



Image 1: Abby Wambach

“Hope Solo Saves the World From Ugly”: Representations of Female Athletes in YouTube Videos

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Image 2: Hope Solo

BACKGROUND

For decades, feminist scholars have highlighted the troubled relationship between the media and women’s athletics. In an attempt to mitigate the threat that female athletes pose to the gender binary system, and by extension, patriarchy, the media frequently ignored or trivialized women’s sports (e.g., Messner, Duncan, & Jensen, 1993). Presently, while egregiously disempowering portrayals of female athletes are no longer tolerated, the media continues to trivialize women’s sport through more subtle and nuanced means (Carty, 2005; Duncan & Hasbrook, 2002). One strategy includes downplaying the woman’s athleticism and emphasizing her (hetero)sexual appeal and femininity (Christopherson, Janning, & McConnell, 2002). Not all female athletes, however, are treated the same. For example, athletes who do not conform to traditional norms of emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987) and are therefore not easily (hetero)sexualized, have been found to be largely ignored by the media or desexualized in ways that pose as a stark contrast to the hypersexualized portrayals of other athletes (Shugart, 2003). While the disempowering ways in which female athletes are portrayed in traditional media sources is well established, what is less known is the extent to which participatory new digital media spaces, such as video sharing sites, may allow for different, more nuanced representations as such sites allow individuals, as opposed to merely major media corporations, the ability to upload mediated content of their choosing. Indeed, although researchers have found that many of the same scripts and discourse found offline are reproduced online, some scholars have highlighted the ways in which participatory internet sites may allow for the disruption of normative representations of female athletes (e.g., Plymire & Forman, 2000).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this pilot study is to explore how female athletes are represented on the popular video sharing site, YouTube. The questions guiding this study include:

RQ1: What type of content related to female athletes is being uploaded by individual (i.e., not corporate) YouTube participants? For example, are participants creating their own content or uploading content produced by other sources?

RQ2: To what extent are female athletes represented in ways that showcase their athleticism versus their (hetero)sex appeal? Does it differ based on the degree to which the athlete conforms to traditional norms of femininity?

METHOD

Sample

The unit of analysis for this study are YouTube videos that focused on Hope Solo and Abby Wambach—key players on the Women’s National (soccer) Team whose gender presentation is different in terms of the degree to which they conform to emphasized femininity (e.g., long hair, make up, etc.). Ten videos focused on each athlete were analyzed (n = 10 for Solo; n = 10 for Wambach). The videos analyzed were only those which were uploaded to the site by an individual—not an organization or corporation—six weeks prior to and following the 2011 FIFA Women’s World Cup (approximately June 12-September 1, 2011).

Data Collection

- Videos focused on Solo were obtained by typing key words “Hope Solo” into the YouTube search engine; videos featuring Wambach were obtained by typing key words “Abby Wambach”
- The first 10 videos that met the aforementioned criteria were selected; if more than one video meeting the criteria was uploaded by the same user, only the first video was analyzed

Analysis

A quantitative content analysis of the twenty videos, as well as the first 50 comments posted by viewers (accessed 10/24/11) pertaining to each video, was conducted. Videos and comments were coded for instances of sexualization, romanticization, feminization and sexism/heterosexism—a selection of ways in which female athletes are trivialized. Conversely, instances of athleticism were also coded. In the analysis of comments, any type of resistance was also coded (e.g., speaking out against the sexualization of female athletes; challenging other commenters to not be sexist, etc.).

RESULTS

1. Originality of Content Uploaded By Individuals

Most videos had a corporate tie:

- 45% completely unoriginal/professionally produced (e.g., ESPN segment)
- 40% professionally produced content altered/mashup (e.g., compilation of clips from network televised games)
- 15% completely original, user made content (e.g., compilation of home videos)

2. Representations of Solo and Wambach

A. Content of Videos

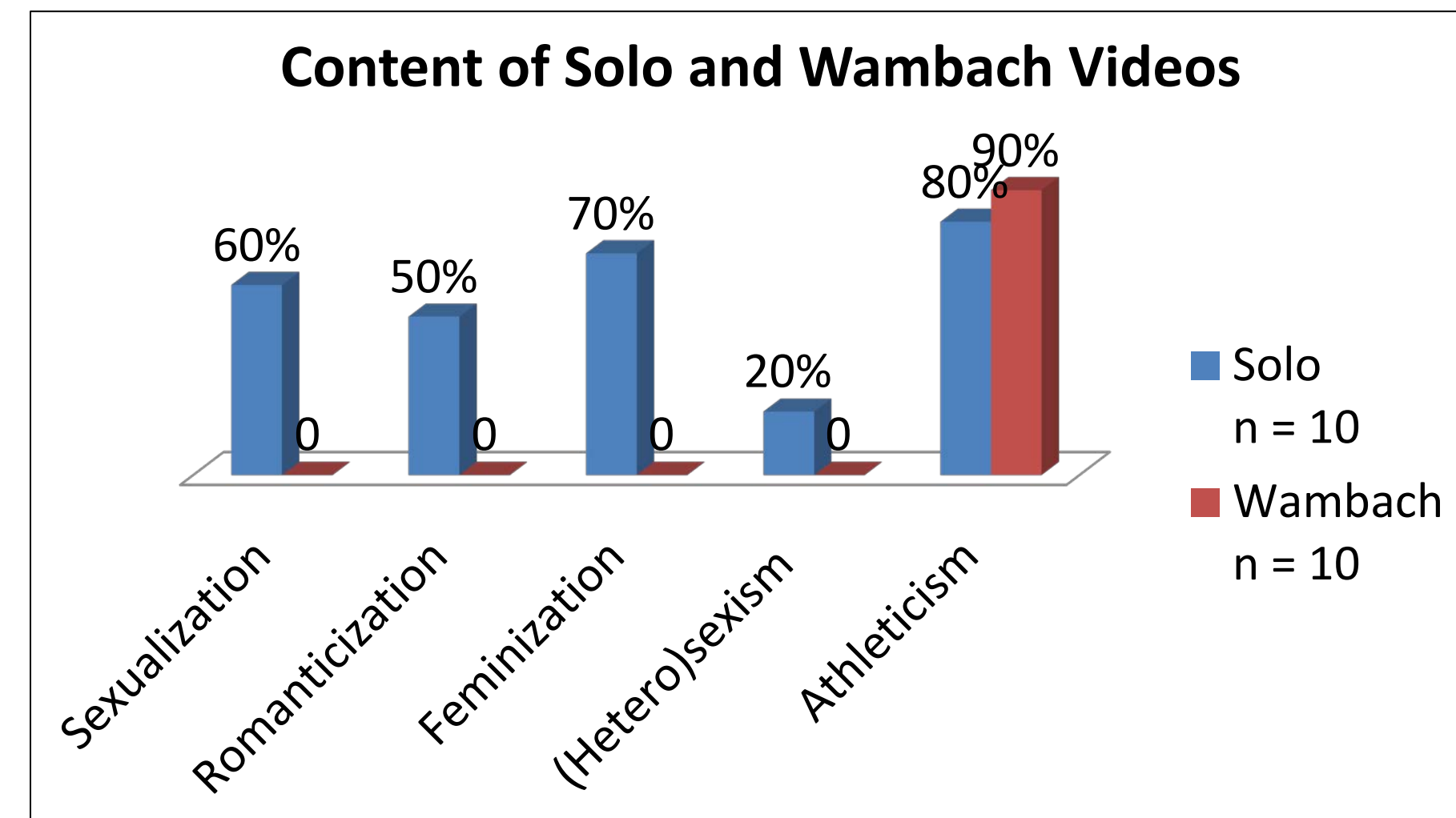


Figure 1: Percentage of videos with at least once instance of the selected variables

Solo:

- 30% of the videos were **primarily** focused on her in action (i.e., visual representations of her athleticism being the main focus of the video)
- 70% of the videos did not show her in action (e.g., interview on talk show, song made about her, etc.)
- The majority of the videos trivialized her in some way (e.g., one of the ‘original’ videos was a vlog of a man inviting her to his military ball)

Wambach:

- 80% of the videos were **primarily** focused on her in action (i.e., visual representations of her athleticism being the main focus of the video)
- 20% of the videos did not show her in action (e.g., MagicJack commercial)
- None of the videos trivialized her based on the selected variables

B. Content of Comments

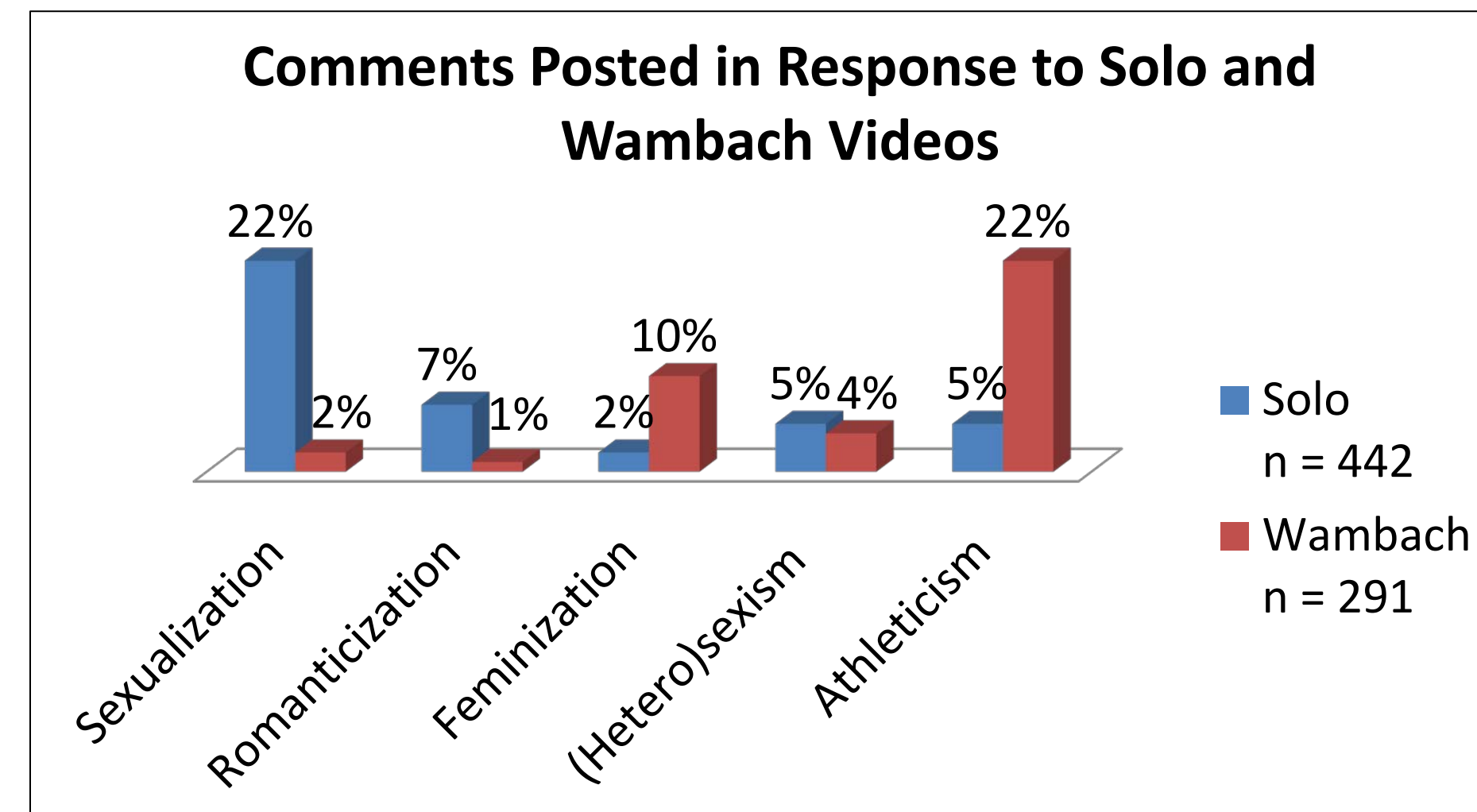


Figure 2: Percentage of variables represented in analysis of the first 50 comments on each video

Solo:

- 36% of comments focused on non-athletic features; only 5% focused on her athleticism
- Comments overwhelmingly positioned her as a sex or romantic object

Wambach:

- 17% of comments focused on non-athletic features, 22% focused on her athleticism
- A significant majority of disempowering comments—especially within the feminization and sexualization categories—did not focus on her, but specific female athletes, such as Solo, or female athletes in general (only a small minority did sexualize/romanticize Wambach)
- Sexist comments ranged from explicit denigration of women’s sports to “get in the kitchen” rhetoric

Examples of Comments Posted in Response to Each Athlete’s Video(s)

Solo

-Hope looks very good with her hair up too, but I think she looks REALLY, REALLY GOOD with her hair down though. :D

-man, crazy things i could do with her in my bed

-Hope Solo is beautiful and I would marry her any day of my life

-I love this video it shows her at some of her best moments I love hope solo she's my inspiration :D good job on the video

Wambach

-She's [Wambach] definitely one of the best female soccer/football players in history, if not then THE best :)

- First off, it's men's soccer. So the worst of goals would be better than the best of women's. Secondly, as I said, it's men's soccer

-Yes, and I imagine the guys, or girls, who have dated Hope [Solo] have called her "high maintenance" or a diva or worse...

- At the very beginning when she opened her eyes I was like omg!!! Her eyes are mad crazy!! Love them!

DISCUSSION

Originality of Content

As 85% of the analyzed content featuring Solo or Wambach was unoriginal, the extent to which YouTube users are portraying female athletes in different, more positive ways is uncertain. Indeed, the high percentage of content that draws from, or is entirely corporately produced suggests that dominant representations of female athletes are being (re)produced online.

Depictions of Solo and Wambach

Solo and Wambach’s portrayals in the videos and comments differed in various ways. Consistent with existing literature (e.g., Christopherson, Janning, & McConnell, 2002), through both the content of many of the videos and a significant percentage of the analyzed comments, Solo was positioned as a sex object first, athlete second (“THUMBS UP IF YOUR SEARCHING FOR HOPE SOLO ON YOUTUBE JUST CAUSE SHES HOT!!”). For Wambach, the majority of her videos focused on her athleticism, strength, and work ethic. These videos can be seen as a way in which a female athlete is portrayed in a (fairly) positive light, possibly challenging hegemonic understanding of female athletes and women’s sports. Many commenters, for example, noted that they are more likely to watch women’s sports after seeing a video of Wambach in action (“that was so fucking gangsta! i gotta start watching more women's soccer”). Many comments posted in response to her videos, however, worked to denounce women’s sports by 1) employing sexist rhetoric; 2) bringing other soccer players into the discussion and proceeding to sexualize or feminize such players; and to a much lesser extent 3) feminizing or sexualizing Wambach.

The different strategies used to trivialize or downplay the athletic skills of Solo and Wambach may be a result of the degree to which they conform to traditional standards of femininity. As Shugart (2003) noted, athletes who cannot be easily (hetero)sexualized due to the way in which their appearance does not meet society’s narrow prescriptions of female (hetero)sex appeal, are treated differently than athletes who are more easily sexualized or feminized. The fact that Solo was overtly sexualized, while the trivialization of female athletes took place in more subtle ways in the comment section of Wambach’s videos, suggests that strategies used to demean women’s sports continue to be dependent upon certain social constructions—in this case, gender presentation.

CONCLUSION

While participatory content sharing sites provide an opportunity for problematic media representations of female athletes to be subverted, the results suggest that athletically-focused portrayals may be limited due to the extent to which new content is being generated, and the way in which female athletes—especially those who are traditionally feminine—are represented. Indeed, even when athletes such as Wambach are portrayed in ways that showcase her athleticism, the participatory nature of such sites allows for disempowering discourse that works to denigrate women’s sports. As this study was exploratory in nature, future studies could investigate whether some of these findings are consistent when larger samples are analyzed.

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Image 1: Michael, R. (2011). *Voice of the people for July 19, 2011*. Accessed October 22, 2011 from http://www.nydailynews.com/opinions/2011/07/19/2011-07-19_vox19ed.html
Image 2: *Hope Solo, I love you*. Accessed October 22, 2011, from <http://rumorsandrants.com2011/07/hope-solo-i-love-you.html>

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