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Sexy Versus Strong: What Girls and Women Think of Female Athletes

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### Abstract

Little research has investigated girls' and college women's reactions to non-objectified media images of women, including those that depict women in instrumental activities like playing a sport. This study examined open-ended responses to images of performance athletes, sexualized athletes, and sexualized models. Participants were 258 adolescent girls (ages 13-18) and 171 college women (ages 18-22). Responses were coded for inductively-derived themes. After viewing performance athletes, participants made instrumental evaluations of the athletes and themselves. They also considered these athletes to be role models and remarked that they transgressed traditional gender stereotypes. In contrast after viewing sexualized athletes, girls and women made objectified appraisals of the athletes and themselves. They also levied critiques about women's status in society in response to sexualized athletes. Participants viewed these images in a similar manner as general sexualized images of women. Findings suggest the need for more performance imagery of female athletes in mainstream media.

Key words: media, objectification, body image, female athletes, sports

## Sexy Versus Strong: What Girls and Women Think of Female Athletes

Mia Hamm is one of the greatest women soccer players, and this is portrayed perfectly in this picture. You can see the strength in her legs, and her concentration [sic] on the ball is clearly visible. She represents strength in women. (13-year-old, European-American girl)

With the increase in women's competitive sports leagues and the explosion in female sport participation since Title IX was passed in 1972, which increased funding to girls' and women's sports, female athletes are increasingly visible in today's media. Select female athletes, such as retired soccer player Mia Hamm and retired tennis player Anna Kournikova, are household names. Hamm is widely known for her athletic accomplishments and is often referred to as the greatest female soccer player of all time. Kournikova, in contrast, is well-known because of her sex appeal though she failed to win a major singles title during her career. Media coverage of these two athletes typifies two opposing ways in which female athletes are portrayed in media—performance-focused or sexualized. The latter pattern is consistent with the broader cultural trend to objectify women in media (e.g., American Psychological Association (APA), 2007), and female viewers may react to sexualized images of female athletes in similar ways as to general sexualized images of women. In contrast, performance images of female athletes may serve as a counterweight to objectified media imagery, inspiring a less appearance-focused emphasis. The aims of the present study were to investigate adolescent girls' and young women's thoughts about, and reactions to, these opposing media representations of female athletes, and to examine how they feel about themselves after viewing the images. Given the dominant role of media in society, it is especially important to better understand what media

imagery, like performance images of female athletes, might be perceived positively by youth so parents, educators, legislators, and engaged citizens can advocate for positive content in media.

Whereas a large body of psychological research has focused on the impact of idealized and sexualized media images on female viewers (e.g., for recent reviews, see Gilbert, Keery, & Thompson, 2005; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Levine & Harrison, 2004; Ward & Harrison, 2005), less is known about the impact of non-objectified images including those that depict women in instrumental activities like playing a sport (exceptions include Daniels, 2009a; Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Existing research suggests that viewers respond positively to these images. For example, Heywood and Dworkin (2003) showed U.S. middle and high school girls and boys a photograph of soccer player Brandi Chastain in action getting ready to kick a ball coming at her. Participants described her as “sporty,” “powerful,” and “talented” (p. 137). Both boys and girls reported that they “admired her athleticism” and liked that she “represented confidence” (p. 138). These findings suggest that youth make instrumental evaluations of female athletes when they are portrayed playing a sport.

In the present study, adolescent girls and college women were shown sexualized or performance images of female athletes and asked to describe the women in the photographs and discuss how the images made them feel. These open-ended responses allowed for an examination of which aspects of the women in the photographs viewers focused on and why particular images positively or negatively impacted them. For example in the quotation at the beginning of this paper, the adolescent girl who viewed the photograph of Mia Hamm remarked on Hamm’s physical strength and focus and considered Hamm’s athletic dominance as indicative of women’s strength more generally. In addition, she found this image to be inspirational

beyond a sport context. In light of the large volume of media that objectifies females, it is critical to determine what type of alternative media imagery might evoke less appearance-focused evaluations from female viewers.

### *Female Athletes and Media*

More girls and women play sports today than ever before. In the 2009-2010 academic year, 3.17 million girls participated in high school sports which means that 42% of high school athletes are female (National Federation of State High School Associations, n.d.). As of 2010, there are approximately 9,100 women's collegiate sport teams and over 180,000 females are inter-collegiate athletes (Acosta & Carpenter, n.d.). Thus, there are a large number of girls and women playing sports, yet there is very little media coverage of female sports. Messner and colleagues have tracked media coverage of female sports over the last two decades. Their recent report found that female sports constituted just 1.6% of sport media coverage on the nightly news of three network affiliates and ESPN's *SportsCenter* during 2009, which is an all-time low since beginning of the study in 1989 (Messner & Cooky, 2010).

When female athletes are featured in media, it is not unusual for them to be sexualized in print and visual media as well as color commentary, which includes expert analysis and background information on athletes and teams (e.g., Christopherson, Janning, & McConnell, 2002; Daniels & LaVoi, in press; Schultz, 2005; Shugart, 2003). Further, female athletes in highly sexualized poses, including swimmer Amanda Beard and race car driver Danica Patrick, have donned the covers of *FHM* (*For Him Magazine*), *Maxim*, and *Playboy* magazines. Just before the beginning of the 2010 Winter Olympics, *Sports Illustrated's* swimsuit edition featured Olympic skiers Lindsey Vonn and Lacy Schnoor as well as Olympic snowboarders Hannah Teter and Clair Bedez in bikinis. This type of media represents these women as sex objects rather than

athletes. Despite this anecdotal evidence of the sexualization of female athletes, a systematic investigation of the prevalence of sexualized images of female athletes across various media sources has not been conducted to date (see Daniels and LaVoi, in press for a comprehensive analysis of the sexualization of female athletes in media).

Some research has investigated viewers' perceptions of media images of female athletes. Knight and Giuliano (2001) found that athletes (both female and male) whose attractiveness received more attention than their athleticism in print media were perceived by male and female college students as less talented, less aggressive, and less heroic than athletes whose athleticism received more attention. Articles focusing on attractiveness were also preferred less than articles focusing on athleticism. Thus, coverage of athletes that focused on their athleticism was perceived more positively by the audience than coverage that focused on the athlete's attractiveness. In a similar line of inquiry, Gurung and Chrouser (2007) found that female college students rated female athletes depicted in a sexually provocative manner as significantly more attractive, more sexually experienced, more desirable, and more feminine, but less capable, less strong, less intelligent, less determined, and having less self-respect as compared to female athletes depicted in sport attire. In sum, athletes depicted provocatively were objectified by viewers and considered less capable.

In addition to research on viewers' perceptions of media images of female athletes, some research has investigated viewers' own self-perceptions after exposure to media images of female athletes. Thomsen, Bower, and Barnes (2004) found that teen girl athletes, who compared themselves to idealized images of women engaged in athletic activities in women's health, fitness, and sport magazines, felt negatively about themselves because they believed it was impossible for them to look like the women in the photographs. In a similar line of inquiry,

Daniels (2009a) found that adolescent girls and college women who viewed sexualized images of female athletes made more self-descriptions about their own physical appearance as compared to girls and women shown images of female athletes performing a sport who, in contrast, were more likely to make self-descriptions about their own physical abilities. Thus, sexualized images of female athletes prompted adolescent girls and college women to self-objectify and focus on their own physical appearance.

Lastly, Harrison and Fredrickson (2003) found that the ethnicity of a viewer and type of sport are important factors in how sport media impacts teen girls. They found that White girls tended to self-objectify after watching female athletes performing in lean sports (e.g., gymnastics), but they did not self-objectify after watching non-lean sport athletes (e.g., basketball). The opposite pattern was found among the girls of Color who self-objectified after watching non-lean sports, but not lean sports. These findings point to the multiple factors that need to be considered when investigating the effects of media images of female athletes on female viewers.

In summary, studies on viewers' perceptions of athletes portrayed as attractive or sexually provocative in media demonstrate that these athletes are considered less capable and talented than athletes represented in a manner that focuses on their athleticism (Gurung & Chrouser, 2007; Knight & Giuliano, 2001). Sexualized and idealized images of female athletes seem to prompt a focus on one's own physical appearance, whereas performance images elicit a focus on one's own athleticism (Daniels, 2009a; Thomsen, Bower, & Barnes, 2004). Collectively, these studies demonstrate the negative effects of focusing primarily on female athletes' attractiveness in media, rather than their athleticism.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Objectification theory provides guidance for the present investigation (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The theory holds that Western societies routinely sexually objectify the female body. Women's bodies are scrutinized as objects for the pleasure and evaluation of others, specifically males. As a result of this objectification, many girls and women focus on how their bodies *appear* rather than what they can *do*. Some research has demonstrated that women who self-objectify at a high rate also objectify *other* women, perhaps because they are highly aware of the importance of their own as well as other women's appearance in Western contexts (Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005). Indeed the practice of women objectifying other women may be fairly common. In a study of objectification in the workplace with over 60,000 participants, women reported feeling objectified by men and other women at similar rates (69% and 67%, respectively), suggesting that many women feel evaluated by members of their own gender (Niles, Daniels, Frederick, Elssesser, & Lever, 2008).

Objectification can occur within interpersonal and social encounters as well as individuals' experiences with visual media. There is substantial evidence documenting the widespread objectification of women in mainstream media and the negative effects of this objectification on female viewers (APA, 2007; Gilbert, Keery, & Thompson, 2005; Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz et al., 2002; Levine & Harrison, 2004; Ward & Harrison, 2005). In short, the media is full of imagery depicting body ideals unattainable for the majority of females, and many girls and women feel dissatisfied with themselves and their bodies after viewing these images.

### *Study Aims and Predictions*

In the present study, adolescent girls' (hereafter referred to as girls) and college women's reactions to performance versus sexualized images of female athletes were investigated. Sexualized images of (non-athlete) models were also part of the study design to provide a point



of comparison for the responses to the sexualized athletes. The three photograph conditions were (a) performance athletes, (b) sexualized athletes, and (c) sexualized models. Their responses were coded into a number of different themes (described below), for example, appearance and sport intensity. Comparisons of themes were tested between the following: (a) sexualized and performance athletes conditions; (b) sexualized athletes and sexualized models conditions; and (c) performance athletes and sexualized models.

Existing research has documented college and adult women's tendencies to self-objectify in response to exposure to sexually objectifying media (see Moradi & Huang, 2008 for a review; Aubrey, 2007). I, therefore, expected that after viewing sexualized images of women (both athletes and models) girls and college women would objectify themselves as well as the women in the photographs, remarking primarily on their own appearance and attractiveness as well as the women's appearance and attractiveness. Less is known about girls' and women's responses to instrumental media images of women, like athletes. However, some research has demonstrated that this type of media shifts girls' and women's attention away from their own appearance to their physical abilities (Daniels, 2009a). Therefore after viewing performance images of women athletes, I expected girls and college women to focus on their own physical skills as well as instrumental aspects of performance athletes such as their physical skills.

*Group membership variables.* Participants' own sport participation was considered as a factor relating to the content of their responses. It is possible that athlete images might trigger different commentary in athletes versus non-athletes. For example, athletes may be especially likely to describe performance athletes as role models compared to non-athletes. No specific athlete status hypotheses were predicted

Age was also considered as a factor relating to the content of participants' responses. As girls mature their bodies are increasingly looked at, commented upon, and otherwise evaluated by others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). College women may be especially aware of pressures to meet cultural standards of beauty and may, therefore, be more likely to focus on the physical appearance and attractiveness of the women in the photographs compared to girls. At the same time, college women are more likely than girls to have the abstract thinking skills (Fischer & Pruyne, 2003) necessary to offer critiques of sexualized imagery. No specific age-related hypotheses were predicted.

Lastly, ethnicity was considered as a factor relating to the content of participants' responses. Recent meta-analyses on the role of ethnicity in body satisfaction in the U.S. have provided conflicting results as to whether there are in fact ethnic group differences in global body image and body dissatisfaction (Grabe & Hyde, 2006; Roberts, Cash, Feingold, & Johnson, 2006). Some research has examined the effects of media on U.S. ethnic minority females' body image. In a longitudinal study with Latina girls (ages 11-17), Schooler (2008) found that frequent viewing of mainstream television was associated with decreases in body satisfaction across adolescence. Similarly in a small-scale study, Rivadeneyra, Ward, and Gordon (2007) found that certain genres of media use, including watching soap operas and movies, was associated with greater body dissatisfaction in Latina/o teens. In the present study, no specific ethnicity-related hypotheses were predicted.

Specific hypotheses included the following:

Hypothesis 1: Participants in the sexualized athletes and sexualized models conditions would objectify the women in the photographs by discussing their physical appearance and attractiveness more than participants in the performance athletes condition.

Hypothesis 2: Participants in the performance athletes condition would focus on instrumental aspects of the female athletes by discussing their physical skills and abilities more than participants in the sexualized athletes condition.

Hypothesis 3: Participants in the sexualized athletes and sexualized models conditions would self-objectify by making statements about their own physical appearance and attractiveness more than participants in the performance athletes condition.

Hypothesis 4: Participants in the performance athletes condition would focus on instrumental aspects of themselves and make statements about their own physical skills more than participants in the sexualized athletes and sexualized models conditions.

## Method

### *Participants*

Convenience samples of 258 girls (ages 13-18,  $M = 14.89$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) and 171 college women (ages 18-22,  $M = 19.00$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) were part of the present investigation which was part of a larger study. A cross-sectional design was used to investigate potential differences in these two populations. Girls were in grades 8-12 from 11 different classes in six schools (four public high schools, one public middle school, and one private preparatory school) located on the central coast of California.

Classroom teachers in a variety of classes, e.g., health, physical education, and science, distributed an informational letter and consent form to middle/high school students to take home to their parents. All students were invited to participate; there were no exclusion criteria. Parents were told that the author was conducting a project about adolescents' thinking about photographs they see in popular magazines. If a parent signed the consent form, the adolescent was eligible to participate in the study. On the day of data collection, the author asked

individuals who had parental consent if they wanted to participate in a study about media images. If they agreed, they signed an assent form indicating their willingness to be in the study. Only students who returned parental consent forms and signed assent forms themselves were allowed to take part in the study. Only one student who had parental consent declined to participate. The majority of students in all classes participated in the study. Surveys were administered during instructional time. Most commonly, only a small number of students ( $n < 5$ ) in a class did not participate. These students remained in their usual seats and worked quietly on homework during the survey administration. In two schools, students who did not participate were separated from students who did participate and sent to another location. The decision to separate students or not was at the classroom teacher's discretion.

After surveys were completed, all middle/high school students (both participants and non-participants) received a nutritional bar and a media literacy workshop on body image and beauty. A debriefing letter was also sent home with information about media and body image concerns. Five girls were dropped from the sample; one did not respond to the writing prompts, two others provided responses to the incorrect photographs due to errors in their survey packets, and two were not fluent in English.

College women were students in psychology classes at a medium-size university on the central coast of California. They were recruited through a posting on an online database used in introductory psychology classes. Their consent was obtained before participating in the study. One participant was dropped from the college sample because her age (26) was greater than the majority of the college women ( $M = 19$ ). After survey completion, a debriefing letter was provided with information about media and body image concerns.

The sample of girls was ethnically diverse with 39% White/European-American, 33% Chicana/Latina, 19% multiple ethnicities, 5% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American, 1% Black/African American, < 1% other ethnicity, and 2% not reported. The sample of college women was primarily White/European-American (70%) with 14% Asian, 8% multiple ethnicities, 8% Latina, 1% other ethnicity, < 1% African American, and 0% Native American.

The mean parental level of education in the sample of girls was ‘attended some college,’ whereas the mean parental level of education in the sample of college women was somewhat higher between ‘attended some college’ and ‘graduated from a 4-year college.’

### *Materials*

Fifteen color photographs of European-American women (five per each of the three experimental conditions) were used in the present study. Photographs of European-American women were used because they are the dominant racial group portrayed in media, especially media of female athletes, and are positioned as the ideal that girls and women should be striving to emulate (Berry, 2003; Davis & Harris, 1998). Photographs were selected from a variety of popular magazine such as *Sports Illustrated*, *Sports Illustrated for Women*, *Glamour*, and *Marie Claire*. Images of women in *Glamour* and *Marie Claire* are representative of images of women found in any popular press outlet and other types of media which males and females see on a regular basis (see APA, 2007).

The three experimental conditions contained photographs of women who were (a) sexualized athletes, (b) performance athletes, and (c) sexualized models. The majority of photographs depicted the woman’s entire body. The photographs of female athletes were labeled with the athlete’s name and sport. The sexualized models were not famous. Their photographs

were labeled with a fictional woman's name, and her occupation was listed as a model. No text appeared on any of the photographs except for name and occupation.

Pilot testing with a pool of 40 photographs was conducted with college students ( $n = 28$  women,  $n = 10$  men) prior to data collection to ensure that women in the five photographs used in each condition were similar on level of attractiveness, affect, and age. Photographs were excluded from use if: (a) the woman depicted was considered unattractive or unhappy, and; (b) the woman depicted was considered to be older than 30 or younger than 20.

Different sets of photographs, all of which were part of the pilot test, were used for the three experimental conditions. To increase the ecological validity of the study, photographs of female athletes were selected based on the way that that athlete is typically portrayed in the media, that is, *either* as an athlete *or* as a sex object. For example, at the height of her career, Anna Kournikova was frequently portrayed in sexualized photographs in contrast to the more limited media imagery of her actually playing tennis. The opposite pattern was true of Mia Hamm, who was primarily portrayed as an athlete and rarely, if ever, depicted in an overtly sexualized manner. An alternative approach would be to present the same female athlete in each of the two athlete photograph conditions, but such matched sets were not available to this author at the time this study was designed. Because ecological validity was a priority and photographs were not digitally altered beyond removing text, there is some variability (noted below) in whether images were full or three-quarter shots.

Athletes in the two athlete conditions represent a range of sports including feminine-stereotyped sports, such as tennis, and masculine-stereotyped sports, such as basketball (Cahn, 1994; Csizma, Wittig, & Schur, 1988; Metheny, 1965). To my knowledge, the last empirical study to investigate gender stereotypes associated with particular sports was conducted in 1988

(Csizma, Wittig, & Schur). In the intervening 20 years, female involvement in sports has grown considerably (Acosta & Carpenter, n.d.; National Federation of State High School Associations, n.d.). In addition, female athletes have excelled in so-called masculine sports such as soccer. The U.S. women's team won the World Cup in soccer in 1991 and 1999, and made it to the World Cup final in 2011, winning a silver medal (Wikipedia, n.d.). They also won Olympic gold in 1996, 2004, and 2008 (Wikipedia, n.d.). In the 2009-10 academic year, over 350,000 girls played soccer in the U.S. (National Federation of State High School Associations, n.d.). Because current attitudes around gender and participation in particular sports are not empirically established, a mixture of historically female-typed and male-typed sports was represented in the two athlete conditions.

The *sexualized athletes condition* was comprised of photographs of five athletes including Lauren Jackson (basketball player), Ekaterina Gordeeva (ice-skater), Jenny Thompson (swimmer), Jenny Finch (softball player), and Anna Kournikova (tennis player) posed in bathing suits. Jackson, Finch, and Kournikova were wearing bikinis and their photographs covered three-quarters of their body. Thompson was wearing swim trunks and covering her breasts with her hands. Gordeeva was wearing a one-piece bathing suit and was posed with her backside facing forward as she looked over her shoulder at the camera. Thompson's and Gordeeva's entire bodies were captured in the photographs.

The *performance athletes condition* was comprised of photographs of five athletes including Anne Strother (basketball player), Jen O'Brien (skateboarder), Jennifer Capriati (tennis player), Lisa Anderson (surfer), and Mia Hamm (soccer player) engaged in their sports. These were action photographs of them playing their sports in sporting attire. Strother and O'Brien were wearing sleeveless jerseys and shorts that extended to their knees. Capriati was wearing a

sleeveless shirt and skirt. Her photograph showed three-quarters of her body, cutting off the lower portion of her legs therefore her skirt covered all of her legs shown in the photograph.

Anderson was wearing a short-sleeve wetsuit top with long pants. Hamm was wearing a short-sleeve jersey and shorts that extended half-way down her thigh.

The *sexualized models condition* was comprised of photographs of five models given the fictional names of Mary Donald (model), Sarah Mitchell (model), Elisa Jacobs (model), Megan Jones (model), and Tara Anderson (model) posed in bikinis or lingerie. Donald, Mitchell, and Anderson's entire bodies were shown. The photographs of Jacobs and Jones were three-quarter shots.

In each condition, photographs were presented to participants in the same order described here.

### *Procedure*

Girls were tested in group administrations during one class period. Each class was randomly assigned to a photograph condition. Due to varying class sizes, sample sizes varied by experimental condition ( $n = 84$  sexualized athletes;  $n = 57$  performance athletes, and;  $n = 112$  sexualized models). College women were tested in small groups of 1-10, but were individually randomly assigned to a photograph condition. Sample sizes by condition were approximately equal ( $n = 56$  sexualized athletes;  $n = 59$  performance athletes, and;  $n = 55$  sexualized models).

All participants viewed five photographs and completed a short writing exercise after each image. After viewing two of the five photographs (the first photograph and the last photograph in the survey packet), participants were instructed, "after looking at this photograph, please write one paragraph describing the woman in the photograph and discussing how this photograph makes you feel." The two photographs in each condition are as follows: (a) Lauren



Jackson (basketball player) and Anna Kournikova (tennis player) were *sexualized athletes*; (b) Anne Strother (basketball player) and Mia Hamm (soccer player) were *performance athletes*; and (c) Mary Donald (model) and Tara Anderson (model) were *sexualized models*. Due to time constraints, after the other three photographs, participants were instructed, “give the photograph you’ve just seen a title that captures the theme of the photograph.” This task was intended to ensure that participants looked at and thought about each photograph. Captions were not analyzed for the present study. The present paper involves analyses of the longer, open-ended responses to two of the five photographs. These longer responses provided more information about the participants’ perceptions than the short captions did. The number of photographs viewed and the type of writing exercise (caption versus paragraph) were based on time constraints for survey administration in schools which was conducted during instruction.

After finishing the writing prompts, participants completed a questionnaire. Measures of interest to the present study are described below.

### *Measures*

*Background measures.* Demographic information collected included age, ethnicity, and parental education. Participants were asked to circle all that apply from the following list of ethnicities: *Asian American/Pacific Islander*, *Black/African American*, *Chicana/Latina*, *Native American*, *White/European-American*, and *Other*. For “other” ethnicity, participants were provided a line to write in their ethnic background. Participants were asked to identify their mother’s and father’s highest level of education from the following options: (a) *I don’t know*; (b) *some high school or less*; (c) *graduated high school*; (d) *attended some college*; (e) *graduated from a 4-year college*; or (f) *postgraduate study or degree (for example, Master’s degree, Ph.D., or similar degree)*.

*Sport participation.* Participants were asked about their physical activity patterns. They were asked “Do you belong to an organized sports team?” Response options included (a) *no*, (b) *high school team*, (c) *intramural team*, (d) *religious organization team*, (e) *parks and recreation department team*, and (f) *other*. Girls were categorized as athletes if they reported playing sports in school or another organized setting. If they indicated no sport participation in these settings, they were categorized as non-athletes. College women were categorized as athlete or non-athlete based on their high school sport participation.

#### *Open-ended Coding*

Thematic analysis was used to code participants’ open-ended responses to the photographs (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes present in participants’ responses were inductively-derived, a “bottom-up” process in which themes “are strongly linked to the data themselves” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Thus, the development of themes (described in detail below) was based primarily on participants’ responses rather than on prior research. By using this approach, I allowed for the possibility that participants would respond to the photographs in ways I could not predict a priori. However, I did rely on objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) to the extent that I expected participants’ responses to the sexualized athletes and models to contain references to the women’s appearance and attractiveness. In addition, based on Heywood and Dworkin’s (2003) work, I expected responses to the performance athletes to contain references to the physical abilities and skills of the athletes. An alternative approach would be a deductive or “top down” process which would rely heavily on previous research to identify expected themes in participants’ responses and exclude participants’ statements that fell outside of those expected themes. Because little research has been done investigating viewers’ perceptions of female athletes, especially ones depicting female athletes performing their sports, the inductive approach was selected for data analysis in the

present study. This approach allowed me to capture the full range of participants' reactions to the photographs.

The development of themes was conducted by the author and a team of undergraduate researchers, and involved: (a) a close read of all responses to identify recurring concepts; (b) extensive discussion about recurring concepts including the boundaries between one concept and another; (c) formation of specific themes based on recurring concepts; and (d) creation of a coding manual with definitions of themes. Teams of two independent coders (the author and three undergraduate research assistants;  $n = 3$  European-American,  $n = 1$  Asian-American women) classified responses to the photographs.

Before coding participants' open-ended responses, I trained coders with the coding manual and fictional example responses for each theme. After adequate inter-coder reliability was obtained with example responses, coders rated participants' actual open-ended responses independently and subsequently compared their ratings. Responses were coded for the presence (1) or absence (0) of each theme. The emotional tone of statements in particular themes (noted below) were coded as positive (1), neutral (0), and negative (-1). A response could contain multiple themes, for example, a statement about the appearance of the woman in the photograph *and* a self-evaluation of the participant's own appearance. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion. A final decision was jointly reached based on these discussions. Inter-rater reliability between coders ranged from acceptable to excellent across themes ( $\kappa$ s = .67 to .90). Specific kappas for each theme are listed below. Individual themes were organized into five meta-themes including (a) *Her Appearance and Attractiveness*, (b) *Her Athleticism*, (c) *My Body/Looks*, (d) *My Feelings about Her*, and (e) *Society*. These five meta-themes encompassed

18 individual themes, some of which were collapsed into composite themes after the coding process to facilitate data analysis and interpretation.

### *Her Appearance and Attractiveness*

Three individual themes encompassed *her appearance and attractiveness*. All focused on various aspects of the physical appearance of the woman in the photograph. The *her body* theme ( $\kappa = .90$ ) captured statements that focused on the woman's general physical appearance (e.g., "very pretty"), body shape/size (e.g., "great body"), and weight (e.g., "very slender"). The emotional tone of *her body* statements was coded as positive (e.g., "she has such an awesome body"), neutral (e.g., "blonde"), or negative (e.g., "I don't think she's very pretty") statements ( $\kappa$  emotional tone = .84). The *female ideal/male gaze* theme involved comparisons of the woman in the photograph to an idealized standard of how women should look and/or comments on the perspective of male viewers ( $\kappa = .72$ ; e.g., "she is an image that guys look at and say that's what I want"). The *sexy* theme included statements about the woman's sexiness or the sexual nature of her pose in the photograph ( $\kappa = .85$ ; e.g., "she looks really seductive").

### *Her Athleticism*

Two individual themes comprised *her athleticism*. The *physicality* theme captured statements about the woman's physical activity involvement or competence ( $\kappa = .83$ ; "apparently she is a basketball player but she doesn't look like one"). The emotional tone of *physicality* statements was coded as positive (e.g., "seems incredibly strong and athletic"), neutral (e.g., "she's in shape"), or negative (e.g., "she is not the greatest player") statements ( $\kappa$  emotional tone = .72). The *sport intensity* theme included statements about the athlete's focus and/or commitment to her sport ( $\kappa = .88$ ; "she's driven and she loves the game").

### *My Body/Looks*

Three individual themes comprised *my body/looks*. The *self-evaluation* theme captured statements about participants' self-perceptions after viewing the photographs ( $\kappa = .80$ ; "makes me feel fat and ugly"). The emotional tone of *self-evaluation* statements was coded as positive (e.g., "I think this girl is a fantastic model I feel like her because I think I have a good body to do [sic] like model"), neutral (e.g., "If I was aiming to look like that, it would not be that unrealistic of a goal"), or negative (e.g., "looking at this picture depresses me and makes me wonder why I can't look like that or be that beautiful and look like that") statements ( $\kappa$  emotional tone = .68).

The *my physical activity* theme included statements about participants' own level of physical activity or desire to be doing something physically active ( $\kappa = .86$ ; "this photograph makes me feel like I want to go outside and run around"). The emotional tone of *my physical activity* statements was coded as positive (e.g., "this photograph makes me want to play soccer again"), neutral (e.g., "makes me feel like I should get in shape"), or negative (e.g., "seeing her look so good in that bikini makes me wanna [sic] exercise 5 hrs a day") statements ( $\kappa$  emotional tone = .76). The negative statements linked the desire to exercise to attaining an ideal body shape/size rather than exercising for enjoyment. The *athlete/sport fan* theme involved statements that reflected participants' own sport or fan involvement ( $\kappa = .85$ ; "I'm a soccer player/and fan").

#### *My Feelings about Her*

Two individual themes encompassed *my feelings about her*. The *admiration/jealousy* theme captured statements about admiring or being envious of the woman's body ( $\kappa = .75$ ; "I am very jealous of her long abdomen and seemingly perfect body"). The *role model/inspiration* theme included statements about what a good example the woman is to others and how motivating she is ( $\kappa = .71$ ; "although I'm not a soccer player, this gives me a sense of

determination to achieve my goal even if it doesn't involve a soccer ball. This photo represents woman who are strong").

### *Society*

Two individual themes encompassed *society*. The *breaking gender stereotypes* theme captured statements that the woman in the photograph is transgressing traditional gender boundaries ( $\kappa = .87$ ; "Mia Hamm seems very focused at the task at hand. It is this type of instance that shows what women can do. I think many people think of men as better, more dedicated athletes. I strongly disagree with that notion, and I think this picture is a good representation as to why I feel that way"). The *societal statements* theme included statements that implicitly or explicitly connected the photograph to women's status in society and/or statements that reflected anger over the portrayal of the woman in the photograph ( $\kappa = .67$ ; "I'm disgusted. When talking about a male athlete he wouldn't be half naked. So why is this woman in a bikini? Women are viewed as objects of lust").

## Results

### *Data Analysis Plan*

Open-ended responses to the 2 photographs participants were asked to write about in paragraph form were collapsed to facilitate analysis of the large volume of statements contained in these responses. Therefore, if a theme was present in either of the 2 responses each participant provided, that theme was coded as present (1). If a theme did not appear in either of the 2 responses, it was coded as absent (0). See Table 1 frequencies of themes by condition.

A series of pair-wise chi-square analyses were conducted to determine if the frequency of themes varied by photograph condition. Specific comparisons included: (a) sexualized and performance athletes conditions; (b) sexualized athletes and sexualized models conditions; and

(c) performance athletes and sexualized models. To facilitate readability, chi-square analyses between the sexualized and performance athletes conditions (comparison a) are reported in full detail. Only significant differences between sexualized athletes and sexualized models conditions (comparison b) are reported in detail. Finally, for performance athletes and sexualized models (comparison c), only patterns that differ from performance and sexualized athletes comparisons (comparison a) are reported in detail. Examples of participants' open-ended responses are provided in addition to the chi-square analyses. Effect sizes are reported as Cramer's V statistics.

Chi-square analyses were also conducted to investigate if the emotional tone of statements (positive, neutral, negative) in particular themes, including the *her body*, *physicality*, *self-evaluations*, and *my physical activity* themes, varied by photograph condition. These omnibus chi-square analyses of three possible emotional tones were followed with post hoc pairwise comparisons following Cox and Key (1993); only significant group differences are reported below. Percentages of responses by emotional tone are reported in Table 2.

Athlete status, age, and ethnicity were investigated as possible factors related to the type of statements made. A series of chi-square analyses were conducted to determine if the frequency of themes varied by each of these variables separately.

#### *Sexualized Athletes Compared to Performance Athletes*

*Her appearance and attractiveness.* Hypothesis 1 predicted that participants in the sexualized athletes and sexualized models conditions would objectify the women in the photographs more than participants in the performance athletes condition. As expected, participants who saw the sexualized athletes made more *her appearance and attractiveness* statements than did participants who saw the performance athletes. Specifically, participants

who saw the sexualized athletes (87.9%) made more statements about *her body* than did participants who saw the performance athletes (24.8%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 257) = 104.92, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .64$ . The planned chi-square analysis to investigate if the emotional tone of *her body* statements varied by photograph condition was not possible because the expected frequencies for some cells were less than five. This problem occurred for select other chi-square analyses and is noted below. For these analyses, only descriptive statements are presented in text. The majority of *her body* statements about the sexualized athletes were positive in tone, whereas the majority of *her body* statements about the performance athletes were neutral in tone. A positive *her body* statement about a sexualized athlete was, "the woman is very beautiful. She is skinny, very tan, and well-toned." (18-year-old, European-American). A neutral *her body* statement about a performance athlete was, "she is Caucasian and has blond hair. Her hair is in a ponytail" (13-year-old, European-American).

Participants who saw the sexualized athletes (30.0%) also made more *female ideal/male gaze* statements than did participants who saw the performance athletes (0.9%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 257) = 38.86, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .39$ . A *female ideal/male gaze* statement about a sexualized athlete was, "[she] makes all the guys drool over her" (16-year-old, Persian).

Lastly, participants who saw the sexualized athletes (46.4%) made more *sexy* statements than did participants who saw the performance athletes (0%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 257) = 72.71, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .53$ . A *sexy* statement about a sexualized athlete was, "only one word comes to mind sex" (18-year-old, multiple ethnicities).

*Her athleticism.* Hypothesis 2 predicted that participants in the performance athletes condition would focus on instrumental aspects of the female athletes more than participants in the sexualized athletes condition. Unexpectedly, there was no significant difference in the



prevalence of *physicality* statements between the sexualized athlete (58.6%) and performance athlete conditions (66.7%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 257) = 1.78, p = .18$ . However, there was a difference in the emotional tone of statements made in the two conditions,  $\chi^2 (2, n = 159) = 37.15, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .48$ . All of the *physicality* statements about the performance athletes were neutral or positive in tone. A positive *physicality* statement about a performance athlete was, "Ann Strother seems incredibly strong and athletic" (15-year-old, European-American). A neutral *physicality* statement about a performance athlete was, "she seems athletic, alert, active" (14-year-old, multiple ethnicities). The *physicality* statements about the sexualized athletes were primarily neutral in tone, but roughly a third were negative and few were positive. A negative *physicality* statement about a sexualized athlete was, "The picture demeans this athlete's ability – her attractiveness is overpowering her talent" (19-year-old, European-American). Pair-wise post hoc tests revealed the following significant group differences in emotional tone: negative and neutral statements,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 112) = 22.40, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .45$ ; positive and neutral statements,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 131) = 6.18, p = .01$ , Cramer's  $V = .22$ ; positive and negative statements,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 75) = 37.05, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .70$ .

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, participants who saw the performance athletes (71.8%) made more *sport intensity* statements than did participants who saw the sexualized athletes (0.7%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 257) = 145.48, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .75$ . A *sport intensity* statement about a performance athlete was, "she looks like she is trying really hard to get the ball. Like she's tough and not afraid to get dirty. Like she's ready to stand up to anyone. She does what she loves" (14-year-old, multiple ethnicities).

*My body/looks.* Hypothesis 3 predicted that participants in the sexualized athletes and sexualized models conditions would self-objectify more than participants in the performance

athletes condition. As expected, participants who saw the sexualized athletes (40.0%) made more *self-evaluation* statements than did participants who saw the performance athletes (17.1%),  $\chi^2(1, n = 257) = 16.06, p < .001$ . Cramer's  $V = .25$ . The planned chi-square analysis to investigate if the emotional tone varied by photograph condition was not possible because the expected frequencies for some cells were less than five. The majority of *self-evaluations* for both the sexualized athletes and performance athletes conditions were negative. A negative *self-evaluation* about a sexualized athlete was, "this photograph makes me feel fat and not pretty. It also makes me feel that shes [sic] perfect and that I have no chance" (15-year-old, European-American).

Hypothesis 4 predicted that participants in the performance athletes condition would make statements about their own physical skills more than participants in the sexualized athletes and sexualized models conditions. As expected, participants who saw the performance athletes (28.2%) made more *my physical activity* statements than did participants who saw the sexualized athletes (15.7%),  $\chi^2(1, n = 257) = 5.91, p = .02$ , Cramer's  $V = .15$ . A *my physical activity* statement after viewing a performance athlete was, "this photograph makes me feel like geting [sic] up and playing some type of sport. It's a very active photo, very aggressive and powerful" (14-year-old, multiple ethnicities). The planned chi-square analysis to investigate if the emotional tone varied by photograph condition was not possible because the expected frequencies for some cells were less than five. *My physical activity* statements were coded as positive if they reflected motivation to get active, like the prior example. They were coded as negative if they reflected motivation to attain a body shape through physical activity such as "She has a nice body and stomach because she is really active. Good for her. And now i [sic] really want to try tennis." (14-year-old, European-American, sexualized athletes). The majority

of *my physical activity* statements in the performance athletes condition were positive in tone, whereas the majority of the statements about the sexualized athletes were negative in tone.

Also consistent with Hypothesis 4, participants who saw the performance athletes (30.8%) made more *athlete/sport fan* statements than did participants who saw the sexualized athletes (4.3%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 257) = 32.70, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .36$ . An *athlete/sport fan* statement about a performance athlete was, "I've played soccer my entire life and this photo makes me feel great seeing a woman playing the sport I love on a pro level" (18-year-old, European-American).

*My feelings about her.* Participants who saw the sexualized athletes (40.0%) made more *admiration/jealousy* statements than did participants who saw the performance athletes (10.3%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 257) = 28.98, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .34$ . An *admiration/jealousy* statement about a sexualized athlete was, "seeing her body, as nice as it is, makes me wish my body was as nice as hers" (19-year-old, European-American). The opposite pattern was found for *role model/inspiration* statements. Participants who saw the performance athletes (40.2%) made more *role model/inspiration* statements than did participants who saw the sexualized athletes (5.0%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 257) = 47.50, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .43$ . A *role model/inspiration* statement about a performance athlete was, "in this photo, Mia Hamm runs her heart out for the love of one game. Although I'm not a soccer player, this gives me a sense of determination to achieve my goal even if it doesn't involve a soccer ball. This photo represents woman [sic] who are strong..." (15-year-old, European-American).

*Society.* Participants who saw the performance athletes (35.0%) made more *breaking gender stereotypes* statements than did participants who saw the sexualized athletes (1.4%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 257) = 51.69, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .45$ . A *breaking gender stereotypes* statement about

a performance athlete was, “this picture makes me feel good because she is succeeding in changing the line that has previously been just a “man’s world.” She is helping women to push farther [sic]” (17-year-old, European-American).

Participants who saw the sexualized athletes (39.3%) made more *societal statements* than did participants who saw the performance athletes (11.1%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 257) = 26.00, p < .001$ , Cramer’s  $V = .32$ . A societal statement after viewing a sexualized athlete was, “I hate that the media is using this woman’s body like this. Tennis has nothing to do with scantily clad women. What the hell!? It pisses me off” (15-year-old, multiple ethnicities). An example *societal statement* in the performance athletes condition was, “this picture makes me feel that despite the many leagues and other activity in sports women have been “allowed” to participate in, I still believe that we are underrepresented in sports as well as other parts of our culture” (20-year-old, Asian).

*Summary.* Consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 3, participants who saw the sexualized athletes made more *her body, female ideal/male gaze, sexy, self-evaluation, admiration/jealousy*, and *societal statements* than did participants who saw the performance athletes. In contrast, consistent with Hypotheses 2 and 4, participants who saw the performance athletes made more *sport intensity, my physical activity, athlete/sport fan, role model/inspiration*, and *breaking gender stereotypes* statements than did participants who saw the sexualized athletes.

#### *Sexualized Athletes Compared to Sexualized Models*

*Her appearance and attractiveness.* Participants who saw the sexualized athletes (30.0%) made more *female ideal/male gaze* statements than did participants who saw the sexualized models (16.0%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 309) = 8.68, p < .01$ , Cramer’s  $V = .17$ . Participants who

saw the sexualized athletes (46.4%) also made more *sexy* statements than those who saw the sexualized models (20.1%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 309) = 24.34, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .28$ .

*Her athleticism.* Participants who saw the sexualized athletes (58.6%) made more *physicality* statements than did participants who saw the sexualized models (20.1%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 309) = 48.29, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .40$ . There was also a difference in the emotional tone of statements made in the two conditions,  $\chi^2 (2, n = 117) = 12.35, p < .01$ , Cramer's  $V = .33$ . *Physicality* statements about the sexualized athletes varied in tone, whereas *physicality* statements about the sexualized models were primarily neutral in tone. Pair-wise post hoc tests revealed the following significant group differences in emotional tone: negative and neutral statements,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 97) = 12.25, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .36$ .

*My body/looks.* Participants who saw the sexualized models (53.8%) made more *self-evaluation* statements than did participants who saw the sexualized athletes (40.0%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 309) = 5.89, p = .02$ , Cramer's  $V = .14$ . The majority of *self-evaluations* for both the sexualized models and sexualized athletes conditions were negative. A negative *her body* statement about a sexualized model was, "this woman makes me feel fat" (18-year-old, European-American).

*Society.* Participants who saw the sexualized athletes (39.3%) made more *societal statements* than did participants who saw the sexualized models (8.3%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 309) = 42.43, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .37$ .

*Summary.* Participants who saw the sexualized athletes made more *female ideal/male gaze, sexy, physicality, and societal statements* compared to participants who saw the sexualized models. In contrast, participants who saw the sexualized models made more *self-evaluation* statements compared to participants who saw the sexualized athletes. There was no difference between participants who saw the sexualized athletes and those who saw the sexualized models

in the prevalence of *her body* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 309) = 0.34, p = .56$ ), *my physical activity* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 309) = 0.46, p = .50$ ), and *admiration/jealousy* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 308) = 0.78, p = .38$ ) statements.

Finally, planned chi-square analyses for the *sport intensity*, *athlete/sport fan*, *role model/inspiration*, and *breaking gender stereotypes* themes and the emotional tones of the *self-evaluation* and *my physical activity* themes were not possible because the expected frequencies for some cells were less than five.

#### *Performance Athletes Compared to Sexualized Models*

Results comparing performance athletes and sexualized models were the same as results comparing performance athletes and sexualized athletes with two exceptions. First, only participants who saw the sexualized athletes (not the sexualized models) made more societal statements than participants who saw the performance athletes. Second, participants who saw the performance athletes (66.7%) made more *physicality* statements than did participants who saw the sexualized models (20.1%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 286) = 62.88, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .47$ .

The remaining patterns were the same. Participants who saw the sexualized models made more *her body* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 286) = 126.32, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .67$ ), *female ideal/male gaze* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 286) = 17.90, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .25$ ), *sexy* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 286) = 26.71, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .31$ ), *self-evaluation* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 286) = 39.32, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .37$ ), and *admiration/jealousy* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 285) = 22.79, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .28$ ) statements than participants who saw the performance athletes. In contrast, participants who saw the performance athletes made more *physicality* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 286) = 62.88, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .47$ ), *sport intensity* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 285) = 167.05, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .77$ ), *my physical activity* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 286) = 10.27, p = .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .19$ ), *athlete/sport fan* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 286) = 59.49, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .46$ ), *role model/inspiration* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 286) = 70.65, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V$

= .50), and *breaking gender stereotypes* ( $\chi^2 (1, n = 286) = 69.13, p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .49$ ) statements than did participants who saw the sexualized models. There was no difference in the prevalence of *societal statements* between participants who saw the performance athletes (8.3%) and those who saw the sexualized models (11.1%),  $\chi^2 (1, n = 286) = 0.65, p = .42$ . Finally, planned chi-square analyses for the emotional tones of the *her body*, *physicality*, *self-evaluation* and *my physical activity* themes were not possible because the expected frequencies for some cells were less than five.

#### *Group Membership Analyses*

*Athlete status.* Thirty-five percent of girls and twenty-three percent of women in the sample reported playing on an organized sport team. Level of sport participation did not differ significantly across the photograph conditions.

Chi-square analyses investigating the prevalence of themes by athlete status (athlete, non-athlete) were conducted. No significant differences were found in the prevalence of themes between the two groups.

*Age.* Chi-square analyses investigating the prevalence of each theme by age (high school girls, college women) were conducted. Girls and women differed from each other on almost all themes. See Table 3.

*Ethnicity.* The sample was primarily European-American and Latinas comprised the largest ethnic minority group. Therefore, chi-square analyses investigating the prevalence of themes by ethnicity (European-American, Latina) were conducted. A number of differing patterns were found between the two groups. European-Americans were more likely to make statements in the following themes as compared to Latinas: *sexy* (27.5% European-American compared to 12.4% Latina,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 315) = 8.74, p < .01$ , Cramer's  $V = .17$ ), *physicality* (51.8%

European-American compared to 34.0% Latina,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 315) = 8.57, p < .01$ , Cramer's  $V = .17$ ), *sport intensity* (22.9% European-American compared to 13.4% Latina,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 315) = 3.81, p = .05$ , Cramer's  $V = .11$ ), *admiration/jealousy* (33.5% European-American compared to 20.6% Latina,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 315) = 5.34, p = .02$ , Cramer's  $V = .13$ ), and *societal statements* (22.0% European-American compared to 11.3% Latina,  $\chi^2 (1, n = 315) = 5.03, p = .03$ , Cramer's  $V = .13$ ).

### Discussion

The objective of the present study was to investigate adolescent girls' and college women's thoughts about, and reactions to, sexualized and performance media images of female athletes. Whereas a lot of research attention has focused on the effects of idealized and sexualized images of women's bodies on female viewers (e.g., APA, 2007; Grabe et al., 2008), less research has examined the effects of instrumental images of women on girls and women. After viewing sexualized images of women (both athletes and models), girls and college women were expected to objectify themselves as well as the women in the photographs, remarking primarily on their own appearance and attractiveness as well as the women's appearance and attractiveness. In contrast after viewing performance images of women athletes, girls and college women were expected to focus on their own physical skills as well as instrumental aspects of performance athletes such as their physical skills. These predictions were all supported. In addition, a number of themes emerged from participants' responses that were not predicted a priori. Below findings are discussed by type of photograph.

*Performance athletes.* After viewing performance athletes, girls and women remarked positively on the athletes' physicality and sport intensity. These patterns are consistent with Heywood and Dworkin's (2003) findings that middle and high school girls and boys made



instrumental evaluations in response to a media image of a female athlete. Across both studies, performance athlete images evoked similar responses from viewers. In the present study, the physicality and sport intensity statements about the performance athletes demonstrated that participants primarily viewed these women as capable or talented athletes, whereas the opposite was true about the sexualized athletes who some participants considered sub-par physically. Girls and women attributed a range of instrumental characteristics to the performance athletes including determination, focus, pursuit of a goal, and commitment to one's passion. These attributions were almost absent from the responses to the sexualized images, suggesting that girls and women ascribed agency to the performance athletes but not to the sexualized athletes.

Responses to the performance athletes contained more breaking gender stereotypes and role model/inspiration statements than responses to the other photographs. Performance athlete images stand in contrast to the typical media images of women which are idealized, objectified, and routinely digitally enhanced (Collins, 2008; Ward & Harrison, 2005). Viewers remarked on these athletes crossing traditional gender boundaries as in the "she is succeeding in changing the line that has previously been just a man's world" example above. In addition, many girls and women, athletes and non-athletes alike, viewed these images positively as inspirational to them as women, and considered these women to be role models. In contrast to media focused on females' appearance, these images generated esteem for the athletes' athletic accomplishments, solidarity with other women, and were viewed as an example to follow.

Finally, girls and college women reflected on their own physical activity and enjoyment of sport after viewing the performance athletes. They commented positively on feeling motivated to be active and described their own sport participation or appreciation for sport (sport fan), whereas sexualized images of female athletes largely did not generate such commentary.

Currently in the U.S., there is a national discussion about high levels of inactivity and rising rates of obesity among youth. In February 2010, First Lady Michelle Obama launched the *Let's Move* campaign to address these issues. While these issues likely require multi-faceted solutions, infusing more performance images of female athletes into the media may be helpful in promoting physical activity among girls and young women. Currently, female athletes are largely absent from magazines targeted at teen girls (Daniels, 2009b).

Overall, responses reflected the powerful, positive impact performance athlete images can have on female viewers. They seem to prompt an instrumental appraisal of the women in the photographs as well as an instrumental focus on the self in female viewers. Unfortunately, women's sports receive far less media attention than men's sports, and female athletes are frequently sexualized in media rather than portrayed as athletes (Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles & ESPN, 2001; APA, 2007; Messner & Cooky, 2010; Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport, 2007). There is a clear need for more media coverage of female athletes depicted as athletes.

*Sexualized athletes.* In keeping with objectification theory, after viewing sexualized images of female athletes, girls and women commented extensively on the women's bodies and sexiness. They admired or were jealous of the body/appearance of these women and made negative self-evaluations in comparison. Girls and women who viewed sexualized athletes described these athletes as the female ideal, but also made a number of societal statements critiquing such images. They did not make many sport intensity, role model/inspiration, or breaking gender stereotypes statements. In addition, sexualized athlete images did not evoke many statements about the viewer's own physical activity involvement or athlete/fan status. In

short, sexualized athlete images prompted objectified evaluations of the women in the photographs as well as the self in female viewers.

Participants remarked on the sexiness of the sexualized athlete or the sexiness of the pose at a high rate (46%). It was difficult, however, to assess whether statements about sexiness were positive or negative. Some were clearly negative, for example, “Anna seems way oversexed” (15-year-old, European-American). However, many contained no overtly evaluative language, e.g., sexy, trying to be sexy. The findings demonstrate that the sexualized nature of the photograph was prominent, and at least some participants objected to athletes being portrayed in this manner. Interestingly, viewers remarked less frequently about the sexiness of the sexualized models (20%), suggesting the practice of sexualizing models has been normalized. It is unremarkable, whereas the sexiness of images of female athletes is particularly noteworthy.

Girls and women remarked that sexualized female athletes were the female ideal more frequently than they identified sexualized models as being the ideal, suggesting that athletic bodies are valued. Although female athletes and women’s sports have historically been underrepresented in media, the 1990s brought bursts of media attention to women’s sports (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). After the U.S. women won gold medals in soccer, basketball, softball, gymnastics, and swimming in the 1996 Olympic Games, media coverage of women’s sports spiked and *Newsweek* magazine called it “the Year of the Woman.” Similar media attention ensued after the U.S. women’s soccer team won the World Cup in 1999. These and other gains by female athletes seem to have triggered a cultural shift toward valuing women’s athletic bodies (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). However, it is important to note that the female athletes who tend to be featured in media are those who conform to particular standards of beauty, specifically European-American standards of femininity. In this study, the sexualized

images of female athletes matched these standards; the images were of two thin, tanned, European-American women with long blonde hair. In contrast, Heywood and Dworkin (2003) found evidence of negative reactions to female athletes of Color whose bodies do not conform to European-American beauty standards. Their athletic bodies were critiqued and rejected unlike the bodies of the women in the present study.

Critiques of societal gender inequalities were most often made about the sexualized athletes. These remarks focused on the objectification of women at the structural level, for example, “this picture makes me feel that the woman needs to show off her body in order to be noticed. It’s as if her talents as a basketball player would be overlooked unless she was wearing a bikini. Sex appeal is an advertising strategy used in this picture, and it is somewhat offensive to me as a woman too” (19-year-old, European-American). Some statements were decidedly angry in tone, for example, “I hate that the media is using this woman’s body like this. Tennis has nothing to do with scantily clad women. What the hell!? It pisses me off” (15-year-old, multiple ethnicities). Of note, there were more societal statements about sexualized athletes than models, suggesting that girls and women objected to the sexualization of female athletes but not of models. This lack of resistance to sexualizing models likely reflects the culture’s dominant practice of objectifying female bodies. Athletes, however, transgress traditional gender roles, and some girls and women protested this contradictory imagery. Media literacy training could be one way to increase the number of viewers, both female and male, who critique any type of sexualized media (APA, 2007).

*Sexualized models.* Girls and women’s responses to sexualized model images were very similar to responses to sexualized athlete images, suggesting that viewers perceive sexualized athletes in the same manner as sexualized models. They commented on the women’s appearance

and attractiveness at a high rate. They remarked on the models' sexiness and reported that these women met the female ideal, but at lesser rates than those who saw the sexualized athletes. Sexualized models were admired for their body/appearance, and girls and women evaluated themselves negatively in comparison. Like sexualized athlete images, sexualized model images did not evoke many or any role model/inspiration, breaking gender stereotypes, or societal statements. The lack of societal statements critiquing the sexualization of models suggests that this practice is not especially noteworthy. Participants rarely linked the sexualization of models to women's status in society, nor did participants express much anger about this type of portrayal. In addition, as one might expect, there were few or no statements about sport intensity or the viewer's own physical activity involvement or athlete/fan status in response to viewing sexualized models.

#### *Group Membership Variables*

Athlete status, age, and ethnicity were investigated as possible factors related to the content of participants' responses. Unexpectedly, athlete status was not related to the content of participants' responses. It is possible that a more fine-grained measure of sport participation is necessary to better understand female athletes' reactions to athlete images. In the present study, participation on a sport team was considered a proxy for athlete status. Intensity of sport participation, e.g., number of hours per week or number of years in a sport, or avowing an athletic identity might be a more sensitive measure of athlete status. These possibilities should be explored in future research.

*Age.* A number of age-related differences were found in the content of participants' responses. However, the effect sizes for all of these differences were small in magnitude, suggesting that girls and college women differed minimally from each other. College women

reported more admiration/jealousy toward the women in the photographs and commented more extensively on the sexiness of the women in the photographs than girls did. There was no difference in the prevalence of her body and female ideal/male gaze statements between girls and women. Differing patterns might reflect a greater internalization of beauty standards among college women than high school girls. High school girls, like college women, identified standards of beauty through her body and female ideal/male gaze statements, but may not yet have internalized these standards for themselves to the extent that college women have, thus explaining the lower number of admiration/jealousy statements among girls.

College women also remarked more on the physicality and sport intensity of the women in the photographs as well as their own physical activity involvement and athlete/fan status than girls did. Given that physical activity involvement and sport participation drops off across high school and between the high school and college years (Acosta & Carpenter, n.d.; Kimm et al., 2002; National Federation of State High School Associations, n.d.), it is unclear why college women had a greater athleticism focus in their responses than girls did. Future research is necessary to clarify these differing patterns.

Finally, college women generated more role model/inspiration, breaking gender stereotypes, and societal statements than girls did. The latter two patterns likely reflect greater abstract thinking skills in young adulthood (Fischer & Pruyne, 2003). College women are better equipped cognitively than girls are to consider the relationship between media images and societal gender norms. They, therefore, would be more likely than girls to comment that performance athletes transgress gender stereotypes and to critique sexualized athlete images. The role model/inspiration pattern may also be explained by increased cognitive skills among college women. College women's greater awareness of societal gender inequalities may prompt

them to identify performance athletes, who are depicted in an instrumental manner rather than an objectified way, as role models more than high school girls would.

*Ethnicity.* Compared to European-Americans, Latinas in the present study made fewer statements in the following categories: sexy, admiration/jealousy, physicality, sport intensity, and societal statements. However, the effect sizes for all of these differences were small in magnitude, suggesting that European-Americans and Latinas differed minimally from each other.

Lower rates of sexy, admiration/jealousy, and societal statements among Latinas suggest that Latinas may be interacting with athlete images in somewhat different ways than European-American females. However, the two groups did not differ from each other in the prevalence of her body, female ideal/male gaze, and self-evaluation statements, suggesting that perhaps girls and women thought about and reacted to the images fairly similarly despite different ethnic group membership. More research is necessary to isolate the contribution ethnicity might make to one's interpretation of media images of female athletes. Prior research indicates that media diet and acculturation status are important factors in assessing media effects among ethnic minority youth (Rivadeneyra et al., 2007; Schooler, 2008).

Latinas made fewer physicality and sport intensity statements than European-Americans. Whereas 55% of European-American participants in the present study were athletes, only 28% of Latinas were athletes. The relatively low sport involvement of Latinas may have contributed to the lower prevalence of physicality and sport intensity statements. However, no difference was found between Latinas and European-Americans in the prevalence of my physical activity and athlete/sport fan statements. These findings suggest that athlete images did not prompt much reflection among Latinas about the athleticism of the female athletes, but did prompt reflection on their own athleticism at similar rates as in European-American girls and women.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

As for all studies, limitations in the present study must be acknowledged. Girls were not randomly assigned to a photograph condition. Instead, given constraints of classroom space and the small size of the data collection team, a classroom of students was randomly assigned to a condition. It is possible that there were classroom effects driving differences in types of statements between experimental conditions. Another potential limitation was that the athlete photographs were not matched in the performance and sexualized conditions. It is possible that participants' differing responses to the images were driven by differences among the athletes rather than the performance or sexualized manner in which they were depicted. Future research could address this concern by using matched images.

Finally, perceptions of athletes' degree of muscularity in the performance and sexualized conditions were not assessed in the pilot test. It is possible that there were meaningful differences on this dimension between athletes in the two conditions which impacted participants' reactions to the images. I do not believe this to be the case, however. Level of attractiveness was investigated in the pilot test and mean ratings were similar across conditions ( $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = .59$  performance athletes;  $M = 4.87$ ,  $SD = .51$  sexualized athletes; *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (6) scale). If the performance athletes were noticeably more muscular than the sexualized athletes, I would expect to see lower attractiveness ratings based on Heywood and Dworkin's (2003) work. However, future research could address this concern by using images matched on muscularity.

### *Conclusion*

This study demonstrates the need for more non-objectified images of women in media, including those that depict women in instrumental activities like playing a sport. Results indicate



that media coverage of female athletes shown performing a sport can positively impact female viewers by evoking an instrumental focus on what female athletes' bodies can do and on one's own athleticism. These images could be a powerful counterweight to the overly-thin standard portrayal of females currently dominating the media. Performance athlete images might also be useful for media literacy interventions which teach youth how to process media and messages embedded within it. In contrast, sexualized images of female athletes perpetuate a narrow focus on physical attractiveness similar to other objectified media images of women. In addition, these images are no more likely to prompt female viewers to reflect on their own physical activity involvement or appreciation of sport than sexualized model images.

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Table 1

*Frequencies of Themes in Participants' Responses By Photograph Conditions*

Theme	Performance Athletes	Sexualized Athletes	Sexualized Models	Total
	n/%	n/%	n/%	n/%
<i>Her Appearance and Attractiveness</i>				
Her body	29/24.8%	123/87.9%	152/89.9%	304/71.4%
Female ideal/male gaze	01/00.9%	42/30.0%	27/16.0%	70/16.4%
Sexy	00/00.0%	65/46.4%	34/20.1%	99/23.2%
<i>Her Athleticism</i>				
Physicality	78/66.7%	82/58.6%	34/20.1%	194/45.5%
Sport intensity	84/71.8%	01/00.7%	01/00.6%	86/20.2%
<i>My Feelings about Her</i>				
Admiration/jealousy	12/10.3%	56/40.0%	59/35.1%	127/29.9%
Role model/inspiration	47/40.2%	07/5.0%	03/01.8%	57/13.4%
<i>My Body/Looks</i>				
Self-evaluation	20/17.1%	56/40.0%	91/53.8%	167/39.2%
My physical activity	33/28.2%	22/15.7%	22/13.0%	77/18.1%
Athlete/sport fan	36/30.8%	6/14.3%	00/00.0%	42/09.9%
<i>Society</i>				
Breaking gender stereotypes	41/35.0%	2/01.4%	00/00.0%	43/10.1%
Societal statements	13/11.1%	55/39.3%	14/08.3%	82/19.2%



Table 2

*Percentages of Emotional Tones of Themes in Participants' Responses By Photograph**Conditions*

	Performance Athletes	Sexualized Athletes	Sexualized Models
	%	%	%
Her body			
Positive	28%	79%	67%
Negative	0%	4%	11%
Neutral	72%	17%	23%
Physicality			
Positive	45%	16%	21%
Negative	0%	34%	3%
Neutral	55%	51%	77%
Self-evaluation			
Positive	20%	9%	3%
Negative	75%	82%	88%
Neutral	5%	9%	9%
My physical activity			
Positive	97%	14%	0%
Negative	0%	82%	100%
Neutral	3%	5%	0%

*Note.* Percentages may total to greater than 100% due to rounding.

Table 3

*Frequencies of Themes in Participants' Responses By Age*

Theme	Girls n/%	Women n/%	$\chi^2$	p-value	Cramer's V
<i>Her Appearance and Attractiveness</i>					
Her body	187/73.3%	117/68.4%	1.21	.27	
Female ideal/male gaze	48/18.8%	22/12.9%	2.65	.10	
Sexy	46/18.0%	53/31.0%	9.63	< .01	= .15
<i>Her Athleticism</i>					
Physicality	103/40.4%	91/53.2%	6.79	< .01	= .13
Sport intensity	40/15.7%	46/26.9%	7.88	< .01	= .14
<i>My Feelings about Her</i>					
Admiration/jealousy	66/26.0%	61/35.7%	4.58	< .05	= .10
Role model/inspiration	26/10.2%	31/18.1%	5.56	< .05	= .11

*My Body/Looks*

Self-evaluation	96/37.6%	71/41.5%	0.64	.42	
My physical activity	36/14.1%	41/24.0%	6.72	< .05	= .13
Athlete/sport fan	16/06.3%	26/15.2%	9.19	< .01	= .15

*Society*

Breaking gender stereotypes	17/06.7%	26/15.2%	8.22	< .01	= .14
Societal statements	40/15.7%	42/24.6%	5.19	< .05	= .11

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*Note.* For all chi-square analyses, there was a 1 degree of freedom and the sample size was 426 except for the sport intensity and admiration/jealousy themes for which the sample size was 425.