Exploring Elite Female Athletes’ Interpretations of Sport Media Images: A Window into the Construction of Social Identity and “Selling Sex” in Women’s Sports

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**Introduction**

- Media portrayals of sportswomen emphasize femininity/heterosexuality versus athletic athleticism.
- There is a gap in the knowledge base on how these portrayals are interpreted by female athletes.
- This study explored how elite female athletes respond to ways they are represented, and how those responses influence their attitudes toward their dual identities of athlete and traditional female.

**Examples of Media Images**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Caricature Image for Individual Sport (Female)</th>
<th>Caricature Image for Team Sport (Female)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feminine Experience</td>
<td>On court, action image with no compression or exaggeration</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/image1.png" alt="Image 1" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/image2.png" alt="Image 2" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine Message</td>
<td>Off court, assorted image with focus on compression and exaggeration</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/image3.png" alt="Image 3" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/image4.png" alt="Image 4" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine Dressy</td>
<td>Off court, portrait image with attention on hairstyle, makeup, and dress</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/image5.png" alt="Image 5" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/image6.png" alt="Image 6" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft Pornography</td>
<td>Off court, portrait image with focus on compression and exaggeration</td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/image7.png" alt="Image 7" /></td>
<td><img src="https://example.com/image8.png" alt="Image 8" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Fig 1.* Which image best represents yourself? *Fig 2.* Which image best represents your sport?

**Study Participants and Data Collection Procedures**

- A convenience sample consisting of 36 females in intercollegiate athletics at two universities (N = 18 per school).
- Participants competed in six sports: individual = swimming, tennis, track & field; and team = basketball, hockey, and softball.
- Face-to-face interviews examined participants’ feelings and beliefs about their dual identities, and images which best represented themselves and their sport.

**Methods**

**Key Findings**

Though each participant was asked to choose just one image, several picked two. Findings are presented as single-response participants (chose one image) vs. multiple-response participants (chose two images).

![Graph 1](https://example.com/graph1.png)  ![Graph 2](https://example.com/graph2.png)

*Fig 3.* Which image best increases respect? *Fig 4.* Which image best increases interest?

**Research Questions**

- Which images—ranging from on-court athleticism to off-court soft pornography—will female athletes choose to best represent themselves?
- Which images will female athletes choose to best represent/ increase respect for their sport?
- Will female athletes indicate a belief that a “sex sells” strategy promotes interest in women’s sports?

**Discussion**

**Competence Matters**

- Images of athleticism were the overwhelming choice:
  - The vast majority of sportswomen chose athletic competence as the image that best: 1) represented themselves; 2) represented their sport; and 3) increased respect for their sport.
  - This pattern was consistent across both team and individual sports.

**Dual Identity**

- Female athletes who picked two images chose a combination of athleticism and traditional femininity, indicating a response pattern of a dual identity:
  - “I want to be portrayed as a fierce competitor, but I also like to dress up and look cute.” —Donna, basketball player

**Selling Sex as a Marketing Strategy**

- 47% chose the soft-porn image as best way to increase interest in their sport. Their target market was males:
  - “[Sexually provocative images] are the only way we can draw [guys] attention.” —Carrie, track athlete

- But the majority disagreed with this approach:
  - “The idea that [soft-porn images] sell sex is not true. We are good athletes, but if we go around selling [sex], people will think we’re a joke.” —Betty, hockey player

**Implications**

- This study supports a growing body of evidence indicating athletes/fans prefer images of athleticism over “sex sells.”
- Sexualized images lead to negative social and psychological consequences for young girls.
- Sport media should challenge images based on gender stereotypes and reflect the reality of women’s sports.

For the full article see: *Journal of Communication & Sport (2013)*