Women are finding more avenues to pursue organized sport participation in the United States. Across all levels, female athlete participation is at record numbers. High school participation rates are at their highest ever, reaching 3,057,260 female athletes during the 2007-08 school year (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2008). In 2008, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) schools offered 8,65 women’s sports per school, with a total of 9,101 total women varsity teams across all levels (Carpenter & Acosta, 2008). The Olympics are an additional venue for female athletes to perform. Professional opportunities are also available to women athletes, including the Women’s National Basketball Association and Women’s Professional Soccer. These opportunities have lead to the continued increase of women’s organized sport participation.

Even though participation in women’s sports has increased dramatically since the 1970s, media coverage of women’s athletics has not increased at the same rate. Sports magazines and television coverage is dominated by male sports (Fink & Kensicki, 2002). New magazines and websites focused primarily on a female audience have been created. However, currently no print magazine focuses solely on women’s sports. Several women’s magazines use sport as part of their content, with the rest of magazine content focused on health, exercise, and lifestyle choices (e.g. Women’s Running, Self, and Shape). Since women do not have a print media dedicated to their own sports, they have to resort to female sport coverage in traditional media outlets. The lack of female athletes being represented in mass media is extremely important. Mass media is a powerful part of the United States today (Kane, 1989). It can determine what and how information is shown. Social learning theory suggests that sex roles are learned through observation and modeling (Bandura, 1977). If gender roles are perpetuated in popular culture via magazines and television, it becomes a learning tool to members of society. In addition to a lack of women’s coverage in the sport media, when female athletes are shown, they are often shown in stereotypical roles (Fink & Kensicki, 2002). This bias can influence the perception of female athletes, and more importantly, perpetuate stereotypical gender roles.

Various studies have examined female sports’ coverage in male dominated media outlets. The sports most often shown in the media are those that help support the traditional ideas of femininity. In these sports (e.g. swimming, ice skating, and gymnastics) females are seen as graceful and beautiful (Snyder, 1990). Metheny (1965) proposed sports emphasizing traits seen as feminine would be considered socially acceptable. Areas seen as feminine are sports that were aesthetically pleasing, had little to no bodily contact, or used light equipment. Sports participants who did not follow those patterns were not seen as feminine and the sport was not nearly as socially acceptable. Using these ideas, it is not surprising that the most promoted and televised sports during the Olympics are the ones that support the feminist ideals. The highest United States ratings of the 2006 Olympics in Torino, Italy, were on the final night of the ice skating competition (Levin, 2006). Others have also observed the differences in the coverage of women’s sports on television, finding that women athletes are underrepresented and trivialized at the same time (Duncan & Hassbrook, 1988; Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1993) Several authors have examined the role of women in Sports Illustrated (Bryant, 1980; Kane, 1988; Reid & Soley, 1979). Fink & Kensicki (2002) analyzed the content of both Sports Illustrated and Sports Illustrated for Women from 1997 to 1999. They found women were still underrepresented in Sports Illustrated and are most often shown in nonsport situations. Additionally, female athletes were also portrayed in stereotypical situations or in pictures that promoted the most common views of femininity in both magazines. Bishop (2003) examined the feature articles for Olympic years, finding female athletes were not only underrepresented, but had less coverage in feature articles. Pictures have the potential to tell us so much more than what is just sitting in the forefront. They portray stories about social situations, certain things about the subject, or society in general (Becker, 1986). They have the potential to elicit powerful reactions from those who view them. Since pictures can have such great impact on readers and play such an important part in magazines, all of the photos in Sports Illustrated were examined in this study, rather than just the photos of feature articles as done in previous studies (Bishop, 2003; Fink & Kensicki, 2002). This will paint a more accurate portrayal of the photos of females in Sports Illustrated.

Based on the previous research, several different hypotheses were formed. H1. Female athletes will be underrepresented in photographs in Sports Illustrated. H2. Female non-athletes will be portrayed in greater percentages than male non-athletes. H3: Female feature photographs will be fewer than male feature photographs. H4. The number of female athlete photographs will remain stable during the time frame. Although data collection is currently in progress, the following data collection methods are being utilized. The first issue of each month of Sports Illustrated from 1997 to 2008 will be analyzed. Every photograph in each issue will be counted if they contained a human whose sex was identifiable. For example, a photo depicting a fan wearing a paper bag over their head and not identifiable as male or female would not be included. Photographs of animals or other
objects and cartoons and sketches of people were not included in the analysis. Once the data is collected, hypothesis one, two, and three will be tested using Chi-square analysis. Hypothesis four will be tested by analyzing the data using a regression analysis with curve estimation. This statistical analysis is consistent with other literature analyzing possible changes in trends over time (e.g. Cunningham, 2008). This study's contribution is twofold. First, it will offer an update on the trend of female athlete's portrayal in Sports Illustrated over the past twelve years. Second, this study will expand on previous analysis of female athletes' portrayal in mass media outlets by offering a more complete dataset. This will be accomplished by including the entire repertoire of human pictures in the analysis, as opposed to previous studies that only examined feature articles.