Replacing Athleticism with Sexuality: A Content Analysis of Athlete Models in Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issues

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Sports Illustrated is not only one of the most widely read magazines in the United States, but it also receives one of the highest levels of advertising revenues among print publications (Erickson, 1987; Kang, 1988). Moreover, its annual swimsuit issue generates enormous byproducts (e.g., Web pages, videos, books, TV shows, calendars) while attracting broader and larger audiences than the weekly editions of Sports Illustrated (Messner & Montez, 2005). These swimsuit issues are deemed hotter than ever before since the magazine started including a number of athlete models—a practice initiated in 1997. However, the lack of current research on athletes’ sexuality and gender differences within sports media has increased the need to examine such phenomena as Sports Illustrated’s swimsuit issues.

During the last few decades, studies in sport media have begun to gradually focus on gender stereotyping. For example, numerous studies (Bishop, 2003; Duncan, 1990, 1993; Hillard, 1984; Kane, 1988; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991) have examined gender stereotyping as represented in media forms such as newspapers, magazines, and advertisements. Unlike male athletes, who promote their masculinity in particular, female athletes have been victims of distorted representations as sexualized and objectified figures (Hillard, 1984). Thus, it can be argued that, not only are female athletes confined by traditional gender stereotypes in sports, but sports media are also trivializing female athletes’ sporting achievements (Lumpkin & Williams, 1991). As a result, many researchers have concluded through their studies that gender inequity exists in the sports media. Specifically, several critical studies have demonstrated how photographic images generate social discourse of sexuality in sports as well as what is truly being represented in the photographic images in Sports Illustrated’s swimsuit issues (e.g., Daddario, 1992; Davis, 1997; Duncan, 1993). In sum, previous research has indicated that heterosexual and male-centered media construction of reality as well as the historical marketability of femininity still exists in the current media industry.

Unlike previous studies, the current study aimed to empirically quantify phenomena, focusing exclusively on athlete images in swimsuit issues. Given the increasing number of athlete models, it is worth examining the content and context in which they appear in the pages of Sports Illustrated as well as the potential problematic representations of the athlete body as it infiltrates into athletics. Thus, this study aimed to reveal and understand how media utilize gender differences and the sexuality of athlete models to sustain gender stereotypes in print media. The purposes of this study were twofold: First, this study explored ongoing trends of athletes’ portrayals in Sports Illustrated swimsuit issues over the past 13 years (1997-2009). Furthermore, the study applied Davis’ (1997) previous analyses of the athlete body by assessing hegemonic masculinity. Finally, utilizing quantitative content analysis, this study investigated gender differences in the quantity and portrayals of athlete models in Sports Illustrated’s swimsuit issues.

A content analysis of athlete models’ photographic images (n = 141) and their accompanying written texts in the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issues was conducted in samples for the 13-year time period from 1997 to 2009. The methodological framework for this study was based on Duncan’s (1990) sport photograph study framework to examine gendered images. The coded data were used to conduct a series of Chi-square analyses. Two research questions guided the study: RQ1. How were both male and female athletes depicted in the contents of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issues from 1997 to 2009? RQ 2. What differences exist between female and male athlete models in Sports Illustrated’s swimsuit issues?

Research question one assesses the depiction of athlete models by dividing the types of models described into four main categories: athletes, athlete couples, fashion models with athletes, and sports-related models. Results suggested that, in the early issues (1997-2002), female athletes were depicted as feminine models rather than masculine athletes, unlike female athletes posing as swimsuit models; meanwhile, male athletes’ coverage emphasized their masculinity as fashion models. In addition, athlete couples were continuously portrayed from the 1998 to 2005 issues. In the middle issues (2003-2005), the swimsuit issues focused more on female and couple...
The second research question assessed gender differences among athlete models. First, like Kane’s (1988) study, sports type differed by gender. Male athletes covered a wider variety of sports types compared to women ($x^2(1) = 503.42$, $p < .001$). Second, the results indicated gender differences within the written text ($x^2(4) = 26.02$, $p < .001$). Photographs with male athletes were evenly accompanied by three types of text: advertisements (25.6%), quotations from models (26.8%), and statements made by models (39.0%). In contrast, the photographs with female athletes were heavily accompanied by advertisements (44.1%). Third, when examining the size of photographic images of athlete models, more photographs depicted male athletes (58.2%) than female athletes (41.8%) ($x^2(3) = 4.67$, $p > .05$). In relation to the photo location on a page, significant differences were also noted ($x^2(3) = 35.87$, $p < .001$). Female athletes were mostly portrayed on the beach (61.0%) while male athletes (45.1%) were predominantly portrayed in sports-related facilities. In relation to facial expressions offered by athletes in the issues, significance was also found by gender ($x^2(4) = 10.20$, $p < .05$). Female athletes were less likely to be portrayed with a smile (30.5%) and focused on the lens without a smile (30.5%), whereas male athletes were portrayed more with a smile (37.8%). For body positions, the largest percentage of female athletes in this category posed in athletic action (28.8%) and body erect (28.8%) poses while males (40.2%) were more likely to be posed with their body erect ($x^2(6) = 5.59$, $p > .05$). For the feminine touch analysis, although female athletes were also depicted in the other group (59.3%), larger percentages were described in feminine groups such as touching the self (35.6%) and body-revealing clothing (5.1%), ($x^2(2) = 30.54$, $p < .001$).

Based on these findings, a significant change has occurred in the way athletes are represented in Sports Illustrated’s swimsuit issues. Distinct gender differences emerged among the athlete models, which were intensified due to more sexualized photographs and written texts in the issues. In this media representation, it could be implied that athletes’ marketability lies in their sexuality rather than their athleticism in sports media. This study contributed theoretically to the current literature in a number of ways. First, this study empirically confirmed the phenomenon of commercialization of a female athlete’s sexuality in the sports media context. Second, this study advances additional support for hegemonic masculinity theory related to athlete models’ sexuality within sports media by advancing the trend in a sports magazine that is a male-dominated, western sports magazine. From a practical perspective, this study warned of potential dilemmas that may create conflicts between ethical problems and marketability for sports media editors and managers. The second managerial implication is the further discovery of gender differences in athletes’ marketability as sexually commercialized objects in the sports media context. Based on previous studies and phenomena in sport media, it could be indicated that female athlete models are being framed in these portrayals as highly sexual and highly marketable models.