The sexualization of athletes’ body images has been deeply embedded in a variety of magazines such as lifestyle, health and sport magazines. Interestingly, previous researchers have argued that many female athletes would like to pose in sexually promoted commercials, body focused sports magazines (e.g. ESPN body issues, Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue) and men’s lifestyle magazines (e.g. Maxim, FHM) (Kane et al., 2013; Lines, 2001). Thus, it can be argued that athletes accept the deeply embedded social norm of “selling sex” and they approve the cultural assumption that one of the most effective ways to generate sports’ fan interest is sexualizing female athletes (Kane et al, 2013). In addition, portrayals of male athletes are also no longer traditionally masculine, and their body images have been also objectified and sexualized in a variety and types of magazines (Pompper, 2010). Although many sport media researchers have investigated the negative influence of sexualized images of female athletes on female athletes, young female viewers and general audiences (e.g. Kane & Maxwell, 2011; e.g., Kane et al., 2013; Krane et al., 2004; Krane et al., 2011; Ross & Shinew, 2008), few researchers have explored how female athletes experience the sexualized body images from different magazine genres. In addition, no empirical research has examined the personal opinions of female athletes about posing in sexually appealing advertisements, and how female athletes perceive male athlete’s sexualized body images in mass media.

The main purpose of this study was to examine how female collegiate athletes respond to sexualized body images of athletes in three different magazine genres. This study provides empirical discourse into the experiences and expressions of the sexualization of athletes’ body images from a female-centric focus, which represent the actual voice of the current cultural phenomenon of sexualization. To understand the social phenomenon of sexualization of athletes’ body images, qualitative research methods were employed in this study. Phenomenography is concerned with identifying individual’s understanding of the different ways about a phenomenon and also in capturing a holistic and integrated view toward a phenomenon based on group of people’s experiences (Bruce, 1999; Sandberg, 1997). The focus of this study is on how female athletes personally understand sexualization of athletes’ body images in mass media and how they shape their thoughts, behaviors, and feelings toward this phenomenon from their everyday lives. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the following research questions guided the scope of the investigation. RQ1. How do female athletes interpret sexualized body images of other female athletes in lifestyle (lad), health, and sport magazines? RQ2. What do female athletes think about personally posing for similar sexualized images, and what factors shape their opinions? RQ3. How do female athletes interpret sexualized body images of male athletes in lifestyle, health, and sport magazines?

The sexualization of culture has been discussed in media research over the last few decades (Gill, 2009; 2012). To understand the nature of sexualized athletes’ body images in mass media, qualitative research have been explored to understand female athletes’ perspectives toward media images based critical feminist theory (e.g. Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Kane et al, 2013) and feminist cultural studies (e.g. Krane et al, 2004; 2011; Ross & Shinew, 2008). Many researchers examined that how women’s health magazines portrayed sexualized body images of athletes and how female athletes interpret the media messages (e.g. Thomsen, Bower, & Barnes, 2001; Hardin, Lynn, & Waldorf, 2005). Others have focused on men’s health magazines focus on a muscular body ideal based on the interest of male audiences (e.g. Frederick, et al., 2005; Ricciardelli, Clow, & White, 2010). Several scholars have also explored that how men’s lifestyle magazines conveyed meaning of sexualized content to audiences and how they present masculinity of men (e.g. Taylor, 2005; Krassas, Blauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2003; Lambiase, & Reichert, 2003). Thus, previous researchers found that men’s lifestyle magazines have featured a variety of masculinity (e.g. Benwell, 2004; Nixon, 1996; Ricciardelli, Cloww, & White, 2010). For this study, gendered identities, which include hegemonic femininity (e.g. Butler, 1990; Krane, 2001), heterosexuality (Kolnes, 1995), and metrosexual masculinity (Coad, 2008), are being used to understand how gendered body images of athletes are presented in three different magazine genres.
As theoretical frameworks of this study, the interdisciplinary theoretical approach proposed incorporates psychology, sociology, and communication, to arrive at an integrative psychological, social and cultural understanding of gender and the sexualized media culture. The theoretical approaches chosen to frame the study are cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1994; Gerbner et al., 2002), objectification theory Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), and social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Lindner, Tantled-dunn, & Jentsch, 2012).

In-depth interviews are ongoing and were constructed through the literature and framed against the research questions. Using a photo interviewing method, this study will employ photo images of female and male athletes gathered from three different magazine genres such as lifestyle (FHM for women, GQ for men), fitness (Fitness for women, Men’s Health for men) and sport magazines (Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue, and ESPN body issue for both genders). This study is employing the purposive sampling method with female student athletes (n=15-20). Current or former female student athletes who play team and individual sports are being interviewed. The sessions are no longer than one hour each and each session is being audiotaped for data analysis. As interviews are conducted and transcribed, the qualitative data will be analyzed with constant comparative analysis, using a grounded theory coding approach, which include initial coding, more focused coding, and finally the theoretical coding of the data (Charmaz, 2006; Hesse-Biber, Howling, Leavy, & Lovejoy, 2004).

This study extends the limited research on perceptions of sexualization of female athletes’ body images as experienced by female athletes. This study will also contribute to the develop of relevant literatures in the areas of sport and media, gender studies, body images of women, sexuality and media culture with female athletes’ perspectives. Also, multiple theoretical lenses will help better understand how female athletes interpret media representations and develop their gender identities and athleticism. This study does also have direct implications for sport management and media research and practice. The results of this study will give empirical evidence about what kind of factors shape female athletes perceptions and behaviors regarding the sport media. These finding should also provide evidence that could lead to a more balanced gender treatment in sports and provide a deeper understanding of how female athletes perceive their body images and how they cultivate their perceptions, attitude, and behaviors as female athletes in the sexualized media culture. Final results, discussion, and implications will be offered in the presentation.