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Impact of professional women athletes' media representations on collegiate women athletes

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Abstract

There is a lack of representation of women athletes from professional to collegiate sports in U.S. media. For example, Fink (2015) studied the inequities between male and women athletes to understand the harmful nature of the implication of these inequities. Other social constructs arise with the objectification of women athletes. Harrison and Fredrickson (2013) found a connection between aging of adolescent girls to women and an increase of self-objectification. They explained their results using Objectification Theory, which teaches young women to “regard themselves in an objectified gaze” from adolescence. The purpose of this study was to examine women collegiate athletes’ thoughts and feelings about the ways their elite representatives are presented within sports media. Women collegiate athletes viewed images displaying four different types of identity portrayals, and were then interviewed about their perceptions of the images. Each participant asked to answer five questions, and that data was analyzed using open coding methods.

Keywords

Women athletes, Media representation, Higher education, College

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

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In U.S. consumer media today, there is a noticeable lack of representation for women athletes. It is popularly taken as a given that women athletes have had far less acknowledgment for their athletic abilities and accomplishments during their careers and afterward. Television is still the biggest platform, and sports networks have become a recognizable stage for men and women athletes. Most athletes and commentators presented on these sports networks are men, leaving little to no room for women athletes.

According to J.R. Angelini, "women's sports makes up of about five percent of total televised sports coverage" (2008). Other platforms, such as magazines and social media, have taken part in establishing the popularity of athletes. Studies of this phenomenon largely focus on how these media platforms represent women athletes, including cultivating negative connotations for women athletes by putting them forward more as sex symbols and objects for men—a feature abetted by commentators using biased language towards women athletes.

Language and images in the U.S. public media are more powerful than one presumes them to be. The effects they have can change a person's opinion, especially in the case of sports commentators descriptions of men and women's performance and physique. In reporting on sport, photography tends to depict men as athletically competent while women sexualized. When women have control over these images, they exhibit a kind of dual personalities between their athletic competence and emphasized femininity (Kane et al., 2013).

In light of these conditions, this study thus has two purposes. The first is to examine how the U.S. visual media's representation of women athletes potentially influences collegiate women athletes. By comparison, the second is to determine what collegiate women athletes think and feel about how the media represents professional women.

Methods

Participants. All participants were recruited through email and word-of-mouth. Certain qualifications were required of participants before they could be considered: they had to be a current collegiate women athlete at Pacific University (PU), over the age of eighteen, and participate on one of six pre-determined program types: three team sports (Volleyball, Soccer, Softball), and three individual sports (Tennis, Swimming, Track & Field).

Three successful interviews were completed with women athletes representing Soccer, Volleyball, and Track & Field. Each interview lasted approximately thirty to thirty-five minutes, and were completed at a location convenient to the interviewee. As the project required current collegiate women athletes at PU, most interview sessions were held on campus in an office that maintained some privacy for the interview.

Procedure. Once participants volunteered to be in the study, an interview time slot and a location for the interview were arranged conveniently for the participant. Once the interview sessions had begun, each participant completed an informed consent form. This form gave permission to audio-record the interview and to view the images necessary for the study. Participants completed a background questionnaire that was utilized to understand how long they have played their sport, what year in college they were, if they watch their professional counterparts on television, and so forth. This received Institutional Review Board approval (no. 1523689-1) for interview protocols and images of minor nudity as part of the interview instrument.

Interview protocol. The interview was conducted in a semi-structured format with all interviews being face-to-face, and aware that it could take up to an hour. After being shown four different classified photos of professional

Table 1. Categories of images and exemplar of each for team (soccer) and individual (track & field).

Categories	Team Sport (Soccer)	Individual Sport (Track & Field)
Athletic Competence
Mixed Message
"Classy"
Soft Pornographic

women athletes from their sports, participants were asked the following questions based on a previous study performed by Kane, et al. (2013):

1. Which image best represents how you would like to be portrayed?
2. Which image best represents your sport?
3. Which image best increases interest in your sport?
4. Which image best increases respect for your sport?

We added a questions to this initial list:

5. How do each of these images make you feel about how the media represents your sport?

Data analysis. All three interviews were transcribed, resulting in forty-nine pages; these transcriptions formed the basis of our data analysis. With the qualitative data, the women athletes selected an image or images for each of the four questions listed above and provided reasoning why. Each interview was coded utilizing open-coding to find common themes within all three interviews. After coding and comparing the transcriptions, higher- and lower-order themes emerged. The themes enable us to capture overarching dimensions.

Results

Dimensions. As mentioned, during the interview sessions. All three participants were shown four different images of professional women athletes in their sport and responded to the five questions. The dimensions are the overarching themes found within the coding from the three interviews. Each dimension presented allows our findings for each question to be highlighted with the key patterns which emerged. Five dimensions connected all the interviews.

Images of power/action are essential. The images of women athletes in action were critical in guiding the perceptions of interest and respect in sport. Powerful action photos augmented attitudes with motivation to participate in sport, and boost respect for women athletes. This dimension is equal to a higher-order theme surrounding all the interviews.

There are lower-order related themes expressed in the interviews. All the participants centered their focus on the importance of being in action. They described how an image displaying athletic competence advances interest and respect for their perspective sport while giving the sport a more accurate representation. Interviewee 2 preferred "the action shot because that's the one you're like really in the moment . . . I feel like that one gets the most kind of like respect or like message because you actually get to see the athletes like

participating.” Other lower-order themes make a connection to the accurate portrayal of the sport, displaying the power of women athletes, and motivate younger athletes to try new sports because of the display of the sport and athletic ability.

Dual identity of women athletes. Images of women athletes displaying a mixed message or “classy” representation of themselves reinforced interest and respect for women athletes. *Dual Identity* refers to featuring multiple, supposedly separate, characteristics of athletes, such as “sporty,” “casual,” or “classy.” Dual identity shots featured both personalities of women athletes and the balance they were able to maintain between their varying identities.

The importance of dual identity allows women athletes to present both sides of themselves in both perspectives, and the media has sponsored this aspects of athlete’s lives. A lower-order theme established from the second interview makes the connection of how the media decides to properly display the “classy” identity of the women athlete within the sport: “even though we’re dressed in a nice kind of dress with our hair down and our makeup done and everything, we still have the battle scars of the sport we play” (Interviewee 1). An athlete’s dual identity in relation to gender norms allows the athlete to bounce between their different characteristics or blend them.

Body positivity in sport. Images exhibiting body positivity redefined perceptions of representation and respect for women athletics. First, the “ideal body” reinforced by contemporary U.S. society is attached to physical beauty, and specifically a thin shape body figure. The images provided troubled this social norm when they revealed more of the body of an individual, which some described as “scandalous” or “soft pornographic” representations. Body positivity images enhanced appreciation for women athletes and their body types. Within this dimension, the participants placed importance on body

positivity in response to the soft pornographic image viewed. An admiration for the athlete’s strength and confidence to display her body was repeated by participants. For example, “even within the body issue, it’s, you know, she’s making a statement and she’s, you know, standing up for something that she believes in within her body and within herself” (Interviewee 1). The respect for the confidence of body types among athletes, then represented in the media, allows the viewing audience to have increased respect for women athletes and athletics.

Sexualization of the athletic women body.

Sexualized images of women athletes were presumed to be scandalous or disrespectful, but provoked interest in the sport. Sexual images promoted respect for the sport through them being recognized as powerful and understood to be a marketing ploy. Participants perceived nudity as power, and assisting in the collapsing of social norms around body types. For example, “And I mean they’re all in some way to me like super empowering yes she’s like naked but like that’s not what I’m like thinking about, like she’s like I don’t know she just looks badass” (Interviewee 3).

The sexualization representation of women athletes did construct into our participant’s minds as a selling point for women sports. Also, the participants agreed on the negative effect the media representation of the “ideal body” by re-affirming the social norm of slim athletic bodies. One of the participants felt, however, that they were unaffected by the use of sexualization in the media as they have deep respect and love for their sport based on lived experience.

Choices of the media are powerful. The context in which the images were produced and circulated enhanced the perception of respect and the representation of women athletes for participants, particularly photos dedicated to celebrating women in sport, took gender into consideration, and attributed recognition and noticeability of women

athletes. Within this dimension, the celebrating women in sport is a higher-order theme with multiple lower-order themes for how the participants thought about the media's acknowledgment of women success.

When celebrating women in sport, the participants reflected on how the images of athletic competence and mixed messages show respect for sports accomplishments, the "roughness" of the sport, and brings attention to women athletes' power. One participant even reflected on how they wish the media would revel in the success of women athletics accomplishments; they stated, "But, you know, I always think of can we be in the moment? Can we stay within glorifying the moment that we've just won the World Cup and, you know, the accomplishment that we've made" (Interviewee 1).

Furthermore, under this dimension is the higher-order theme of taking gender into consideration. The lower-order themes found discussed the importance of showing the differences between genders of the same sport, showing no division among genders in sport, and respect each gender has for one another in the same sport. When referring to the importance of showing no division in the sport, one participant stated, "Like, we're all a really good team like, yeah, there's definitely . . . no divider anything between like the men's and women's" (Interviewee 2).

The last lower-order theme focuses on the recognition the U.S. media gives to women's athletics. The importance of noticeability makes space for women athletic teams to gain recognition for their accomplishments. The accomplishments of a team are what is framed as important, and allow for the athletes to be able to advertise the sport and themselves. After viewing images of April Ross and Kerri Walsh Jennings, both Olympic sand volleyball players, one of the participants stated, "I think they're both big names in the sport of volleyball that gives a lot of positive reinforcement for girls" (Interviewee 3).

Discussion

In this investigation, the main focus was to contribute to sports media research by analyzing how representation impacts college-level women athletes. The individuals interviewed had different beliefs and thoughts about the images they viewed. Despite this, they had overwhelming feelings that correlated together. While this study is not the first to address the sports media representation of professional women athletes and the issues that come from the media portrayal, it adds to the conversation by focusing on interrelations between college and professional visual representation. Professional women athletes have the power to change how they are represented physically and as a brand.

Our findings reveal feelings consistent with and contradictory to pre-existing research. First, the dimension of Dual Identity for women athletes coincided with that of Kane, et al. (2013). Their results identified how women athletes embrace and are aware of the responses to women in athletics. The Dual Identity aspect found from our study had an empowerment effect. A sense of Dual Identity arose from the images associated with "athletic competence" and "classy" identities. The Dual Identity was perceived as granting athlete's permission to be skilled while performing "appropriate" female-identifying behavior, as opposed to merely being a girl in a "guy's" world.

Another result that shared similarities with Kane, et al., pertained to athletic competence images. The images that emphasized power and action were associated with athletic competence. Our interviewees explained the importance of athletic ability, where that expertise was a "superpower" for them when participating in their sport. In the Kane, et al., study, one of the most significant findings was that, across all the questions they posed, women athletes repeatedly chose images that highlighted athletic competence (2003). The interviewed athletes' feelings were of motivation when seeing professional

women athletes in motion, and felt it would impact the younger generations by encouraging them to want to try new sports. Likewise, Daniels (2009) found that there was a positive effect on body image when viewing performance or physical images. Ultimately, witnessing the power of the professional athletes is crucial to collegiate women athletes.

Contrary to Kane et al. (2013), this study suggests that revealing images deemed as “pornographic” or “sexy” can be more empowering and cultivate body positivity within the sport, rather than elicit negative reactions. Sexualized images brought feelings of power, confidence, and a willingness to deviate from social norms of the ideal body type. Consumer perceptions of women's sports and athletes can be altered based upon the usage of sexualized images.

By extension, the interviewees took more notice of how the media uses sex or sex appeal as a marketing ploy to gain attention to the sport or event for the professional women athletics. The participants also expressed disinterested or ambivalent feelings toward the media's use of sexualized images because they claimed to be too invested and expert in their sport to care what the media circulates. Our participants surprised us with feelings of being celebrated and recognized by on-campus media, but had unfavorable emotions toward the continued absence of appreciation for women's athletics and individual athletes' accomplishments in professional media.

Limitations of this study include a low response rate from student-athletes volunteering to take part in the research. Although there was a considerable amount of data collected between the three participants, future studies would benefit from a larger survey pool and across a broader demographic range in terms of race and class. Due to the understated awareness of women athletes within the media, continued research would benefit women's athletics and women athletes by tracking changes within the media. A necessary complement to this study would be to examine the feelings of men athletes about

professional women athlete's representation in photos as well as in print commentary.

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Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire

Demographics (Student Athletes)

- 1) Class year
 - ☐ Freshman
 - ☐ Sophomore
 - ☐ Junior
 - ☐ Senior
 - ☐ Other
- 2) Which NCAA sport do you participate in?
- 3) Years of participation in NCAA sport
 - ☐ 1
 - ☐ 2
 - ☐ 3
 - ☐ 4
 - ☐ 5
- 4) Do you participate in more than one NCAA sport? If so, which one(s)?
- 5) Total years of lifetime participation in sport
 - ☐ less than 5
 - ☐ 5-10
 - ☐ 10-12
 - ☐ 12-15
 - ☐ 15+
- 6) Do you watch professional Sports teams of the sport program you participate in?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Not often
- 7) What is your race/ethnicity?
 - ☐ African American
 - ☐ Asian American
 - ☐ Caucasian
 - ☐ Hispanic/Latino
 - ☐ Native American
 - ☐ Other
- 8) Primary season of competition
 - ☐ Fall
 - ☐ Winter
 - ☐ Spring

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

Introduction

Hi [name of interviewee]. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me about your experiences, thoughts and feelings about women athletes and their representation in the media. As you know, we are interested in understanding how the media representation of women athletes impacts collegiate athletes. Specifically, we're interested in your own thoughts, opinions, and feelings about how you feel this impacts you; as a collegiate women athlete. *I am interested in all feelings and issues you have about this topic.*

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers in this interview. We are interested only in what you think and feel about your experiences. Please be as descriptive as possible with your answers so I understand your experiences.

I will be taping your responses so I can pay attention to hearing your answers and don't have to write everything down. The information from this interview will be transcribed and used in the analysis. You will have an opportunity to read the transcription to make sure it is accurate and that you had the opportunity to say what you wanted to say.

Part I: Background Information

Before beginning the interview, we have this demographic questionnaire for you to complete. [Have the participant complete the demographic sheet].

START AUDIOTAPE

Part II: Main Questions

Now I'm going to show you some images and ask you questions about them [see Appendix C]. [Show team appropriate images.]

1. Which image best represents how you would like to be portrayed?
Probe: Why is this the case?
2. Which image best represents your sport?
Probe: Why is this the case?
3. Which image best increases interest in your sport?
Probe: Why is this the case?
4. Which image best increases respect for your sport?
Probe: Why is this the case?
5. How do each of these images make you feel about how the media represents your sport?
Probe: Why is this the case?

Part III: Wrap-up

6. Is there anything else you would like to share about what has been discussed?
7. Do you have any questions you would like to ask me?

Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with me. The information you provided will help us understand how collegiate athletes feel about media representation of professional women athletes.

STOP AUDIOTAPE

Appendix C: Team-Appropriate Images

1. Softball

Athletic Competence

Mixed Message

Sexy/ "Classy"

Soft Pornography (Lauren Chamberlain)

2. Basketball

Athletic Competence (Candance Parker)

Mixed Message (Skylar Diggins)

Sexy/ “Classy” (Skylar Diggins)

Soft Pornography (Brittney Griner)

3. Soccer

Athletic Competence (Alex Morgan)

Mixed Message (Alex Morgan)

Sexy/ "Classy" (Hope Solo)

Soft Pornography (Hope Solo)

4. Volleyball

Athletic Competence

Mixed Message (April Ross)

Sexy/ "Classy" (Kerri Walsh Jennings)

Soft Pornography (Nellie Spicer)

5. Swimming

Athletic Competence (Katie Ledecky)

Mixed Message (Katie Ledecky)

Sexy/ "Classy" (Missy Franklin)

Soft Pornography (Natalie Coughlin)

6. Tennis

Athletic Competence (Serena Williams)

Mixed Message (Maria Sharapova)

Sexy/ "Classy" (Venus Williams)

Soft Pornography (Venus Williams)

7. Track & Field

Athletic Competence (Allyson Felix)

Mixed Message (Allyson Felix)

Sexy/ "Classy" (Jessica Ennis-Hill)

Soft Pornography (Amanda Bingson)

8. Golf

Athletic Competence (Michelle Wie)

Mixed Message (Michelle Wie)

Sexy/ "Classy" (Lexi Thompson)

Soft Pornography (Lexi Thompson)