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Female Bodies on Display

Attitudes Regarding Female Athlete Photos in *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue and *ESPN:* *The Magazine's* Body Issue

RACHAEL R. SMALLWOOD, NATALIE A. BROWN,
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While a male athlete's athletic prowess is rarely questioned, with accomplishments leading to celebrity status, female athletes seeking the same celebrity status find the publicity avenues to be quite different. Some female athletes are respected as high-achieving athletes, but the majority of female athletes reside at the margins of sports media, causing them to explore other outlets for publicity. Female athletes and hypersexuality has been a topic of great debate among researchers, and many believe that sex does not sell women's sports.

This study quantified perceptions of female athlete pictorials in *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue and *ESPN: The Magazine's* Body Issue, specifically examining presumed sexuality and athleticism.

While there has been little empirical research to measure audience responses toward female athlete hypersexuality, such a comparison is important not only for the focus on survey data but also to observe differences in the content of the two publications. While the *SI* issue features highly sexualized poses of female athletes alongside bathing suit models, *ESPN* adopts a different approach, highlighting athletic bodies of all shapes and sizes and from both genders—without accompanying models, yet in nude form.

Respondents were shown twelve pictures of female athletes, six from *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue and six from *ESPN: The Magazine's* Body Issue. Results from the 221 respondents indicated that while *SI* pictures were more likely to receive high ratings for femininity and sexuality, *ESPN* pictures yielded higher scores for athleticism and muscularity. Many factors were positively correlated, revealing that sex might just sell women's sports and calling for modifications to previous literature.

Female Bodies on Display: Attitudes Regarding Female Athlete Photos in *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue and *ESPN: The Magazine's* Body Issue

For decades, a perceived dichotomy existed for women as they could be considered feminine, glamorous, attractive, and sexy—or, conversely, they could be considered athletic. The tacit belief was that they could be one but not both (Duquin, 1988). Given the social construction of femininity (Bordo, 1993), athletic women generally adhere to cultural ideals for a woman's appearance as they seek recognition and social acceptance. In the 1990s and beyond, men began to redefine the expectations of the female athlete, frequently viewing her as more sexy and romantic rather than overtly masculine (Brunet, 2010). However, this dichotomy shift toward women athletes being seen as more sexual and feminine came at the expense of perceptions regarding overall athletic credibility and prowess.

Many female athletes found (and continue to find) they can gain more media exposure if they "sell out" to mainstream media by posing for a magazine highlighting attributes other than their sporting skills. Volleyball's Gabrielle Reece, high jumper Amy Acuff, and swimmer Amanda Beard are just three examples of female athletes who have posed for *Playboy* magazine, creating controversy regarding their motives for being involved in a hypersexual publication. Such discussions in modern circles could be termed a form of "Danica Patrick effect," when a female athlete attempts to be both a sex symbol and respected athlete simultaneously, presumably in equal measure (Simmers, Damron-Martinez, & Haytko, 2009), finding that the sexualized image is what resonates more with the general public.

While a male athlete's athletic prowess is rarely questioned, with accomplishments leading to celebrity status, female athletes seeking the same celebrity status find the publicity avenues to be quite different. Some athletes are able to be respected both as high-achieving athletes and as women who are considered attractive to the masses (consider Serena Williams). However, the majority of female athletes reside at the margins of sports media and are troublingly viewed as merely famous people who happen to play sports because of the way the media brands them for their attractive or sexualized look. Kane (2011) argues that these female athletes are not building credibility for women's sport but are only closing the gap between being a "female" athlete and being labeled as another pretty face. She also acknowledges the large collection of empirical evidence suggesting that female athletes are more likely to be depicted in manners emphasizing their femininity over athletic prowess by hypersexualized media images.

Analyses of sports-magazine photographic content aids the discussion of media coverage regarding sports literature (e.g., Davis, 1997; Kim, Sagas, & Walker, 2010); however, little empirical research has moved beyond content analytic stages to measure audience responses to offerings such as *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue and *ESPN: The Magazine's* Body Issue. Specific to *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue, Kim, Sagas, and Walker (2010) used content analysis to find that “female athletes had more focus on their appearance, while their athletic achievements were trivialized” (p. 12). The coverage of female athletes generally consists of a focus on appearance and personal life, and often shows these female athletes in an inactive or glamorous pose, creating a climate of hegemonic masculinity that diminishes women (Davis, 1997; Weber & Carini, 2013). These content-related findings warrant the necessity of survey research to explore audience perceptions regarding mediated portrayals of female athletes and to query the relationships that exist among the variables identified by scholars within sports-media offerings.

While previous content analysis research provides a valuable understanding of female athlete media portrayals in terms of variables such as sex appeal, athleticism, and femininity, these studies cannot reveal how audiences actually comprehend any coded differences. Thus, this study builds upon previous content analytic work by exploring how audiences perceive differences between two media offerings featuring female athletes: *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue and *ESPN: The Magazine's* Body Issue. A comparison of attitudes is not only important for highlighting survey data but also because each magazine approaches hypersexuality through different tactics. The *SI* issue features highly sexualized poses of female athletes alongside bathing suit models, while the *ESPN* special issue seeks to highlight the bodies of both men and women athletes of all shapes and sizes—without accompanying models, yet in nude form.

Ideals of hegemonic femininity create problematic perceptions for female athletes as they negotiate performance (Krane, 2001). Female athletes receive significantly less coverage than male athletes in both print and broadcast media (Kian, Vincent, & Mondello, 2008; Kim et al., 2010). Based on previous research by Lynn, Hardin, and Walsdorf (2004), Kane, LaVoi, and Fink (2013) acknowledge that media typically overlook the effect of individual values and beliefs with regard to perceptions of hypersexualized female athletes. They also suggest that female athletes and the media do not usually account for audience response to and interpretation of the messages presented. Therefore, what a female athlete possibly intends for professional benefit or gain could be seen as another demerit for

female athletes and true athletic ability. As such, a comparison of audience response to the women in the two photographic offerings is useful to show potential ramifications for female athletes who are marketed as sex symbols, even if they rose to prominence because of athletic skill. This study examines how sex appeal plays into the brand of a female athlete in a positive or negative manner and whether sex actually does sell women's sport to the detriment of women's athletic credibility.

Related Literature

Theoretical Overview

There are differing schools of thought relating to the athletic-or-attractive binary regarding women in sport. Foucault's (1990) theory of reverse discourse helps to advance the concept of women specifically regarding perceptions of visual representation in sport, because it posits that groups aiming to free themselves from oppression may employ the same discourse for a different approach. Thus, Foucault's reverse discourse encourages individuals to "ask new questions, think differently and allow for the creation of new understandings and possibilities" with regard to audience perceptions (Pringle, 2005, p. 273), which is one of the foundational questions within the mixed-messages and intentions that surround photographic media portrayals of women athletes. These new possibilities are witnessed in Foucault's research as he uses the body in a fundamental theme for positioning discourse and power (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Pringle, 2005).

The theory of reverse discourse argues that some of the actions of the oppressed group, in this case the female athlete, work to qualify themselves by using the trait which is said to cause the oppression—being feminine—in order to gain power. Foucault provides a unique lens for examining this case querying whether any (and all) publicity is good publicity. Increased media coverage of female athletes (presumably positive) suggests impact on perceptions of sexualization regarding female athletes that could result in a negative manner by marginalizing their achievements. But according to the theory of reverse discourse, what appears to be oppression to some may actually serve as a means of power to the women involved—suggesting that women use their feminine looks to successfully "manipulate a power source" (Kenen, 1987). According to Kane et al. (2013), a number of elite female athletes indicate that they want—and even possibly feel obligated—to create awareness and increase support for

their sport. Female athletes find that one of the most lucrative ways in which they can market themselves, attract corporate sponsors, and gain fan interest is by presenting or selling a hypersexualized image (Kane & Maxwell, 2011).

Scholars (see Kane, 2011; Kim et al., 2010; Knight & Giuliano, 2001) have discussed the repercussions of media sexualization of women's athletic success through uberfeminine or hypersexualized images. Kane et al. (2013) suggest that according to recent studies (Antil, Burton, & Robinson, 2012; Kane & Maxwell, 2011), these hypersexualized images "do little to increase interest in and respect for women's sports" (p. 7); therefore, the "brand" of the female athlete walks a fine line in magazines such as *ESPN: The Magazine's Body Issue* and the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*. While the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* predominantly features models over athletes, it typically offers several photos of female athletes in swim attire—which represents heavy coverage of women athletes in a magazine that recently averaged one non-swimsuit cover of a female athlete per year (Weber & Carini, 2013). In contrast, *ESPN: The Magazine's Body Issue* features female athletes on display, yet without the perceived hypersexualized model-oriented context.

Nonetheless, determining whether this relationship is truly inverse in nature has largely been elusive; to this point, mainly content studies have been conducted with *ESPN: The Magazine's Body Issue* and the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* (Daddario, 1992; Kim et al., 2010) concerning mediated hypersexuality and female athletes. Because of this lack of empirical evidence outside the content realm, researchers are only able to suggest that hypersexualization diminishes perceptions of female athleticism, underscoring the need for a survey-based approach that incorporates content-based studies to undergird and hypothesize about the perceived inverse relationship.

Women in the Media

Slenderness has been associated with femininity and reduced power, and muscularity has symbolized strength, control, and masculinity (Bordo, 1990). In Western society, women feel tremendous pressure to be thin. The average American woman is 5 ft. 4 in. tall and weighs 165 pounds, whereas the average Miss America winner is 5 ft. 7 in. and weighs 121 pounds (Martin, 2010). Additionally, the average BMI of Miss America winners has shown a decrease from approximately 22 in the 1920s to 16.9 in recent years. The World Health Organization identifies a normal BMI as one falling be-

tween 18.5 and 24.9 (Martin, 2010). Therefore, it is not surprising that most women report being at least moderately dissatisfied with some aspect of their body (Lin & Kulik, 2002; Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985). Multiple studies find that women with a larger than average body shape are not often found in the media or are portrayed in a negative manner (Greenberg, Eastin, Hofschire, Lachlan, & Brownell, 2003; Schwartz & Brownell, 2004; Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, & Kelly, 1986), and it is the projection of these selective media images that encourage thinness as an important attribute in sociocultural attractiveness norms. Scholarship primarily attributes this societal shift toward thin-figured women to the media's promotion of thin-ideals (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Holmstrom, 2004). Previous research suggests that sports media should generally be considered thin-ideal media because of the focus placed on the lean bodies of many athletes. (Bissell & Zhou, 2004).

Women in Sports Media

Sports are suggested to be a representation of societal influences of the surrounding culture and are, therefore, influenced by sociocultural norms governing gender order and social interaction (Birrell & Cole, 1990; Kane & Snyder, 1989). Based on cultural influences, there are certain behaviors that are traditionally related to males or females. Historically, sport has been a male association that is domineered by masculinity in nearly every society in the world (Kane & Snyder, 1989), resulting in frequent gender stereotyping when conveyed within sports media (Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Kane, LaVoi, & Fink, 2013). For instance, research has shown that when females appear in sports news, they are usually depicted in feminine-stereotyped roles (Davis, 1997; Kane et al., 2013). This issue of female sport media coverage is not new to literature; Hargreaves (1994) suggested that media outlets portray to the public a "very limited and partial view because attention is given almost exclusively to top-level, competitive and 'feminine-appropriate' events, or to the sporting events or aspects of the lives of sportswomen that are deemed to be unusual, spectacular, controversial or newsworthy" (p. 193). Current research by Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum (2013) suggests that women's sports coverage has actually lost ground, thus creating a greater "need" for female athletes to do something that is deemed controversial or newsworthy in order to obtain media attention.

Orbach (1993) argues that women have been taught and trained from an early age to view their bodies as commodities; it is the usage of that "com-

modity” permeating sports media that causes much attention and controversy for female athletes. Professional athletes are now seen adorning the covers of sport-related magazines in poses that have created the argument for negative hypersexuality. Messner (2002) suggests that the media positions sport in a way that makes female athletic achievements seem trivial, while Kane et al. (2013) suggest that not only is the hypersexualization of female athletes “ineffective,” but it is also “counterproductive” (p. 25).

Kim et al. (2010) found that the advertising and marketing of female athletes in sports print media such as *Sports Illustrated* plays a crucial role in branding an athlete’s mediated image because of the large influence media has on determining society’s attitudes toward athletes and sport. If the media prefers that female athletes portray themselves in a “controversial” manner to be deemed “newsworthy,” then a female athlete must make a conscious decision regarding how she will proceed with the branding aspect of media attention to garner the desired publicity for her brand. ESPN’s website claims that the Body Issue magazine is a celebration of the athletic body; the magazine considers its photographs to be art that honors athletes of all shapes, sizes, genders, and race. However, such representations still potentially connect to a perceived double standard because of the preconceived notions the reader may bring to consuming the magazine. While one sees an advertisement of a male athlete in his underwear and never questions his athletic ability, he or she may witness a female athlete in a swimsuit magazine and conclude that she is choosing modeling over being a serious athlete.

The Sexualized-or-Athleticized Perceived Dichotomy

Traditional images of sport are seen as incompatible with traditional roles for women (Miller & Levy, 1996). Duquin (1988) explains that being feminine is incompatible with the “sado-asceticism” of aggressive sports, suggesting “females are expected to keep their feminine sympathies and values off the sporting field” (p. 37). Women’s participation in sport has increased dramatically in the last three decades. But certain sports are still perceived as masculine and others as feminine (Hardin & Greer, 2009; Koivula, 2001). Sports have been stereotyped as either gender neutral (e.g., tennis), feminine (e.g., gymnastics), or masculine (e.g., football) based on society’s beliefs for proper male and female activity (Hardin & Greer, 2009; Koivula, 1995). Feminine sports portray women in societal stereotyped roles—sports in which grace and beauty are foundational elements (Koivula, 2001). Koivula (2001) suggests that appearance and attrac-



tiveness in sport also are strongly related to perceived femininity. Feminine sports are not considered aggressive and are said to provide visual pleasure (Young, 1995), whereas masculine sports have been suggested as aggressive and competitive, showing masculinity through muscularity and physical strength (Hardin & Greer, 2009). But society is continually changing with regard to cultural norms, which allows women to harness the opportunity and redefine what it means to be both female and athletic (Griffin, 1998).

Although it is now much more acceptable for a woman to be known as a successful athlete, it is imperative that she remain properly feminine (Theberge, 2000). Royce, Gebelt, and Duff (2003) suggest that it is frequently possible for a female athlete to be seen as both feminine and athletic, because the issue of her femininity is often separated from the issue of her role as an athlete. As the sociocultural definition of females and athletes do not readily mix, females are forced to identify with two incompatible roles: the feminine role and the athletic role (Royce, Gebelt, & Duff, 2003). These roles can lead female athletes to believe that they must justify, or apologetically defend, their positions in each role for societal purposes.

The concept of the apologetic defense first appeared in sociological research in the 1970s (Del Rey, 1978; Felshin, 1974), described as a coping mechanism allowing a woman to compensate for the perceived masculine effect of participating in sport by exaggerating her femininity. This defense method illustrates one way that female athletes remind and convince society that they are feminine through outward appearances such as hairstyles, clothing, jewelry, and heterosexual relationships. Women who employ this strategy can be described as having a “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” personality, because they are seen as masculine during their athletic participation but feminine away from competition (Crosset, 1995). Research shows that it is not athletics specifically but rather the physique and self-presentation that may affect perceptions of femininity (Duff, Hong, & Royce, 1999; Krane, 2001). Scholars (see Deaux, 1992; Kane et al., 2013) have studied the ability of a female athlete to engage in highly competitive sports, as long as she is not too muscular, without losing the public perception that she is also feminine.

Research Questions

Previous literature suggests that, with regard to sports media, the marketability of female athletes lies in their sexuality rather than their athleticism, presenting the following research questions:



- RQ₁: Are female athletes pictured in *Sports Illustrated*'s Swimsuit Issue and *ESPN: The Magazine*'s Body Issue more likely to be viewed by the public as sexualized models or professional athletes?
- RQ₂: Will perceptions of pictured athletes differ by gender of respondent?
- RQ₃: Are depicted female athletes perceived as displaying their sexuality to gain celebrity for themselves and/or their sport?
- RQ₄: Will perceptions of athletic competence differ between photographs from *Sports Illustrated*'s Swimsuit Issue and *ESPN: The Magazine*'s Body Issue?
- RQ₅: Does a relationship exist among participants' personal gain, professional gain, athleticism, model, sexuality, femininity, and muscularity scores that were attributed to the *Sports Illustrated*'s Swimsuit Issue and *ESPN: The Magazine*'s Body Issue?

Methods

The researchers surveyed 221 total participants from a large, Southeastern university, of which 37% were male and 63% were female. Because of differing magazine sample sizes, three photos of female athletes were taken from *Sports Illustrated*'s 2010 Swimsuit Issue, three more were taken from the 2011 Swimsuit Issue, and six photos were taken from *ESPN: The Magazine*'s 2011 Body Issue. These 12 pictures were inserted into a survey format with all logos or other identifiers to *SI* or *ESPN: The Magazine* removed. A complete list of URLs for all pictures used in this study can be found in Appendix A.

Participants answered 12 Likert items for each photo. Thus, with 12 items for each of the 12 photos, 144 items were answered, along with five demographic questions, which provided a total of 149 questions in the complete survey. The 12 questions for each photo were located below the picture, and participants could spend as much time as needed to answer the questions. The survey format ensured that (a) all respondents viewed each picture in the same manner and (b) correlative results between exposure to photographic content and public attitudes were achieved. A portion of the scales listed on the survey are taken from Bissell (2004), while a few newly constructed items were added to the previously designed scales to measure the phenomena of these new research questions regarding public opinion of hypersexualized female athletes.

Participants completed 5-point Likert scales related to each athlete picture on the following variables: athleticism, model, femininity, sexuality, muscularity, professional gain, and personal gain. To measure athleticism, statements such as “This woman looks like an athlete” and “I believe this woman is an athlete” were used. To measure whether these women were seen as models, statements like “This woman looks like a supermodel” and “I believe this woman is a supermodel” were used. A complete list of all items included in the questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

For student convenience and privacy, the survey was administered online. To protect the anonymity of each student, participant names were disassociated from the survey and were only used for awarding class credit for participation. No identifiers were present on the survey to link the students back to their responses; ethnicity and gender were recorded on a voluntary basis. Ratings were entered and divided by the two magazines used for sampling: *Sports Illustrated*’s Swimsuit Issue and *ESPN: The Magazine*’s Body Issue. SPSS Statistics 18.0 was used to analyze the data with all data entered in aggregate form, and significant findings were determined using *t*-test comparisons.

Results

RQ₁ sought to determine if respondents viewing female athletes from *Sports Illustrated*’s Swimsuit Issue and *ESPN: The Magazine*’s Body Issue were more likely to regard them as sexualized models or professional athletes. Table 1 reveals mean differences in how different gendered participants rated each picture in terms of athleticism, sexuality, femininity, and model.

A paired samples *t* test showed that a significant difference existed in how participants viewed the women who posed in these magazines as being either athletes or models ($t(172) = -5.27, p < .001$), as participants were more likely to view these women as athletic ($M = 3.46, SD = .52$) rather than as models ($M = 3.22, SD = .59$). Thus, the first research question can be answered in that women athletes were more likely to be viewed as athletes than as models. Yet both means skewed toward agreement on the delineated measure items by scoring higher than the neutral item (3), suggesting that participants did, to some extent, agree with the use of both terms (“athlete” and “model”) as accurate descriptors of the women.

To answer the second research question, independent samples *t* tests were run on athletic and model scores to determine gender differences. Results showed that males ($M = 3.62, SD = .59$) scored the women in the magazines as being more “athletic” than females ($M = 3.39, SD = .46$), ($t(190)$

TABLE 1. Independent Samples Test for Perceptions of Model vs. Athlete

	TENDER	MEAN	STD. DEV.	SIGNIFICANCE	DEGREES OF FREEDOM
Athleticism	Male	3.62	.59	.053	190
	Female	3.39	.46		
Sexuality	Male	3.60	.61	.025	197
	Female	3.36	.47		
Femininity	Male	3.99	.55	.197	210
	Female	3.89	.56		
Model	Male	3.39	.61	.001	190
	Female	3.10	.55		

Note: Uses 5-point Likert scale, 5 meaning strong agreement.

= 2.87, $p = .005$). Moreover, results also showed that males ($M = 3.39$, $SD = .61$) had a higher perception of the female athletes as a “model” than did females ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .55$), ($t(190) = 3.31$, $p = .001$). In terms of sexuality ($t(197) = 2.87$, $p = .005$), males ($M = 3.60$, $SD = .61$) tended to rate the pictures as more sexual than the females in the sample ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .47$). Consequently, the second research question was answered in that the women who posed in *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN: The Magazine* were uniformly seen as being athletes more than models, with agreement on all sets of items more likely to occur among males than females.

RQ₃ built on the first two research questions, seeking to determine the extent to which these photographed female athletes were perceived as someone displaying their sexuality to gain celebrity. A two-tailed paired samples t test was conducted to determine if participants felt that the athletes and models that posed for the pictures used in the study did so for personal or professional gain. Results showed a significant difference between scores of professional and personal gain ($t(203) = -4.55$, $p < .001$), as participants felt that these athletes and models were likely posing for professional gain ($M = 3.75$, $SD = .61$) more so than personal gain ($M = 3.76$, $SD = .61$). While each variable was tested individually, the results do not imply that these two measures have an inherently negative correlation. In fact, personal gain could signify professional gain (and vice versa) for these female athletes. However, for the purpose of this study, participants were asked to define their perception of the images based on individual opinion regarding personal or professional promotion. No significant differences were found on these items regarding the gender of the respondent. These

TABLE 2. Intermagazine Perceptions of Athletic Competence between *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue and *ESPN: The Magazine* Body Issue

	MAGAZINE	SIGNIFICANCE	MEAN	STD. DEVIATION	N
Athleticism	<i>Sports Illustrated</i>	.001	2.91	.770	208
	<i>ESPN: The Magazine</i>		4.04	.463	197
Femininity	<i>Sports Illustrated</i>	.001	4.04	.499	213
	<i>ESPN: The Magazine</i>		3.33	.647	211
Muscularity	<i>Sports Illustrated</i>	.001	2.84	.760	209
	<i>ESPN: The Magazine</i>		4.11	.473	214
Sexuality	<i>Sports Illustrated</i>	.001	4.12	.553	214
	<i>ESPN: The Magazine</i>		3.74	.698	215
Model	<i>Sports Illustrated</i>	.001	3.55	.696	192
	<i>ESPN: The Magazine</i>		2.88	.652	192

Note: Uses 5-point Likert scale, 5 meaning strong agreement.

results answer RQ₃, as women posing for pictures in *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN: The Magazine* were seen as doing so for professional gain.

RQ₄ was the cumulative primary focus of this study, using these base-line differences but allowing for cross-magazine comparisons, since the two magazines clearly aim to depict female athletes in different manners. Data confirmed clear and distinct separation of magazine image perspectives, particularly with regard to a major difference in perceived athletic competence. Paired samples *t* tests were run to test for differences in *Sports Illustrated*'s and *ESPN: The Magazine*'s pictures based on the following items: athleticism, femininity, sexuality, muscularity, and model. As Table 2 shows, significant differences were found between the magazines in every category.

With respect to the scores of athleticism ($t(191) = 21.56, p = .001$), *ESPN: The Magazine*'s ($M = 4.04, SD = .463$) pictures were scored significantly higher than *Sports Illustrated*'s ($M = 2.91, SD = .770$). In terms of femininity, ($t(206) = -16.95, p = .001$), *Sports Illustrated*'s ($M = 4.04, SD = .499$) pictures were scored as being higher than *ESPN: The Magazine*'s ($M = 3.33, SD = .647$). With respect to the scores of muscularity ($t(206) = -25.62, p = .001$), *ESPN: The Magazine*'s ($M = 4.11, SD = .473$) pictures were scored significantly higher than *Sports Illustrated*'s ($M = 2.84, SD = .760$). In terms of sexuality ($t(211) = -9.62, p = .001$), *Sports Illustrated*'s ($M = 4.12, SD = .553$) pictures were scored as being higher than *ESPN: The Magazine*'s ($M = 3.74, SD = .698$). In terms of the women who posed for the magazines looking like models ($t(191) =$

TABLE 3. Pearson Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviation for Scores on Athletic Competence

	PERSONAL GAIN	PROFESSIONAL GAIN	ATHLETIC	MODEL	SEXUALITY	FEMININITY	MUSCULARITY
Personal Gain	1.00						
Professional Gain	.651**	1.00					
Athletic	.260**	.339**	1.00				
Model	.374**	.424**	.415**	1.00			
Sexuality	.279**	.357**	.984**	.419**	1.00		
Femininity	.451**	.539**	.286**	.480**	.275**	1.00	
Muscularity	.264**	.303**	.811**	.386**	.792**	.270**	1.00
Mean	3.59	3.76	3.47	3.21	3.45	3.93	3.48
SD	.615	.60	.525	.589	.60	.558	.525

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed).

-.14.19, $p = .001$), *Sports Illustrated's* ($M = 3.55$, $SD = .696$) pictures were scored as being higher than *ESPN: The Magazine's* ($M = 2.88$, $SD = .652$). In sum, RQ_4 is answered in that athletes in *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue were more likely to be viewed as feminine, sexualized, and model-like, while *ESPN: The Magazine's* depictions were more likely to feature female athletes regarded as athletic and muscular, clearly showing a divide between athleticism and femininity.

RQ_5 questioned whether this divide could be accounted for by mere magazine differences or whether these divides represent either/or thinking. A Pearson r correlation was run to determine the extent of relationships between the factors of personal gain, professional gain, athletic, model, sexuality, femininity, and muscularity.

As seen in Table 3, significant correlations were uncovered among all scores. More specifically, strong positive correlations existed between athletic and muscularity scores ($r = .811$, $p < .001$) and between athletic and sexuality scores ($r = .984$, $p < .001$). A strong positive correlation was also observed between muscularity and sexuality scores ($r = .792$, $p < .001$). Overall, RQ_5 was answered in the many observed associations between scores of athletic competence for *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN: The Magazine*, with nuance provided in that sexuality was correlated with the perceived other side of the spectrum: athleticism and muscularity.

Discussion

Kane (2011) has long been a proponent for female athletes and athletic ability, believing that the composite work of many content analyses suggests that “sex sells sex, not women’s sports” (p. 28). However, this empirical study suggests that although sex does sell sex, it could also sell women’s sports. In some ways, results indicate there is a clear division between magazines regarding femininity and sexual attractiveness. However, when taken jointly, correlations reveal more overlap than one would originally surmise.

When attaching such findings to the various forms of first-, second-, and third-wave feminism, the essence of the stimuli in this study seemingly embody the form of lipstick feminism arising from the third-wave in which athletes pose in photos that are sexualized (indeed, sometimes nude); yet they are often shown in powerful, athletic poses in which their athletic form is promoted beyond the mere selling of sex. This appears to happen much more with *ESPN: The Magazine*, with several choices—most notably the intermittent inclusion of sexualized male athletes—resulting in subjects viewing these images much more in line with a serious athlete than a less serious model. This finding is particularly interesting when considering that *ESPN: The Magazine* featured less clothing yet arguably more athletic credibility.

Female athletes purportedly receive more media coverage for “controversial” hypersexualized or nude images (minus strategically placed arms, legs, or hair). However, this study illustrates that with regard to *ESPN: The Magazine’s* Body Issue, these athletes are still seen as athletic, even when in nude form. This finding is possibly due to posing choices that are featured in *ESPN: The Magazine*. The poses in this magazine often amplified the athlete’s body and muscles, and they were shown in more athletic poses. Thus, it should come as no surprise that photos in *ESPN: The Magazine* rated higher in terms of seeming more athletic and muscular.

Audiences consider images taken from *Sports Illustrated’s* Swimsuit Issue to be less athletic and muscular but more feminine, sexual, and model-like, as reported in Table 2. Thus, one takeaway from the study regarding audience perception is that the presence or absence of clothing presented in specific poses plays a seemingly small role in determining the “pretty vs. the powerful” (Jones, Murrell, & Jackson, 1999, p. 183). Against the perceived dichotomy for societal feminine standards, Griffin (1998) suggests that sport provides women with the opportunity to redefine what it means to be both feminine and athletic. This research reinforces that

redefinition. While *ESPN: The Magazine* shows athletes without clothing, models in *Sports Illustrated* are clothed. Despite this difference, participants report *Sports Illustrated*'s photos as being more sexual in nature. Results suggest that the posing of the women, rather than her clothing, determines whether audiences will perceive the pictures as being sexual and feminine or athletic in nature.

From a theoretical perspective (and taking cue from Foucault), audiences could perceive female athletes as acting out roles that seek to dismiss oppression by using female genetic gifts to successfully manipulate the power source. Decades ago, this could be viewed as fighting the oppressive notion of being merely attractive but not athletic; as found in this study, female athletes are able to dispel this notion, making a visual argument for being both. By using this athletic platform, female athletes are able to gain fame for being perceived as hypersexual and feminine. Interestingly, though, respondents still viewed these women as athletic as long as the athlete is depicted in images showing femininity and muscle tone. The photographs taken from *ESPN: The Magazine*'s Body Issue depict female athletes meeting this criterion. However, when the muscle tone and athleticism is taken from the pictures, as in *Sports Illustrated*'s Swimsuit Issue, the women are considered softened and the athletic perception is not reported to be as high.

As mentioned previously, *ESPN: The Magazine*'s Body Issue claims to be a celebration of the athletic body. It considers the photographs to be art that honors athletes of all shapes, sizes, genders, and race. And although their photographs of female athletes are sexual in nature, this empirical research suggests that public perceptions of *ESPN: The Magazine*'s Body Issue are that female athletes are athletic, sexy, and feminine. There was not a significant difference between male and female participants when gauging femininity, but the reported mean of 3.93 does show that on a 5-point scale, these participants view the women in these photographs as slightly more feminine. Society's opinion of female athletes is changing and formed through media cultivation to see these "females" as the new reality for athletes. Seeing these women as feminine, sexy, and athletic, in one person, means that the issue of "selling out" is declining and that, when shown with some semblance of muscularity and athleticism, even if hypersexualized, society is learning to accept these women for exactly what they are selling: the female athlete.

Given the findings and limitations of this study, suggestions for future research are in the area of reason and justification for sexual image as well as future possibilities to enhance generalizability. More information is necessary to determine the reasons female athletes pose for images

such as the ones included with this study. Additionally, future research should examine the different levels of muscularity contrasted with selected poses in hypersexualized photographs that help to distinguish a female as athletic. Finally, while this study does provide useful insights regarding audience perceptions of mediated portrayals of female athletes, it cannot establish causal relationships between variables. Thus, future research should consider adopting experimental designs in which pretested traits can be manipulated and tested to further explore whether relationships between variables exist and whether those relationships are positive or negative in nature. Understanding that the study is limited by the selected sample, it would be helpful for future research to extend beyond a college population. Opening the study for a larger sample population would allow for greater determination as to whether the differences found within this study are specific to a certain demographic or more typical of larger portions of the population.

Conclusion

There has been debate regarding the use of overt sexuality by female athletes to positively gain professional athletic notoriety. Discussions of sexuality and athleticism have generally shown that correlation between the two is scarce and that selling sex as a means of selling sport is not palatable in women's athletics. This study furthered research in the area of perceptions regarding female athleticism and sexuality, determining the relationship between the two ends of a presumably wide continuum. Finding that muscularity and muscle tone serve as mediators for society's perceptions of sexuality, the female athletes portrayed in this study were found to be "sexy"—and yet also were still found to be athletic. Additionally, subjects perceived these female athletes to be posing as a means of promotion or gain for their profession or career more than for personal advancement, proffering that perceptions of professional gain were potentially guided by opinions regarding muscularity and perceived athleticism. Moreover, if a hypersexualized female athlete is presented with muscularity or muscle tone, this study suggests society may take notice. Good or bad, it garners publicity and suggests that if sex does sell, it might *also* sell women's sports.

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Appendix A: URL List of Survey Photographs

These twelve photographs were associated by number with the corresponding survey questions described in Appendix B.

1. Gretchen Bleiler. Photograph by Francesco Carrozzini for *ESPN: The Magazine's Body Issue* (2011). http://espn.go.com/espn/photos/gallery/_/id/7030506/image/3/gretchen-bleiler-bodies-want-2011
2. Kim Glass. Photograph by Stephan Wurth for *Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Issue* (2011). http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/swimsuit/modelfeatured/kim_glass/2011/model/16/38/index.htm
3. Alicia Sacramone. Photograph by Francesco Carrozzini for *ESPN: The Magazine's Body Issue* (2011). http://espn.go.com/espn/photos/gallery/_/id/7030506/image/10/alicia-sacramone-bodies-want-2011
4. Clair Bidez. Photograph by Warwick Saint for *Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Issue* (2010). http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/swimsuit/modelfeatured/clair_bidez/2010/winter_stars/21/45/index.htm
5. Stephanie Gilmore. Photograph by Luis Sanchis for *ESPN: The Magazine's Body Issue* (2011). http://espn.go.com/espn/photos/gallery/_/id/7030506/image/6/stephanie-gilmore-bodies-want-2011
6. Bruna Schmitz. Photograph by Stephan Wurth for *Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Issue* (2011). http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/swimsuit/modelfeatured/bruna_schmitz/2011/model/8/38/index.htm
7. Sylvia Fowles. Photograph by Jeff Riedel for *ESPN: The Magazine's Body Issue* (2011). http://espn.go.com/espn/photos/gallery/_/id/7030506/image/5/sylvia-fowles-bodies-want-2011
8. Lindsey Vonn. Photograph by Warwick Saint for *Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Issue* (2010). http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/swimsuit/modelfeatured/lindsey_vonn/2010/winter_stars/7/45/index.htm
9. Hope Solo. Photograph by Luis Sanchis for *ESPN: The Magazine's Body Issue* (2011). http://espn.go.com/espnw/photos/gallery/_/id/7055718/image/1/body-issue-outtakes-gallery

10. Leryn Franco. Photograph by Stephan Wurth for *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue (2011). http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/swimsuit/modelfeatured/leryn_franco/2011/model/41/56/index.htm
11. Julie Chu. Photograph by Alex Cayley for *ESPN: The Magazine's* Body Issue (2011). http://espn.go.com/espn/photos/gallery/_/id/7030506/image/4/julie-chu-bodies-want-2011
12. Hannah Teter. Photograph by Warwick Saint for *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue (2010). http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/swimsuit/modelfeatured/hannah_teter/2010/winter_stars/3/45/index.htm

Appendix B: General Survey Questions

The following are questions regarding individual perception of image and female athleticism. After viewing the sample photographs, please read each of the following items and circle the number that best reflects your agreement with the statement for each photograph provided.

	COMPLETELY DISAGREE		NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE		COMPLETELY AGREE
	1	2	3	4	5
1. I view this woman as attractive	1	2	3	4	5
2. I view this woman as thin	1	2	3	4	5
3. This woman looks muscular	1	2	3	4	5
4. This woman looks glamorous	1	2	3	4	5
5. This woman looks like a supermodel	1	2	3	4	5
6. This woman looks like an athlete	1	2	3	4	5
7. This woman looks feminine	1	2	3	4	5
8. The photograph of this woman shows sexuality	1	2	3	4	5
9. I believe this woman is an athlete	1	2	3	4	5
10. I believe this woman is a supermodel	1	2	3	4	5
11. I believe this woman has posed for this magazine for personal gain	1	2	3	4	5
12. I believe this woman has posed for this magazine for professional gain for her career	1	2	3	4	5

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