

Introduction

- A “sex sells” marketing strategy is ineffective and counterproductive because images of on-court competence increase interest in and respect for women’s sports (Fink et al., 2004; Kane & Maxwell, 2011).
- Nevertheless, female athletes are disproportionately portrayed in off-court, sexualized poses. How and why they appear in such images has never been empirically addressed.
- This groundbreaking study examined how elite female athletes would choose to be portrayed—competence vs. traditional femininity—if there was no difference in the financial award or commercial exposure they received.

Research Questions

- How would elite sportswomen wish to be portrayed in endorsement campaigns if given equal financial rewards and commercial exposure?
- Would their choices be influenced by participation in team vs. individual sports?

Methods

Study Participants

- Intercollegiate female athletes (N=36) at two public universities in the Midwest and Northeast (18 per institution) ranging in age from 18-24. 83% were White; 17% were African American.
- Individuals participated in three individual (swimming, tennis, and track) and three team (basketball, ice hockey, and softball) sports.

Interview Protocol

- In face-to-face, semi-structured interviews participants were asked to choose a how they would most like to be portrayed in endorsement campaigns.
- The two “image options” were on-court athletic competence vs. off-court femininity (see Figure 1).
- Metheny’s sport typology of more feminine (e.g., swimming) vs. more masculine (e.g., basketball) sports for females was used to analyze participants’ responses.

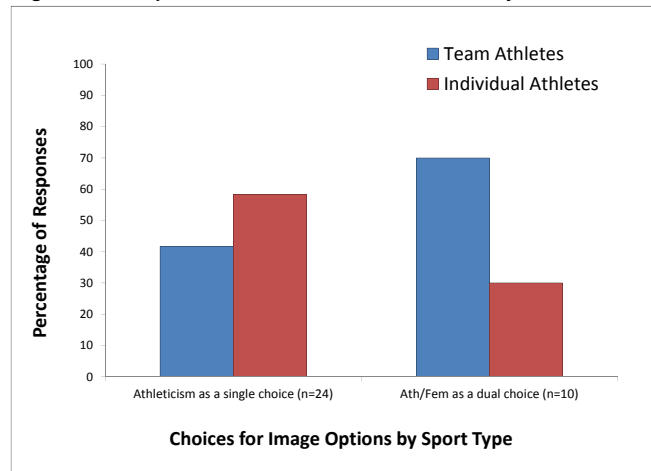
Figure 1. Examples of Image Options

Image Category	Definition	Example Image (Individual Sport)	Example Image (Team Sport)
Athletic Competence	On-court, in-action		
Traditional Femininity	Off-court, posed image		

Key Quantitative Findings

- On-court competence was the single (only) choice for 70% of all respondents while 30% chose both images (See Figure 2).
- 10 respondents made the “dual choice” of competence AND femininity; 7 of them participated in team sports.
- This result confirms females in “masculine” sports are sensitive to how their sport is seen given traditional expectations of femininity and heterosexuality.

Figure 2. Participants’ Choices for Endorsement Portrayal



Key Qualitative Findings

Athletic Competence Choice:

“[I] definitely [want to be portrayed] on the court. Because that’s what I’ve worked hard for. I’m not a model, I’m a tennis player.”

“I want to be respected for what I do [swimming] instead of what I look like.”

Competence/Femininity Choice:

“You’d be performing [softball] and then you would be in normal clothes, looking nice.”

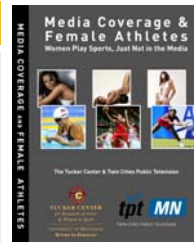
“It’s a concern of women in some sports to want to show they are feminine because of negative connotations of homophobia in [women’s] sports.”

Discussion

- Female athletes are keenly aware of the tension between sport participation and pressures to “perform femininity.”
- Messner’s “contested terrain” highlights the power struggle between traditional femininity and women’s entrance into sports in unprecedented numbers.
- Our results show that women’s sports participation remains contested terrain and gendered sport typing still exists two generations after Title IX.

Implications

- Future research should consider different geographic locations, additional sports, and racial backgrounds of female athletes.
- Competence-focused marketing campaigns can contribute to increasing respectful attitudes towards and interest in women’s sports.



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