

The Myth of Empowerment: Analysis of Women Athletes and Sexual Objectification



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Purpose

Despite public perception that women have gained credibility and respect as elite skilled athletes, female athletes continue to struggle to find positioning and empowerment within sport. There is a gap in the philosophical literature analyzing the objectification of female athletes especially at the elite level.

The increasing trend of women athletes posing nude in a variety of mediums (like *Playboy*, nude calendars, *FHM* magazine) highlights that we ought to be concerned with women's representations.

I argue that given the sexist context of the nude images, women athletes are less likely to be viewed as body-subjects and, in turn, are primarily showcased in a dualistic and objectified manner, which results in decreasing their empowerment and positioning as elite athletes.

Theoretical Framework

According to feminist ethicists Nel Noddings and Carol Gilligan, the overt social structure of society has historically been male dominated (Kluge, 1999).

The traditional female experience in social experiences like sport involves some extent of discrimination, and ultimately leaves women unequally powerless (Kluge, 1999).

An application of feminist ethics and theories can lead to the conclusion that persistent sexualization can result in serious harm.

The *Report of the Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* published in 2007 by the APA provides empirical evidence. Researchers concluded that continued sexualization affects girls negatively cognitively and in physical functioning.

To justify their incredible muscular bodies, some athletes see posing nude as an effective manner to celebrate women and athleticism.

It is important that athletic women celebrate their incredible bodies, however, I see concerns *how* the body celebrations are framed. Consequently, I borrow a line from Gail Dines to further emphasize my approach, "its not that I don't like sex, rather it's the type of sex that is celebrated that I worry about."

"we are not big, butch, masculine lesbian football players" (LFP: 2002:20)



Methodology

Through and examination of a selection of images, I argue that there is something objectionable about female athletes posing nude. The most common justifications for posing nude include:

- * lack of funding
- * enhanced media image and marketability
- * a goal of showcasing their strong powerful athletic bodies (Lenksyj 2008; Robinson 2002).

The image analysis highlights theories of sexualization, heteronormative culture, and homophobia which appear to be entangled within the justifications for posing nude.

Interpretation of sexualization is based on Paul Davis (2001) and Martha Nussbaum (1999) accounts on sexual objectification.

Sport is a celebration of the body-subject whereby the athlete ultimately seeks the unity of the self and the body (Davis, 2001: 289).

When the sexualization of an athlete decontextualizes the body and subject, a bifurcation between "sexualization" and "sexuality" occurs.

In other words, sex/sexuality is "good" because one is attracted to the person as subject, whereas sexualization is wrong because one primarily views the person as an object and the subject (agency) is removed.

Analysis

The continuum helps demonstrate the varying degrees of sexualization the sample of photographs represent:



Somewhat Sexually Objectified (SSO) **Moderately Sexually Objectified (MSO)** **Highly Sexually Objectified (HSO)**

- Duncan's (1990) criteria:
- * Project heterosexuality (cosmetics, jewelry, styled hair)
 - * Body positioning (submissive, hide physical stature)
 - * *Auto-Erotic Look* (head tilted, lips parted, back arch)

Key: **CONTEXT!** *Playboy* & *FHM* (packaging and readers)

Need to change negative perceptions of women, sex, and bodies. Difficult to achieve empowerment (while nude) within patriarchal societal expectations and ideals.

Strategies for Change



The *Antigone Foundation* in 2010, produced a calendar, **"Dreams for Women"**, that featured world class female athletes.

The athletes are mostly captured in action shots, in their uniforms, and short biographies are also included. Additionally, key historical moments for women in society and sport are listed in the daily boxes.

Represents an actual celebration of women's strong powerful bodies and spirit, consequently, moving beyond the simplistic dualistic approach that encompasses sexual objectification.

Moves beyond short-lived false empowerment experiences. Athletes are viewed and admired more for their athletic abilities than their ability to titillate.

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