. Future research in this area might also determine changes in perceptions of female athletes and the sports they participate in by showcasing their beauty and that beauty can be associated with non-lean sport female athletes (e.g. bodybuilders/fitness competitors, basketball players), not just lean-sport athletes (e.g. gymnasts). It is possible that these images and consumption of these images on a regular basis can help young women (and men) to see that women of all shapes and sizes not only can be successful athletes, but beautiful no matter their shape, muscularity, and/or size. Media images that portray these images can begin to shift the focus away from how an athlete looks to what she can accomplish.

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?

## 6. Conclusions

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 researchers who study 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 considering depictions of female athletes are still significantly different than their male counterparts on the covers of magazines. Though the data in the present study does not offer “new,” innovative, or shocking evidence, that data that is provided shows that 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.

In this day and time, findings obtained 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 other academic scholars in recent years, we must consider the possible negative effects these images of female athletes have had on how we, as a society, view women’s sports. Do female athletes have to sacrifice dignity for publicity? This study may be used to explain why highly successful female athletes often feel they must deny dignity and succumb to the pressures to engage in our culture’s pressure to “act like a woman” and self-objectify by allowing portraits on covers that show them in sexual poses. It is time that female athletes start feeling empowered to wear their athletic uniform in lieu of wearing bikinis and slinky dresses in order to obtain celebrity and publicity. Female athletes and media we must start sacrificing publicity for female dignity!

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