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

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Findings Related to Sport Media Research

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

2) Sportswomen are routinely presented in ways that emphasize femininity and sexuality vs. athletic competence
Two Competing Narratives re: Impact of Media Patterns

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

2) Those who cover and promote women’s sports say a “sex sells” approach creates and increases interest
Lack of Empirical Support

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

- Therefore, we don’t know:
  - How representations of sportswomen are interpreted by consumers.
  - How interpretations impact attitudes and intentions to support (view/attend) women’s sports.
Cultural Assumptions Behind “Sex Sells” Narrative

- **News Headline:**
  “Soccer and Sex: Attractive Athletes Sell League”

- “Real” fans = male fans

- Best way to attract male fans = sexualize women

- Images of sexy, feminine sportswomen
  - ⇒ more social acceptance of women’s sports
  - ⇒ more (male) fan interest
  - ⇒ more attendance/corporate sponsorship/TV coverage
Reasons Why “Sex Sells” Approach Counterproductive

- Ignores & dismisses those most likely to support female athletes—young girls and women
- Marketing campaigns (WNBA) promote wholesome, All-American girl-next-door image
- Family values/connection between dads and daughters
- When males buy *SI* swimsuit issue, are they interested in consuming athletic events …
- …or sportswomen’s bodies as objects of sexual desire?
Audience Reception Research

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

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

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

Categories of Representation

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

Chamique Holdsclaw, WNBA
Ambivalence

Katie Smith, WNBA
“Girl-Next-Door”

Michelle Wie, Professional Golfer
Hyper-heterosexual

Mia Hamm, US Olympic Soccer
“Sexy Babe”

Serena Williams, Professional Tennis Player
Soft Pornography

Danica Patrick, Indy Racing League
Research Design

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

- “Situated Knowledge”
  - Age: 18-34; 35-55
  - Gender: Male / Female
  - Level of Sport Engagement: High / Low
Focus Group Protocol

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

- **Phase II**: Fill Out 1-7 Scale on How Each Image Makes You Want to:
  - Read About
  - Watch
  - Attend
  - Buy Season Ticket

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

- “Action”
- “Empowered”
- “Exciting”
- “Intensity”
Ambivalence

- “Embarrassing”
- “Silly/Fake”
- “Disconnect”
- “Well-rounded”
“Girl-Next-Door”

- “Tasteful/Classy”
- “Impractical”
- “What’s this have to do with golf?”
Hyper-heterosexual

- “Red-carpet celebrity”
- “Irrelevant to Sport”
- “Admiration”
- “Put Her in Action Photo”
“Sexy Babe”

- “Pretty Hot”
- “Strength & Beauty”
- “Disgusting”
- “Targeted to Men”
Soft Pornography

- “Hot/Yes!”
- “Selling Sex”
- “Pandering/ Demeaning”
- “Cheapens Herself”
Overall Impact of Image on Reading About & Watching Women's Sports Across All Age/Gender Groups

Mean Score

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

Type of Fan Consumption

Read

Watch

4.43
3.46
2.73
2.78
2.67
2.38
5.02
3.13
2.64
2.70
2.87
2.40
Overall Impact of Image on *Attending & Purchasing Season Tickets* Across All Age/Gender Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Fan Consumption</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
<th>Competence</th>
<th>Ambivalence</th>
<th>&quot;Girl Next Door&quot;</th>
<th>Hyper-Heterosexual</th>
<th>&quot;Sexy Babe&quot;</th>
<th>Soft Pornography</th>
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<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.81</td>
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Impact of Image on Attending Women's Sports by Gender of Fan

All Focus Groups by Gender

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<tr>
<th>Mean Score</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>5.46</td>
<td>4.38</td>
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Impact of Image on *Attending* Women's Sports by Age & Gender of Fan

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

### Mean Score

**All Focus Groups by Age & Gender Interaction**

- **35-55 Females**
  - Competence: 6.13
  - Ambivalence: 3.33
  - Girl Next Door: 3.00
  - Hyper-Heterosexual: 2.00
  - Sexy Babe: 2.40
  - Soft Pornography: 1.53

- **35-55 Males**
  - Competence: 4.73
  - Ambivalence: 2.45
  - Girl Next Door: 2.45
  - Hyper-Heterosexual: 2.64
  - Sexy Babe: 2.45
  - Soft Pornography: 2.19
Key Findings

- Ambivalence Image
  - Offends all groups equally
  - Being all things to all groups is unappealing to everyone
Key Findings (cont.)

- “Sexy Babe” & “Soft Pornography” Images
  - Interested the 18-34 males to buy magazines
  - Turned off all females & older males
  - Didn’t increase interest in / respect for women’s sports across the board
Key Findings (cont.)

- “Athletic Competence” Image
  - Significantly increased females’ intentions across all consumer options
  - 35-55 males more motivated to attend
  - 18-34 males ranked “sexy images” higher than all other focus groups
  - But still gave competence the highest rating
Conclusions

- All females and older males offended by sexualized images
  - Alienates core fan base
- Younger males interested in “sexy images” but did not translate into desire to become a fan
- These results, though preliminary, challenge bedrock assumption that “sex sells”
Conclusions (cont.)

- Contrast coverage with NCAA Division I Women’s Basketball

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