Tucker Center Distinguished Lecture - Spring 2007

Sex vs. Athletic Competence:
Exploring Competing Narratives in
Marketing and Promoting Women's Sports

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Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport

Findings Related to Sport Media Research

1) Female athletes significantly underrepresented in terms of *amount* of coverage

2) Sportswomen are routinely presented in ways that emphasize femininity and sexuality vs. athletic competence

Two Competing Narratives
re: Impact of Media Patterns

1) Scholars & advocates of women's sports say images marginalize and trivialize athletic females

2) Those who cover and promote women's sports say a "sex sells" approach creates and increases interest

Lack of Empirical Support

- Neither side has empirical evidence for which types of images generate fan support

- Therefore, we don't know:

  - How representations of sportswomen are interpreted by consumers

  - How interpretations impact attitudes and intentions to support (view/attend) women's sports

Cultural Assumptions Behind "Sex Sells" Narrative

- News Headline:
  "Soccer and Sex: Attractive Athletes Sell League"

- "Real" fans = male fans

- Best way to attract male fans = sexualize women

- Images of sexy, feminine sportswomen
  - ⇨ more social acceptance of women's sports
  - ⇨ more (male) fan interest
  - ⇨ more attendance/corporate sponsorship/TV coverage

Reasons Why "Sex Sells" Approach Counterproductive

- Ignores & dismisses those most likely to support female athletes—young girls and women

- Marketing campaigns (WNBA) promote wholesome, All-American girl-next-door image

- Family values/connection between dads and daughters

- When males buy *SI* swimsuit issue, are they interested in consuming athletic events …

- …or sportswomen's bodies as objects of sexual desire?

Audience Reception Research

- Examines not only the meanings of media texts, but audience interpretations and intended practices

Purpose of Study

- How do consumers interpret particular media images and do those interpretations influence interest in / respect for women's sports?

- How does one's social role/position in society influence one's interpretations?
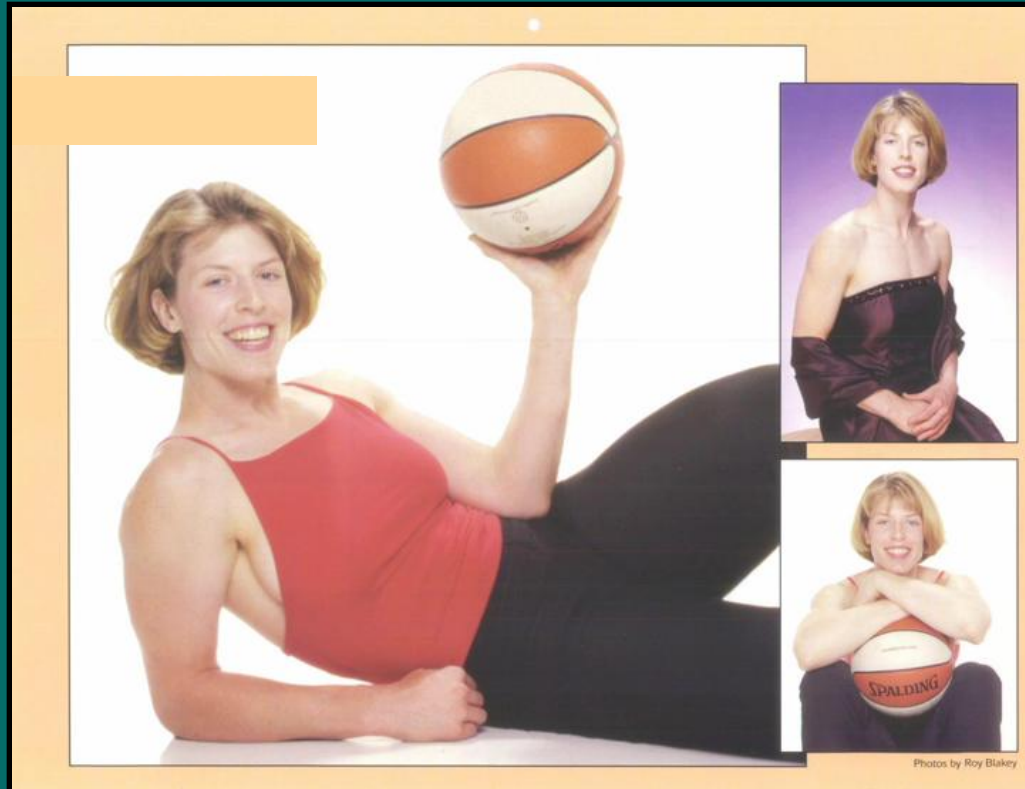
Methodology

Categories of Representation

Athletic Competence — Ambivalence — "Girl Next Door" — Hyper-Heterosexual — "Sexy Babe" — Soft Pornography
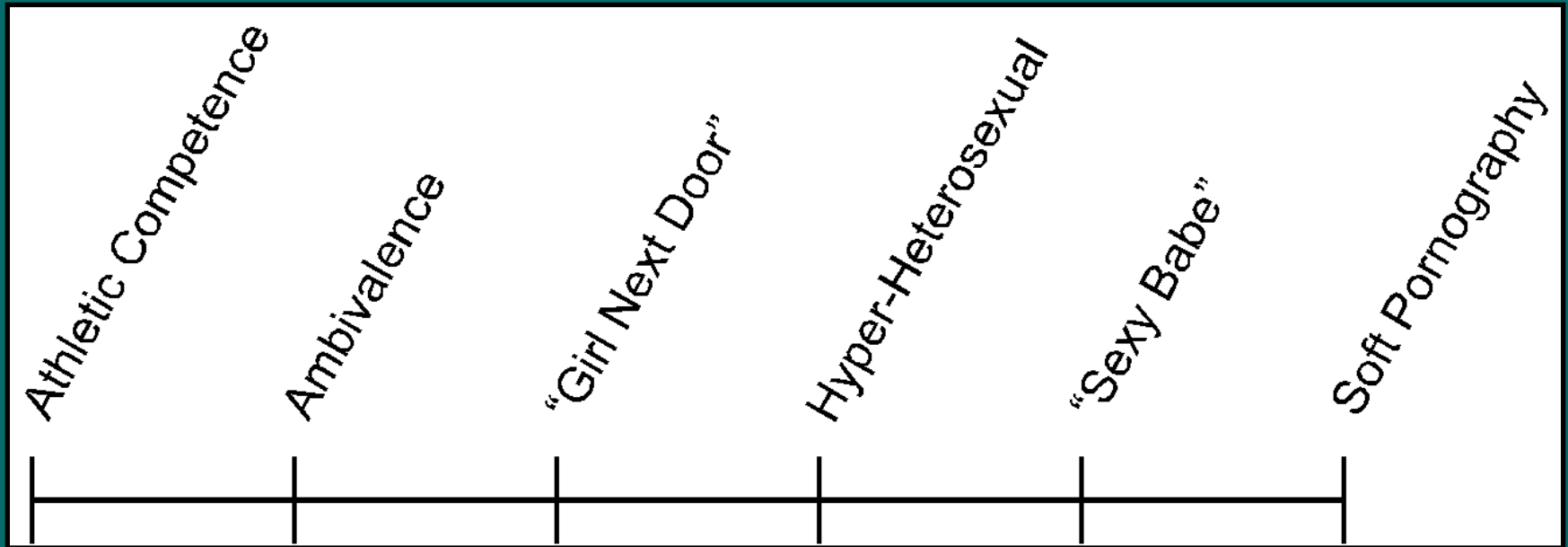
Athletic Competence
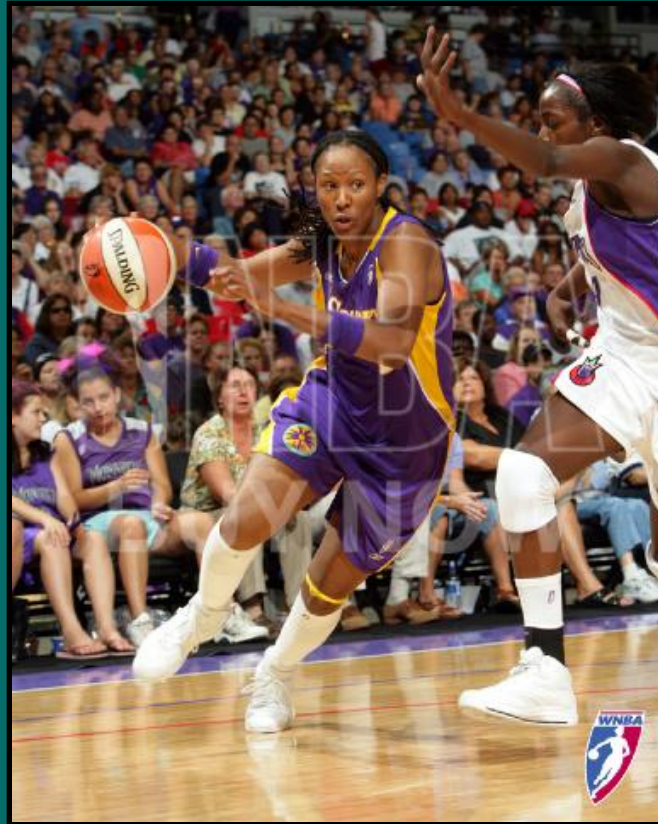
Chamique Holdsclaw, WNBA

Ambivalence

Katie Smith, WNBA

"Girl-Next-Door"

For Michelle the transformations to pro golfer and young woman are simultaneous.
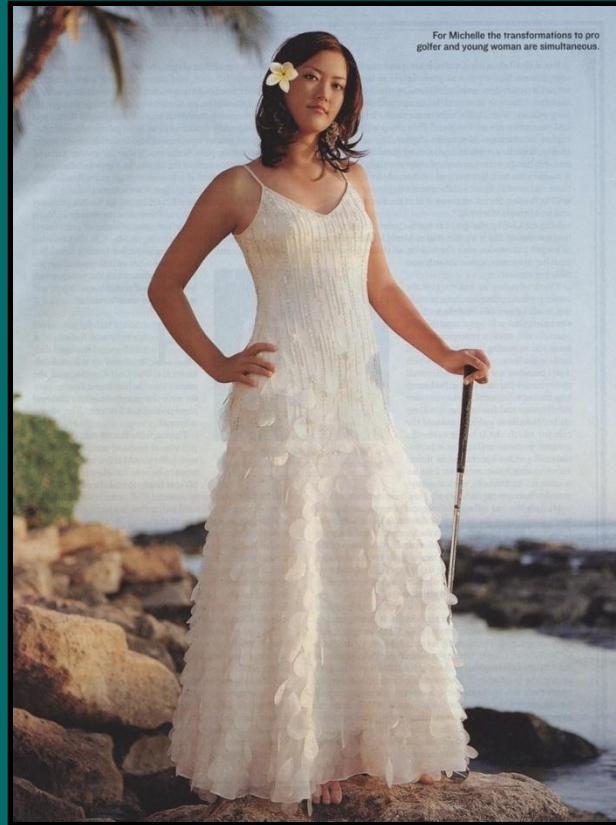
Michelle Wie, Professional Golfer

Hyper-heterosexual

Mia Hamm, US Olympic Soccer

"Sexy Babe"

Serena Williams, Professional Tennis Player

Soft Pornography

Danica Patrick, Indy Racing League

Research Design

- Pilot study combining quantitative & qualitative measures w/ 12 focus groups

- "Situated Knowledge"
  - Age: 18-34; 35-55
  - Gender: Male / Female
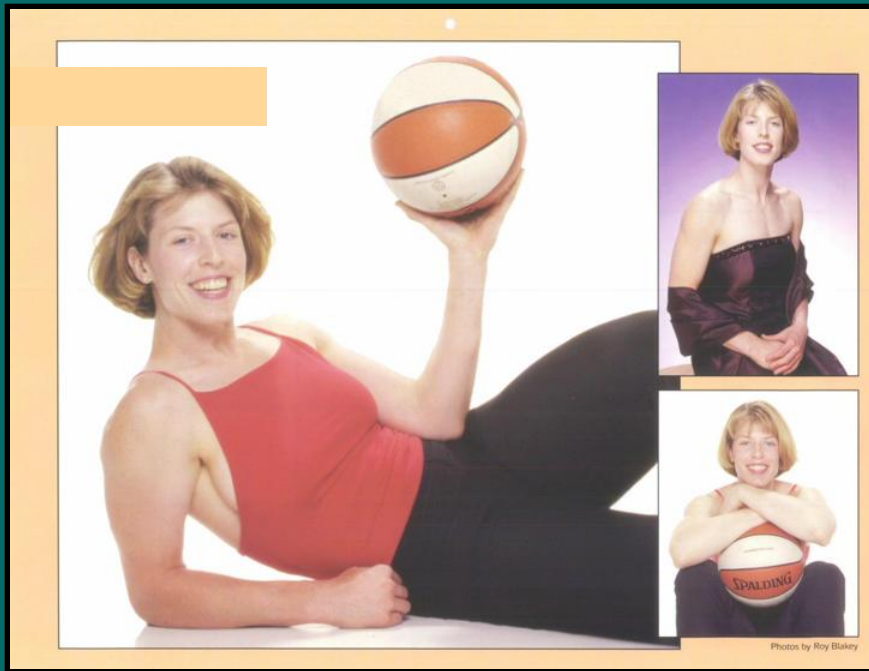 - Level of Sport Engagement: High / Low

Focus Group Protocol

- **Phase I: Free Associations re: Overall Feelings towards Women's Sports**

- **Phase II: Fill Out 1-7 Scale on How Each Image Makes You Want to:**

  - Read About
  - Watch
  - Attend
  - Buy Season Ticket

- **Phase III: Open Dialogue re: Answers to Phases I & II**

Athletic Competence

- "Action"

- "Empowered"

- "Exciting"

- "Intensity"

Ambivalence

- "Embarrassing"

- "Silly/Fake"

- "Disconnect"

- "Well-rounded"

"Girl-Next-Door"

For Michelle the transformations to pro golfer and young woman are simultaneous.
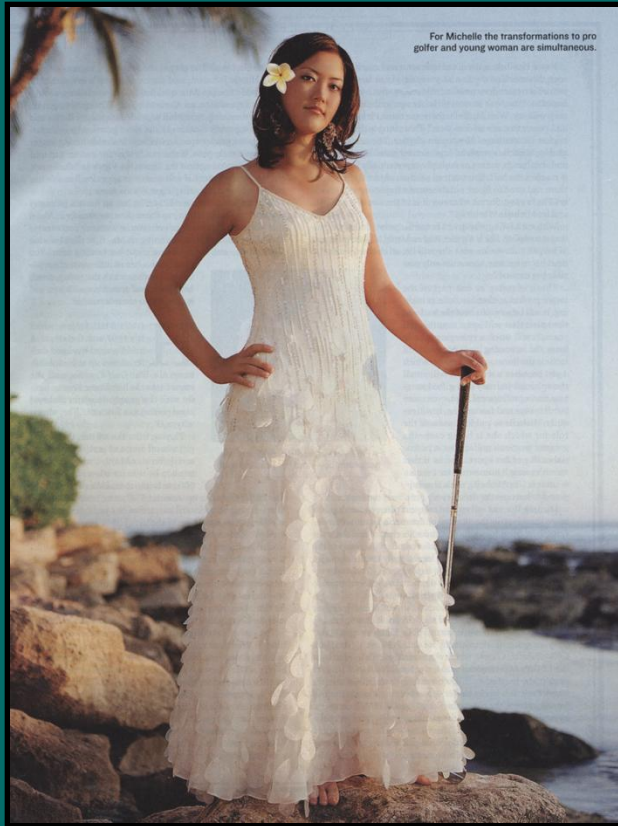
- "Tasteful/Classy"

- "Impractical"

- "What's this have to do with golf?"

Hyper-heterosexual

- "Red-carpet celebrity"

- "Irrelevant to Sport"

- "Admiration"

- "Put Her in Action Photo"

"Sexy Babe"

- "Pretty Hot"

- "Strength & Beauty"

- "Disgusting"

- "Targeted to Men"

Soft Pornography

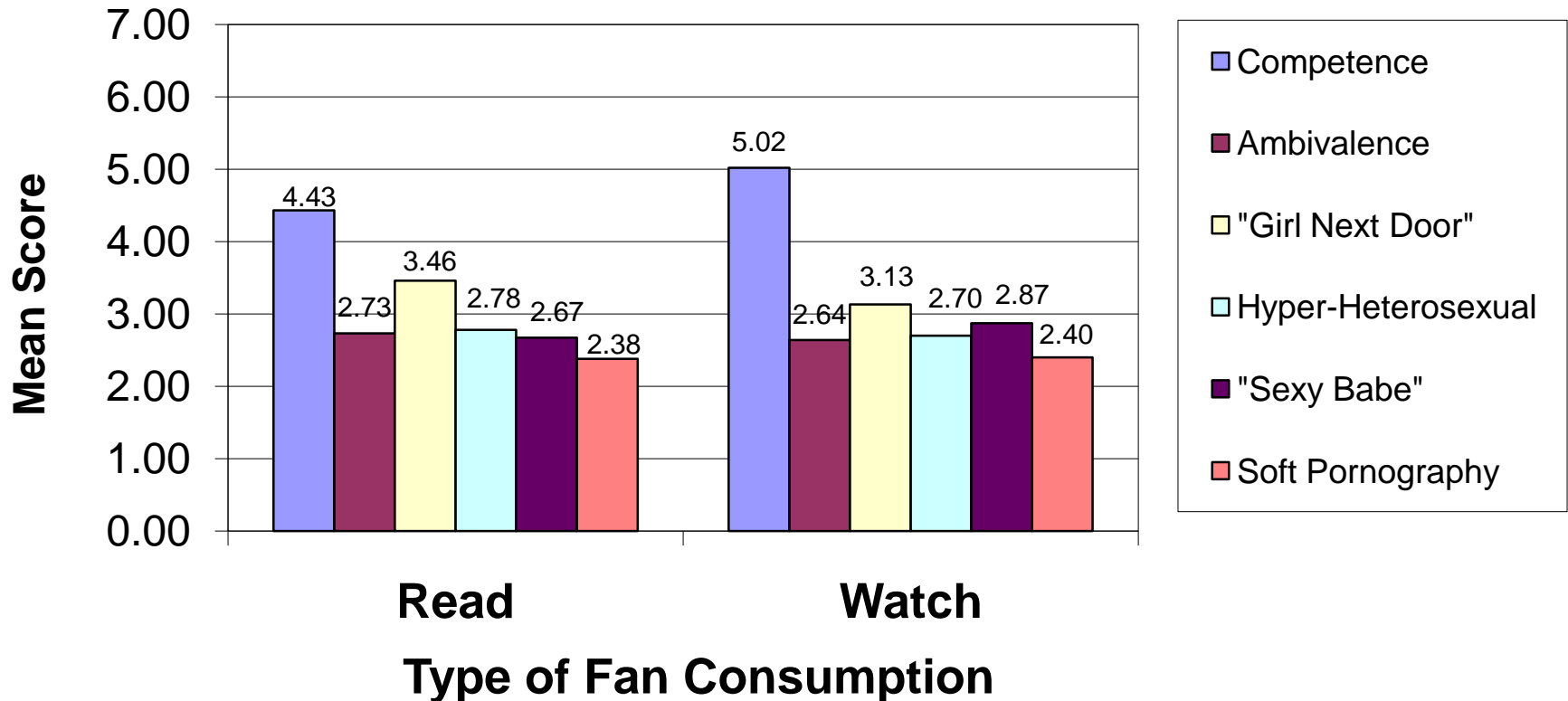- "Hot/Yes!"

- "Selling Sex"

- "Pandering/ Demeaning"

- "Cheapens Herself"

Overall Impact of Image on
Reading About & *Watching* **Women's Sports Across All Age/Gender Groups**

Mean Score (y-axis): 0.00 to 7.00

Type of Fan Consumption (x-axis)

Read:
- Competence: 4.43
- Ambivalence: 2.73
- "Girl Next Door": 3.46
- Hyper-Heterosexual: 2.78
- "Sexy Babe": 2.67
- Soft Pornography: 2.38

Watch:
- Competence: 5.02
- Ambivalence: 2.64
- "Girl Next Door": 3.13
- Hyper-Heterosexual: 2.70
- "Sexy Babe": 2.87
- Soft Pornography: 2.40

Legend:
- Competence
- Ambivalence
- "Girl Next Door"
- Hyper-Heterosexual
- "Sexy Babe"
- Soft Pornography

Overall Impact of Image on *Attending & Purchasing Season Tickets* **Across All Age/Gender Groups**

Mean Score (y-axis)

Type of Fan Consumption (x-axis)

	Attend	Buy Season Tickets
Competence	5.02	3.41
Ambivalence	2.56	2.00
"Girl Next Door"	2.81	2.13
Hyper-Heterosexual	2.62	2.14
"Sexy Babe"	2.62	1.94
Soft Pornography	2.10	1.65
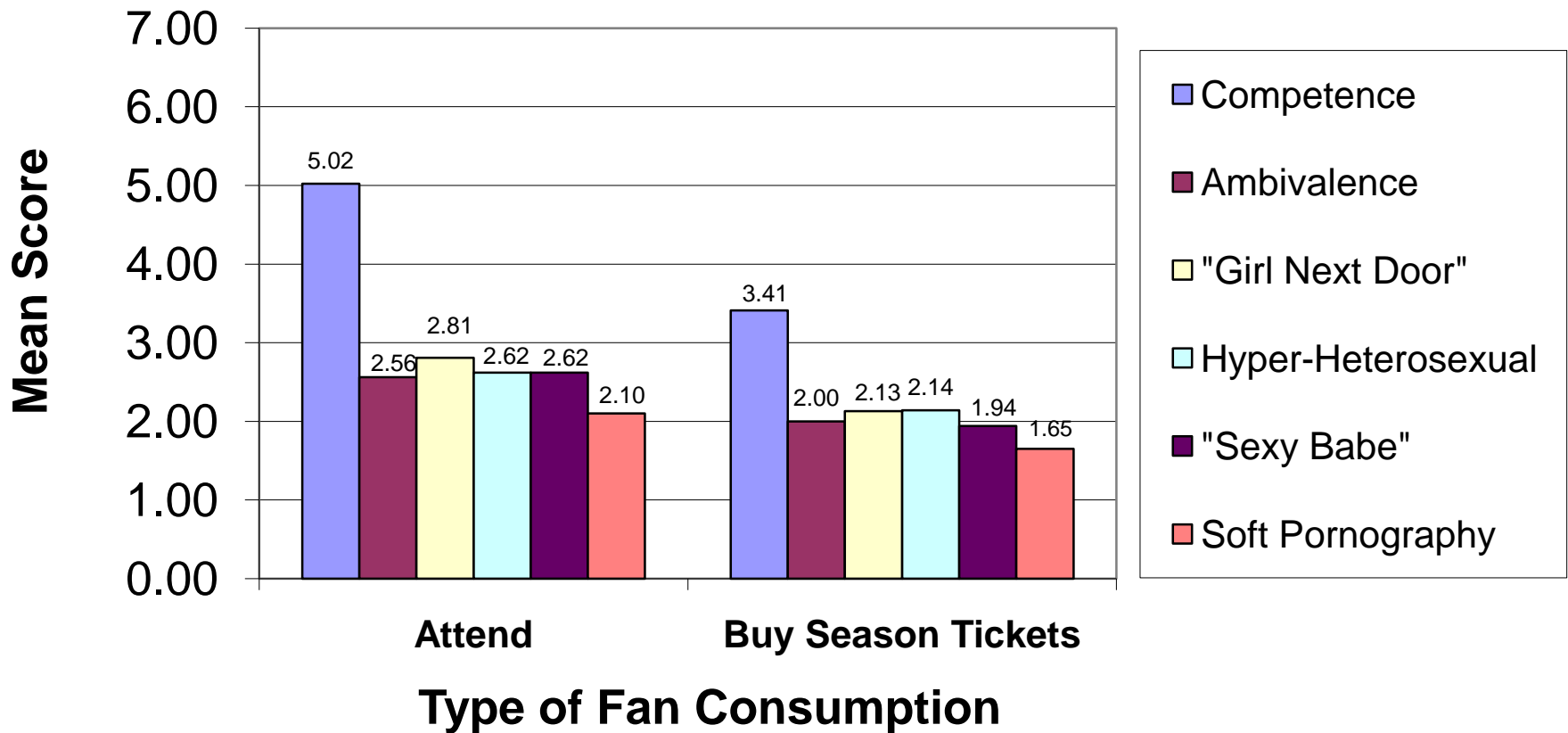
Impact of Image on *Attending* Women's Sports by Gender of Fan

Mean Score (y-axis, 0–6)

Females
- Competence: 5.46
- Ambivalence: 2.56
- Girl Next Door: 2.81
- Hyper-Heterosexual: 2.62
- Sexy Babe: 2.62
- Soft Pornography: 2.10

Males
- Competence: 4.38
- Ambivalence: 2.12
- Girl Next Door: 2.77
- Hyper-Heterosexual: 2.65
- Sexy Babe: 3.00
- Soft Pornography: 2.88

Legend:
- Competence
- Ambivalence
- Girl Next Door
- Hyper-Heterosexual
- Sexy Babe
- Soft Pornography
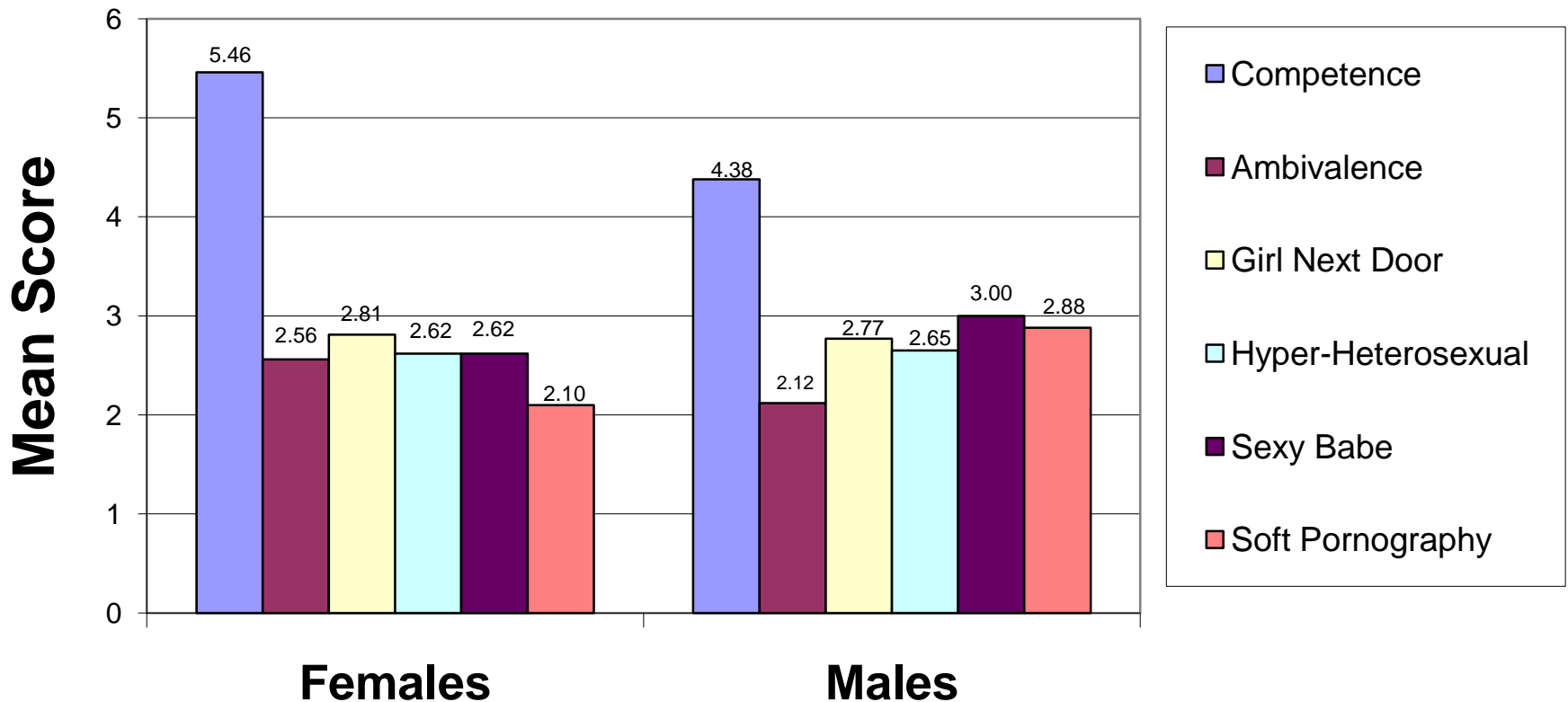
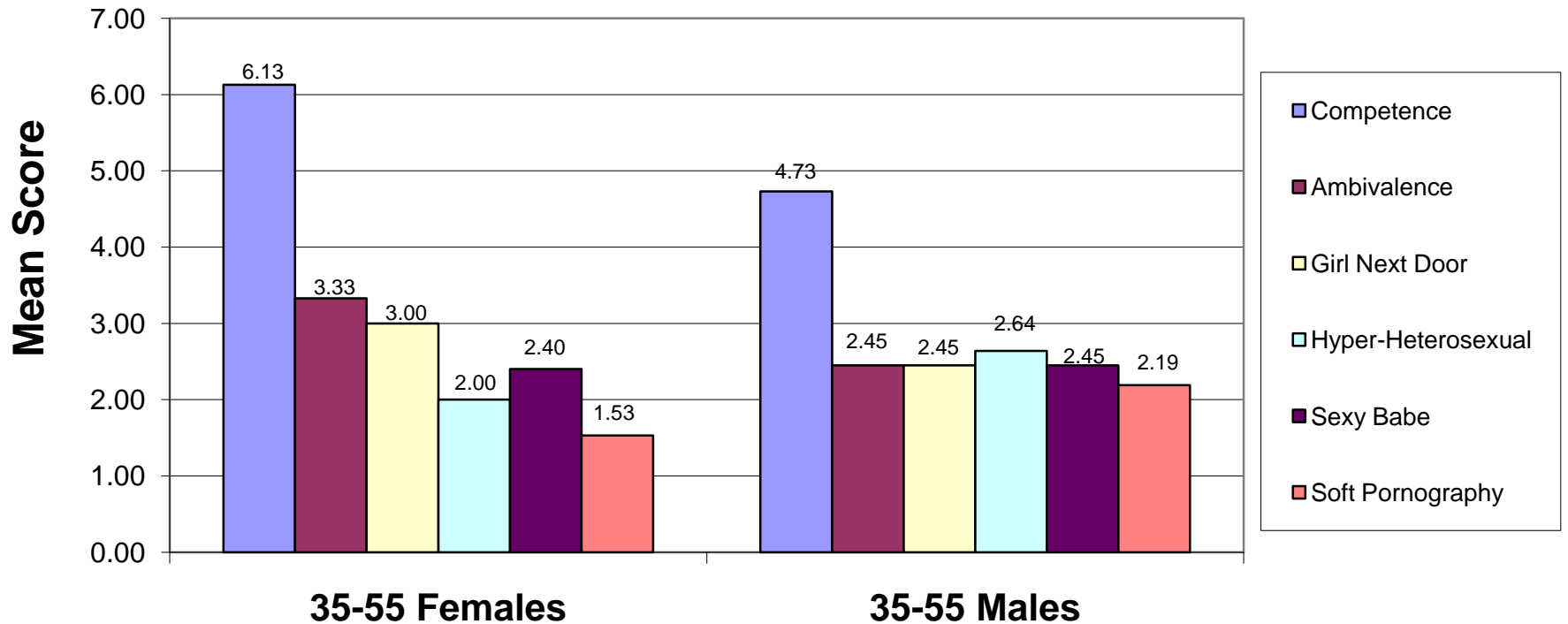**All Focus Groups by Gender**

Impact of Image on *Attending* Women's Sports by Age & Gender of Fan
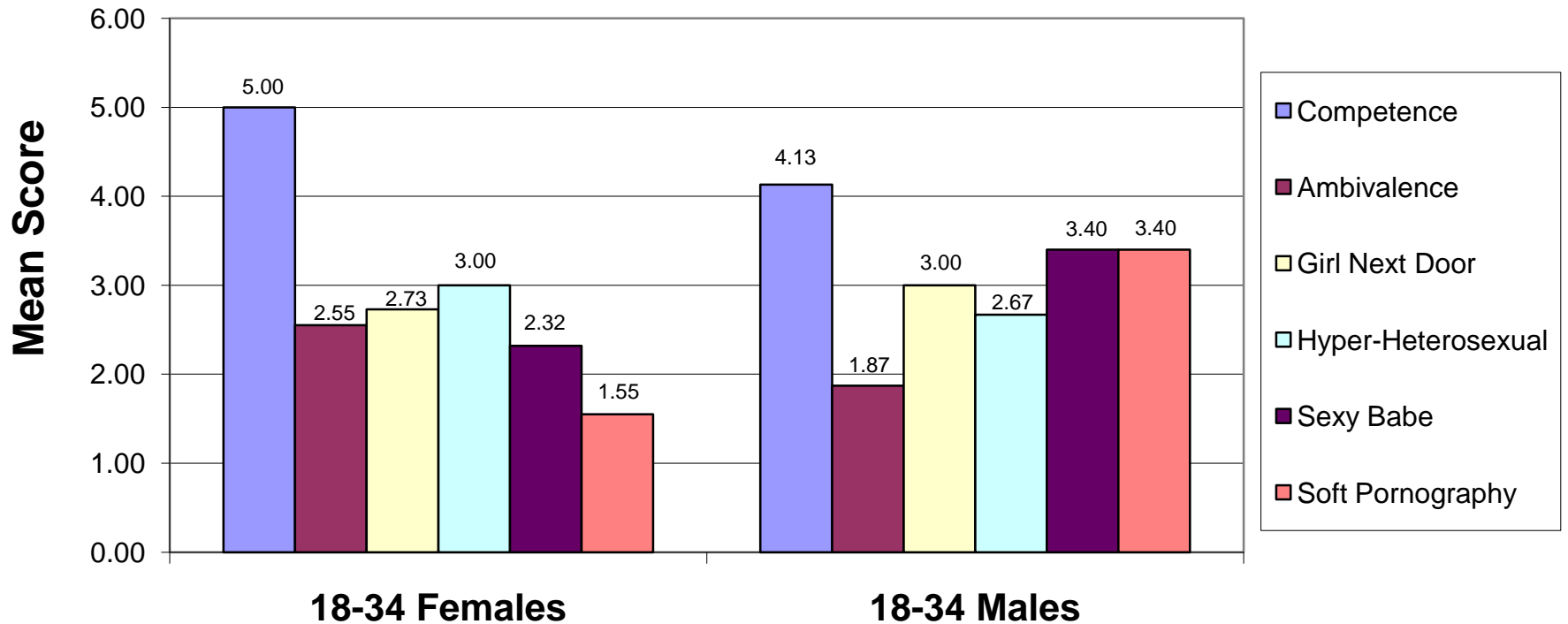
All Focus Groups by Age & Gender Interaction

Impact of Image on *Attending* Women's Sports by Age & Gender of Fan

Mean Score

- Competence
- Ambivalence
- Girl Next Door
- Hyper-Heterosexual
- Sexy Babe
- Soft Pornography

35-55 Females: 6.13, 3.33, 3.00, 2.00, 2.40, 1.53

35-55 Males: 4.73, 2.45, 2.45, 2.64, 2.45, 2.19

All Focus Groups by Age & Gender Interaction

Key Findings

- **Ambivalence Image**

  - Offends all groups equally

  - Being all things to all groups is unappealing to everyone

Key Findings *(cont.)*

- "Sexy Babe" & "Soft Pornography" Images

  - Interested the 18-34 males to buy magazines

  - Turned off all females & older males

  - Didn't increase interest in / respect for women's sports across the board

Key Findings *(cont.)*

- ■ "Athletic Competence" Image

  - • Significantly increased females' intentions across all consumer options

  - • 35-55 males more motivated to attend

  - • 18-34 males ranked "sexy images" higher than all other focus groups

  - • But still gave competence the highest rating

Conclusions

- All females and older males offended by sexualized images

  - Alienates core fan base

- Younger males interested in "sexy images" but did not translate into desire to become a fan

- These results, though preliminary, challenge bedrock assumption that "sex sells"

Conclusions *(cont.)*

- Contrast coverage with NCAA Division I Women's Basketball

- What do they promote?
  - Athletic Competence/Strategy
  - Superstars = Candace Parker & Maya Moore
  - Pioneers/Legends=Pat Summitt & Vivian Stringer