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An Imperceptible Difference:  
Visual and textual constructions of femininity in  
*Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women*

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**Abstract**

The success of female athletes in the 1996 Olympics brought with it a great deal of optimism that women in sport would finally receive acceptance for their athletic talents. This optimism was concomitantly fueled by the rise of women's sport magazines. This study was designed with two purposes. First, through an analysis of both visual and literal texts, we sought to replicate previous research in determining whether there had been any changes in the coverage of female sport and athletes in *Sports Illustrated's* historically male-centered magazine. Second, the same standards of review were applied to *Sports Illustrated for Women* to discover if the mandates for marketing femininity are so strong that they have crossed over to this female-specific sport magazine as well. An analysis of content (1,105 articles and 1,745 photographs) within *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women* from 1997-1999 found that women continue to be underrepresented, portrayed in 'traditionally-feminine sports', or shown in non-sport related scenery in both media outlets. Within the pages of media explicitly focused on women's issues within sport, successful female athletes continue to be constructed in stereotypical and traditional conceptions of femininity that supercede their athletic ability. It is suggested that this generally unoffensive, status-quo approach has been continued in order to maintain marketability to advertisers and to general sports readers.

**Key Words:**

gender construction, media representation, stereotyping, femininity, athletics

## Introduction

The success of the United States' female athletes in the 1996 Olympics spawned a great deal of public enthusiasm for women's sports in America. In the span of just a few weeks, the US Women's Olympic basketball team was chosen for the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, Sheryl Swoopes appeared on the cover of *New York Times Magazine*, *T.V. Guide* ran two cover stories about Olympic female athletes, and *Newsweek* featured Olympic gold medallist Gwen Torrence in proclaiming 1996 the 'Year of the Woman' (Gremillion, 1996). Along with this wave of interest came the concomitant optimism that *all* female athletes – traditionally feminine or not, mother or childless, heterosexual or lesbian/bisexual – would finally receive full societal acceptance and an unwavering appreciation of their *athletic* accomplishments rather than merely their sex appeal (Fink, 1998; Lopiano, 1997; Women's Sports Foundation, 1997).

One method scholars have consistently utilized to gauge levels of societal acceptance has been to study the coverage of female athletes in the media. As Kane (1988, p. 89) noted:

the mass media have become one of the most powerful institutional forces for shaping attitudes and values in American culture. Mass media portray the dominant images or symbolic representations of American society (Tuchman, Daniels, & Benet, 1978). These images in turn tell audiences who and what is valued and esteemed in our culture (Boutlier & SanGiovanni, 1983). How female athletes are viewed in this culture is both reflected in and created by mass media images. Thus, it becomes critical to examine both the extent and the nature of media coverage given to female athletes.

Indeed, a review of scholarly research highlights the persistent inadequate media coverage of female athletes (Bryant, 1980; Creedon, 1994; Kane, 1988; Miller, 1975). Such research has spanned several different mediums including television coverage (Blinde, Greendorfer, & Shanker, 1991; Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988; Duncan, Messner, & Willams, 1990), newspaper content (Miller, 1975; Theberge, 1991; Wann, Schrader, Allison, & McGeorge, 1998), and magazine coverage (Hilliard, 1984; Kane, 1988; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Lumpkin & Willams, 1991). Invariably, each study has discovered under-representation and/or misrepresentation of female athletes.

While such under-representation has been consistent throughout the years, the proliferation of women's sporting events during and after the 1996 Olympics and the ensuing fervor following these

events provided some hope that the current 'male-biased' practices of the sport media would be challenged (Coffey, 1996; Ebersol & Roy, 1996; Gremillion, 1996). Four new women's professional sport leagues, network and cable television deals for the WNBA and the Women's Professional Softball League, two cable television stations with a focus on women's sports, and four new magazines focusing on women's sports all served to trigger expectations that female athletes would gain ground in the media (Lifetime, 1997; Lifetime TV Builds, 1997; Sandomir, 1996). Indeed, these advancements brought some optimism that the tendency to marginalize and trivialize female athletes' accomplishments would be denounced and, subsequently, serve to weaken the ideological dominion of masculine superiority that the realm of sport has long perpetuated. That is, rather than continuing to trivialize female accomplishments, there was hope that the media would begin to cover women's sports in a manner similar to men's sport, not only in terms of an increased *amount* of coverage, but by focusing on their *athletic accomplishments* rather than their *sex appeal*.

Some recent research regarding female athletes in the media have served to dampen any optimism that was generated in 1996 (Eastman & Billings, 1999; Jones, Murrel, & Jackson, 1999; Tuggle & Owen, 1999; Urquhart & Crossman, 1999). However, the entirety of these studies has examined non-gender specific, 'inclusive' media content. Further, previous examinations into the constructions of gender through sport have centered strictly on literal transmissions (Weiller & Higgs, 1999) or solely on imagery (Bruce, 1998). This research is an attempt to fill this theoretical gap by examining the construction of gender within 1,105 articles and 1,745 editorial photographs from both *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women*.

This study was designed with two purposes. First, through an analysis of both visual and literal texts, we sought to replicate previous research in determining whether there had been any changes in the coverage of female sport and athletes in *Sports Illustrated's* historically male-centered magazine. Second, the same standards of review were applied to *Sports Illustrated for Women* to discover if the mandates for marketing femininity are so strong that they have crossed over to this female-specific sport magazine as well. By examining female sport content in relation to similar male

representations, it may be possible to dissect both latent and apparent constructions of 'appropriate' gender roles to which 'normal' athletes should aspire. This has importance, not only for the athletes who read these magazines, but also for a better understanding into how broader constructions of gender are shaped in the United States.

### **Constructing Feminism**

Entman (1993) writes that journalists "select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p.52). Therefore, news, like any other system of communication, can be understood as a narrative that has implied meanings, which are transmitted through media frames. Indeed, frames are integral to understanding how issues of relevance and importance are constructed in the media.

Frames are actually "the imprint of power," (Entman, 1991, p.7) in that they bestow a singular identity that often translates to transformations in public opinion. Hertog and McLeod (1995) concur with Entman when they state that "the frame used to interpret an event determines what available information is relevant" (p.4). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) purport that frames provide an integral "part of the process by which individuals construct meaning" (p.2). This assertion is supported by a large body of research, which suggests that media frames effect how the public perceives reality (Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

However, research has found that through media frames, the resulting construction of 'reality' is often skewed from one's own immediate perceptual reality (Ghanem, 1996; Tuchman, 1978; Funkhouser, 1973). Tuchman (1978) contends that news in particular and media in general construct a version of reality that may not correlate with reality itself but normally serves to legitimate the status quo. An ever-growing body of research has found that media often perpetuate both negative and positive stereotypes found in our society (Greenberg & Brand, 1994; Lester, 1996; Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994). While there are possibilities for breaks within an ideological media position, routine

practices and claims of professionalism create an atmosphere that make challenging media constructions of reality extremely difficult (Tuchman, 1978).

Constructing reality in adherence to the status quo has proven particularly important in this study of female representation in sports. Blinde, Greendorfer, & Shanker (1991) conceptualized sport as a "system of social practices based on two symbolic assumptions" — first, that the human body serves as a tool of power and second, that "the social construction of the human body is gendered" (p. 109). Thus, sport has provided a culturally salient mechanism for demonstrating power over women (Messner, 1988). As Messner (1988) noted, the most major or popular sports (i.e., those receiving the most media coverage) have served to highlight men's dominance over women due to the fact that they are "organized around the most extreme potentialities of the male body" (p. 206). Thus, while women may have enjoyed increased coverage in the media, such coverage may also serve to emphasize the "natural" differences between men and women and further entrench the ideological hegemony of male superiority (Blinde et al., 1991; Messner, 1988).

The manner of the coverage or how the issue is framed has proven vital to the continual feminization of women. That is, the ways in which female athletes are portrayed by the media have reinforced a patriarchal ideology (Blinde, et al., 1991; Duncan, 1990; Kane, 1988). In the first half of the nineties, during the relative explosion of interest in female sport, Kane and Greendorfer (1994) found that although there was greater interest and media coverage in women's sports, it was a "superficial social change because deep-seated ideological change (had) not occurred" (p. 40). These authors wrote further:

The mass media have been used as one means of resisting ideological change, as media practices, production, content and messages continue to perpetuate notions of sexual difference, gender difference, and gender hierarchy. The media have transformed the meanings of women's physicality - women becoming active agents with and of their own bodies and women using their bodies in skilled, physical activity-to commodification, sexuality and femininity (Kane & Greendorfer, 1994, 40).

This marketability of feminism was further explored within NBC's handling of the 1996 Olympics — the supposed 'Year of the Woman'. Andrews (1998) purported that the

substantial market forces at work and the importance of American female viewership to the monetary success of NBC's venture marshaled a rhetoric of equality to magnify profits, and yet did so by continuing to replicate traditional gender ideologies. As Andrews (1998) further stated:

NBC sought to hail, or interpellate (Hall, 1996), female members of the television audience by proffering essentialized feminine subject positions within its primetime discourse. NBC's Atlanta Olympic coverage highlighted events that represented women in ways that the network deemed would be gender appropriate for the *middle* American audience. Predictably, NBC's primetime coverage focused on the overdetermined hyperfemininity (Feder, 1995) of gymnasts such as Shannon Miller, Dominique Dawes, Dominique Moceanu, and Kerry Strug.....Of course there is nothing inherently feminine about these sporting activities, or any other activity for that matter. However, all of them have long been culturally coded as signifying the type of vulnerable, aesthetic, and hetero-sexualized embodied femininity (Duncan, 1990; Ryan, 1995; Whitson, 1994) around which NBC chose to center its Olympic reality. (p. 12)

Several studies have revealed that the 1996 Olympic games produced no gains in parity for women in the media (Eastman & Billings, 1999; Jones, Murrel, & Jackson, 1999; Tuggle & Owen, 1999; Urquhart & Crossman, 1999). In their analysis of NBC's coverage of the 1996 Olympics, Tuggle and Owen (1999) found that although women received extensive coverage, most of the coverage was on individual sports (e.g., swimming, diving, gymnastics) rather than team sports. Further, NBC gave very little coverage to sports that required women exert enormous power or those in which they engaged in a great deal of physical contact. Similarly, Jones et al. (1999) found that the print media treated female athletes differently than male athletes during the 1996 and 1998 Olympics. Female athletes in 'typically male' sports were described regularly using male-to-female comparisons and many of the descriptions in the print media focused not on the women's athletic feats, but instead on information that was irrelevant to the athletic event. Jones et. al. (1999) also found that female Olympic athletes in more typically 'feminine' sports (e.g., gymnastics) did receive more task-relevant coverage, but the coverage was laden with comments reinforcing female stereotypes.

Such traditional constructions of femininity were not limited to the Olympic games. For example, Bruce (1998) noted that only 3% of college basketball games shown during 1996-97 were



women's games. Further, Tuggle and Owen (1999) found that only 5% of airtime involved in ESPN's SportsCenter and CNN's Sports Tonight was devoted to women's sports. Additionally, Bruce (1998) noted that viewers of women's sports felt that the production was less technologically advanced than men's sporting events and that commentators tended to trivialize and stereotype the female players. Such disparity was also prevalent in televised golf (Weiller & Higgs, 1999). In fact, Weiller and Higgs (1999) wrote that gender comparisons were made consistently throughout the women's tournaments; much more personal (as opposed to athletically relevant) information was provided about female golfers; and commentators' descriptions of strength differed substantially between the male and female golfers.

These examples clearly illustrate that traditional constructions of femininity have proven difficult to overcome within the general media. Yet, the entirety of these studies have examined non-gender specific, 'inclusive' media content and did so in a strictly visual or, conversely, literal manner. The advent of women's magazines specifically dedicated to promoting and covering female sport activities, without the incessant gender-laden comparisons across sexes, promised to create fundamental shifts in female representation. This research is an attempt to fill this theoretical gap by examining the differences in literal *and* visual constructions of gender in the more generalized *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women* — a magazine whose marketing theme purports to "give voice and vision to the stories of women in sports". That is, the research seeks to determine whether a media outlet designed to specifically cover and promote women's sports does so in a manner consistent with the coverage of male sports.

### **Hypotheses**

Several sport magazines have been created since 1996 that have a primary focus on female readership (e.g., *Real Sports*, *Sports Illustrated for Women*, *Conde Nast Sports for Women*, *Jump*). This research effort evaluates one of the largest circulating women's sport magazines in the United States, *Sports Illustrated for Women*, and compares its editorial and photographic content to the largest

circulating sport magazine in the United States, *Sports Illustrated*. Both magazines are owned by Time Inc. and are subsidiaries of AOL Time Warner. A perusal of the organizational structure of each magazine shows that they have different editors and different writers, but many of the other staff members (e.g., associate editors, art department workers, copy desk employees, etc.) work with both magazines. The readership of *Sports Illustrated* totals over 20 million, 77% of those being men. The average annual income of readers of *Sports Illustrated* is \$56,482 and their median age is 36 (*Sports Illustrated* Media Guide, 2002). In contrast, the readership of *Sports Illustrated for Women* 1.6 million and well over 90% of the readers are female. The average age of readers is 34 and their median income is \$63, 467 (*Sports Illustrated for Women* Media Guide, 2002). Given previous heterosexual and male-centered media constructions of reality as well as the historical marketability of femininity, several research hypotheses were created to guide our analysis.

Consistent with the theoretical perspectives presented above, past scholars have found women glaringly ignored or marginalized on the pages of *Sports Illustrated* (Bryant 1980; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Ryan, 1994). As Kane (1988) noted, *Sports Illustrated* has been a “men’s magazine”. She emphasized the importance of going beyond a proportional description regarding male and female athletes into an analysis of the content pertaining to both sexes. Such an analysis of *Sports Illustrated* has produced consistent results. For example, in terms of article content, researchers have found that feature articles on female athletes tended to characterize them in blatantly sexist terms and articles about women were found to be non-performance related while articles about men were found to be more task relevant (Kane, 1988; Kane & Parks, 1990; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991). Due to the pervasive gendered nature of sport (Bruce, 1998; Tuggle & Owen, 1999; Weiller & Higgs, 1999), we anticipate that this trend will continue despite the overwhelming success female athletes have experienced during recent Olympic and World Cup games.

*Hypothesis 1: The type of written coverage afforded to female athletes in Sports Illustrated will be less sport related, or task relevant, than that afforded to men.*

Similarly, analyses of *Sports Illustrated* covers have found that men are more likely to be depicted in active poses than women, even when the blatantly sexist swimsuit editions are deleted from the analysis (Ryan, 1994; Salwen & Wood, 1994). To date, there has been no analysis of female athletes' photographs that are found within article content. However, we anticipate that the above trend will hold true for these editorial-related photographs.

*Hypothesis 2: The photographic depictions of athletes in Sports Illustrated will portray women in fewer active poses than men.*

The creation of *Sports Illustrated for Women* in 1997, the first female-targeted magazine heralded to focus on women's sports and athletes (Gremillion, 1996), brought with it the anticipation of thorough and accurate coverage similar to that of male sports and athletes found in *Sports Illustrated*. Given the fact that *Sports Illustrated for Women* was designed to capture a female market, and purports to give "voice and vision to the stories of women in sports", (*Sports Illustrated for Women* Media Guide, 2002) it may be logical to assume that emphasis of the stories and photographs within its pages would be on the women's *athletic* accomplishments. However, *Sports Illustrated for Women* has been met with some professional criticism charging that its coverage of female athletes serves to marginalize the female athletic experience and further entrench 'appropriate feminine roles' rather than depict accurate athletic roles (Women's Sports Foundation, 1997). Production of the magazine was terminated after the first two issues due to lower than anticipated sales; however, two new issues were produced and released in the summer and autumn of 1999 and production continues today.

No empirical studies to date have been undertaken to analyze the content of *Sports Illustrated for Women*. However, studies of women's sport television programming suggests that while media coverage created solely for female sporting events may help alleviate the disproportionate *amount* of coverage provided to men's sports, it does little to alter the trivializing and marginalizing *nature* of the coverage (Bruce, 1998; Weiller & Higgs, 1999). Being a subsidiary of TimeLife, Inc., the main purpose of the magazine is to create a profit, thus, its presentation is driven by the economics of the

marketplace and, subsequently, the magazine may attempt to “package” women’s sports in “gender appropriate” ways that appeals to the seemingly widest audience. Indeed, as Andrews (1998) suggested, certain coverage may present a rhetoric of equity that serves vital market forces yet does little to challenge the dominant ideologies that underlie sport and gender. Thus, we anticipate the following:

*Hypothesis 3: The written coverage of female athletes in Sports Illustrated for Women will be comprised of more non-sport related (or task irrelevant) material than sport related (or task relevant) material.*

*Hypothesis 4: The photographic depictions of female athletes in Sports Illustrated for Women will be comprised of more passive than active photographs.*

*Hypothesis 5: Written coverage of male athletes in Sports Illustrated will be comprised of a greater proportion of sport related (or task relevant) stories than written coverage of female athletes in Sports Illustrated for Women.*

*Hypothesis 6: Photographic depictions of male athletes in Sports Illustrated will be comprised of a greater proportion of active photographs than photographs of female athletes in Sports Illustrated for Women.*

Therefore, the purpose of this research was twofold. First, through an analysis of both visual and literal texts, we sought to replicate previous research in determining whether there had been any changes in the coverage of female sport and athletes in *Sports Illustrated*’s historically male-centered magazine. Second, the same standards of review were applied to *Sports Illustrated for Women* to discover if the mandates for marketing femininity are so strong that they have crossed over to this female-specific sport magazine as well.

### Methodology

In order to answer these research questions, a content analysis of the articles and article-related photographs within *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women* was conducted. At the time of the analysis, nine issues of *Sports Illustrated for Women* had been produced. All of the articles and photographs (n = 1075) within each issue of *Sports Illustrated for Women* were analyzed. A random sample of *Sports Illustrated* issues was taken for the same time period that *Sports Illustrated for*

*Women* was produced (i.e. 1997-2000) which resulted in the content analysis of 1,775 *Sports Illustrated* articles and photographs.

### *Coding*

In order to ensure objectivity within the content analysis of photographic material, a coding method first established by Kane (1998) was utilized. Each photograph was placed in one of the following four categories: athletic action, dressed but poised and pretty, non-sport setting, and pornographic. This coding construction has a long history in previous pictorial studies searching for active or non-active poses and competitive or non-competitive scenes (Salwen & Wood, 1994; Duncan, 1990; Rintala & Birrell 1984). Further, this coding method enabled us to objectively determine whether the pictorial depiction of female athletes served to challenge dominant ideologies or merely "package" women's athletic participation into more non-controversial, stereotypically feminine coverage. Showing women less in athletic action and more in "posed" photographs enables a media outlet to "construct a reality" that serves to maintain the status quo ideology of women as different and inferior athletes in comparison to men.

The operational definitions for these categories were:

*Athletic action* – Person(s) actively engaging in a sport and dressed in athletic apparel. (e.g. photograph of athlete in game action)

*Dressed but poised and pretty* – Person(s) dressed in athletic apparel but posed for the photograph. Person(s) is not engaged in athletic activity. (e.g. group shot of team)

*Non-sports setting* – Person(s) dressed in non-athletic apparel and photographed in a non-athletic setting. (e.g. photograph of athlete at home with family)

*Pornographic/Sexually suggestive* – Person(s) dressed provocatively or photographed in such a way as to focus solely on sexual attributes. (e.g. photograph framed on an athlete's breasts)

Because the authors could not locate a suitable established coding method for the article analysis (i.e., one that thoroughly captured the article content found in both magazines), two issues of each magazine were read separately to determine coding categories. The authors then met to discuss

category selection. Although categories were named differently, similar groupings of content were found. After discussing key terms, a consensus was reached as to the final nine categories within the coding scheme. Further, as with the pictorial coding scheme, this method allowed us to objectively determine whether differences in the coverage of female athletes were present and, if so, how those differences served to maintain dominant ideologies regarding gender and sport.

While an article could feasibly address many issues throughout a story, written content was coded according to one overall narrative theme. The operational definitions of article content were thus constructed as:

*Personal* – Content describing the non-athletic portion of a person(s) life. (e.g. story of athlete's family)

*Victim* – Content describing a person(s) struggle against adversity. (e.g. story of an athlete's history with drug abuse)

*Sport Related* – Content describing a person(s) ability as an athlete. (e.g. story of an athlete's sporting accomplishments)

*System Critique* – Content critiquing a sporting institution. (e.g. story investigating television airtime of women's sporting events as compared with men's sporting events)

*Sport Struggle* – Content describing difficulties of a sport achieving popularity or content describing continued mismanagement/poor behavior of athletes. (e.g. story detailing continued low awareness of a sport)

*Sport Victories* – Content describing triumphs of a sport achieving popularity or content describing continued management/good behavior of athletes. (e.g. story detailing rise of sport popularity)

*Health-Personal* – Content describing activities or products that improve a person(s) non-athletic health. (e.g. story describing sun tan lotions)

*Health-Sport* – Content describing activities or products that improve a person(s) athletic health. (e.g. story describing work-out routines for sport-specific improvement)

*Fashion* – Content detailing clothing or makeup. (e.g. story describing new line of jogging attire)

All content (both pictorial and editorial) was also examined for the presence of opposing genders. For example, the number of females was noted in *Sports Illustrated* while the number of

males was counted in *Sports Illustrated for Women*. If the article or photo contained content regarding both a male and female athlete, it was coded twice. If the article or photo portrayed a non-human (e.g., an article regarding a racehorse), it was not coded.

In order to assure greater objectivity, a graduate assistant was trained in the coding procedure and then used as a reference to check for reliability. The graduate assistant was taught the different coding schemes mentioned above and was provided examples of content from magazines that were not part of this study. In order to practice the coding method, the graduate assistant coded an older issue of *Sports Illustrated*, which had also been coded by one of the authors. Any disparities in the two coders' analyses were discussed in order to provide appropriate training for the graduate assistant before the actual coding began.

After the training was completed, half of the issues were randomly selected and coded by the graduate student. The authors coded all of the magazine issues included in the study. Thus, three mechanisms for determining the reliability of the coding scheme were conducted (i.e., reliability between the first author and the graduate student, reliability between the second author and the graduate student, and reliability between the first and second author).

### *Analysis Technique*

The study utilized descriptive statistics to describe the variables of interest. Inter-observer reliability coefficients were utilized to provide an indication of the reliability of the coding scheme used. Independent sample t-tests, simple percentages, and frequencies were utilized to answer the stated hypotheses.

### **Results**

Inter-observer reliability coefficients for the coded magazines were calculated. Interobserver agreement between the three coders ranged from 90-98% on the *number* of articles and photographs. The coefficient of agreement (i.e., total number of agreements divided by the total number of coding

decisions both had observed) for the three observers ranged from .92 to .94 for the pictorial and article content. Scott's Pi, a reliability assessment that corrects for 'chance' agreement, was calculated to be .86 for photographic content and .80 for article content. Both scores were within the .8 to .9 range, which denotes a high level of reliability (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 1998).

Articles and photographs that were unnoticed by one of the coders, or that were coded differently by the coders, were discussed and their content agreed upon before further statistical analyses were conducted.

The analysis of *Sports Illustrated* content found that women are still far underrepresented within the magazine's pages. Of the 817 articles within the sample, only 82, or 10%, were stories covering female athletes or female specific sports. Similarly, of the 958 photographs in the sample of *Sports Illustrated* magazines, only 96, or 10%, of the photographs were of female athletes.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that men would be provided more sport related (or task relevant) coverage than women in *Sports Illustrated*. Over 86% of the articles in *Sports Illustrated* regarding male athletes were coded as 'sport related'. Eighty percent of the stories regarding female athletes were coded as 'sport related'. However, 12% of the stories concerning female athletes were coded as 'personal', while only 6% of the articles on males were coded as such. Taken one step further, if all non-sport related categories ('personal', 'victim', 'health personal', and 'fashion') are collapsed into one, these stories comprise 20% of the stories about female athletes but only 8% of stories regarding male athletes. Table 1 provides a comparison of all the categories by magazine and by gender.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that female athletes would be depicted in fewer 'active' poses than male athletes in *Sports Illustrated*. In fact, over half (56%) of the photographs of female athletes were non-action photographs (55% were female athletes in a 'non sport setting', .05% in 'dressed but poised and pretty', and .05% in 'pornographic' photos) and 46% were 'athletic action' photographs. In contrast, 66% of the photographs of male athletes were coded as 'athletic action' shots. Further, only 25% of the photographs of male athletes were coded as 'non sport setting' shots.



Hypothesis 3 stated that the written coverage of female athletes in *Sports Illustrated for Women* would be comprised of more non sport related (or task irrelevant) material than sport related (or task relevant) material. However, 42.5% of all of the articles regarding female athletes were coded as 'sport related'. In fact, when all of the articles that have some sort of sport relevance ('sport related', 'sport critique', 'sport struggle', 'sport victory', and 'health sport') are collapsed into one category, nearly 58% of all stories have a sport basis. Thus, this hypothesis was not supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that the photographic depictions of female athletes in *Sports Illustrated for Women* would be comprised of more passive than active photographs. However, 'athletic action' photographs comprised the largest percentage (56%) of the four categories while the other categories were less represented (19% = 'dressed but poised and pretty', 24% = 'non sport setting'). Thus, this hypothesis was not supported.

Hypothesis 5 stated that written coverage of male athletes in *Sports Illustrated* would be comprised of a greater proportion of sport related (or task relevant) stories than written coverage of female athletes in *Sports Illustrated for Women*. While 87% of the stories regarding male athletes in *Sports Illustrated* were coded as 'sport related', only 43% of the stories regarding female athletes were coded this way. Further, as indicated by significant results in 6 of the 8 the independent sample t-tests, which utilized Bonferonni's correction ( $\alpha$ /number of analyses) to guard against family wise error, the two magazines were statistically different in the 'sport related' ( $t = 7.61, p < .000$ ), 'personal' ( $t = -4.24, p < .001$ ), 'sport struggle' ( $t = -3.39, p < .001$ ) and sport victory ( $t = -4.47, p < .001$ ) categories. Thus, there were significantly more 'sport related' articles about male athletes in *Sports Illustrated* and significantly fewer 'personal' and 'sport struggle' and "sport victory" related articles in comparison to articles covering female athletes in *Sports Illustrated for Women*. *Sports Illustrated for Women* also had significantly more articles regarding 'personal health' ( $t = -4.124, p < .000$ ), 'sport health' ( $t = -5.05, p < .000$ ), and 'fashion' ( $t = -5.23, p < .005$ ).

Hypothesis 6 predicted that photographic depictions of male athletes in *Sports Illustrated* would be comprised of a greater proportion of active photographs than photographs of female athletes

in *Sports Illustrated for Women*. This hypothesis was proven to be true as 66% of the male athletes in *Sports Illustrated* photographs were 'athletic action' shots, while only 56% of the female athletes in *Sports Illustrated for Women* photographs were 'athletic action' shots. Further, two of three independent sample t-tests (which utilized Bonferonni's correction to guard against family wise error) were statistically significant. The t-test for the 'athletic action' category ( $t=-3.85$ ,  $p < .007$ ) and the 'dressed and poised and pretty' category ( $t = -3.8$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were significant. Thus, there were significantly more athletic action shots of men in *Sports Illustrated* and significantly fewer 'dressed but poised and pretty' shots in comparison to the photographs of female athletes in *Sports Illustrated for Women*. The t-test for 'non sport setting' was not significant indicating that the magazines were not different in this category. Due to the low number of pornographic photographs, t-tests were not conducted in this category. However, it is interesting to note that 7 of the 9 pornographic photographs were of the female athletes.

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Insert Table 1 here

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## **Discussion**

### *Sports Illustrated*

Although female athletes are becoming stronger, faster, and more talented than ever, very little progress is being made in relation to the media's depiction of them as *athletes* rather than *feminine role models* or *trivialized sex symbols*. As the results of this study show, women are still underrepresented within the pages of *Sports Illustrated*, the largest circulating sports magazine in the world. This paper suggests, as Tuchman (1981) first discovered, that such under-representation can result in the 'symbolic annihilation' of the female athlete. That is, because the media are relied upon to reflect the important events within our culture, their lack of representation of the female athlete submits the

message that female athletes have very little value, especially in relation to male athletes (Kane & Greendorfer, 1994).

Perhaps even worse, in many cases, the accomplishments of females as athletes are trivialized in *Sports Illustrated* through non-action photographs and non-sport related articles. Most photographs depicted female athletes in non-sport settings. That is, photographs of female athletes were taken in a setting completely removed from the athletic arena in which they participate. Additionally, in many instances, the athlete was 'made up' in these photographs, her hair was styled, they wore make-up, and they were dressed in feminine (often revealing) clothing. Venus and Serena Williams, arguably two of the best tennis players in the world were shown off-court, clad in street clothes, make-up, and numerous pieces of jewelry. Swimmer Amy Van Dyken and sprinter Marie-Jose' Perc were pictured fully nude, from behind, in an article regarding an advertising campaign by Tag Heurer. In fact, although *Sports Illustrated* devotes very few pages to female athletes, they found space (10 pages!) to cover the fact that Jerry Buss, owner of the Lakers, may hand over the team to his daughter, former Playboy model, Jeanie Buss. The article contained a full page, layout photograph of a naked Buss with two basketballs covering her breasts and another smaller picture in a low cut dress holding two basketballs over her breasts with a caption that read, "Pass it on, the Lakers would be in good hands with Jeanie".

Such 'removal' of the athlete from the sport setting and highlighting of their 'feminine' rather than athletic qualities serves to reinforce the socially constructed, 'appropriate' gender roles to which 'normal' women should aspire. As Duncan (1990, p. 40) notes, "the issue, at bottom, is one of power. Focusing on female difference is a political strategy that places women in a position of weakness". Thus, consistent with the theory regarding media constructions of reality, *Sports Illustrated* tends to construct a "false reality" in which females are viewed only as feminine sex symbols rather than powerful, talented *athletes*. Such depictions serve to strengthen the ideological hegemony of male superiority.

One could argue that 80% of the articles on women in *Sports Illustrated* falling into the 'sport related' category is quite substantial considering past findings, and we would agree. We were, in fact, quite surprised by this percentage. However, upon closer inspection, it appears that this finding is not much different than other recent findings in which increased coverage still subtly reinforced appropriate gender stereotypes (Jones et al., 1999; Weiller & Higgs, 1999). Although not an initial aspect of this study, the researchers went back through the issues of *Sports Illustrated* that contained articles regarding female athletes to determine whether these women were involved in 'sex appropriate' (e.g., ice skating, track, tennis, gymnastics, golf) or 'sex inappropriate' roles (e.g., basketball, softball, boxing) as set forth by Kane and Parks (1990). Even with the recent introduction of the WNBA and other women's professional sports teams, 65% of the sport related articles on women fell into the 'sex appropriate' category while 19% were articles pertaining to women in sex inappropriate sports. The other 16% fell into what we determined a 'neutral' category (soccer, triathlons, lacrosse).

#### *Sports Illustrated for Women*

The articles regarding female athletes in *Sports Illustrated for Women* were predominantly sport related which counters the previous literature and our hypothesis. Because a large number of readers for the magazine are sports minded women, perhaps the editors have recognized this large potential market and plan to offer them a more realistic view of female athletes. As Messner et al. (1996) suggested, perhaps capitalistic ventures have "won out" over the maintenance of patriarchy in this situation. That is, due to the proliferation of active females since the passing of Title IX, the media may be arduously constructing audiences for women's sports in order to take full monetary advantage of this societal change.

Still, there was plenty of evidence within these articles that the monetary forces were being dealt with in the most innocuous manner possible. That is, while providing coverage of female athletes, *Sports Illustrated for Women* did so in a manner that often served to maintain the status quo.

Articles often "created" a female athlete that was *different* than the male athlete as stories were produced to highlight the stereotypically feminine, heterosexual, "sexy" aspects of the athlete rather than their athletic superiority. For example, in the 2000 May/June issue of the magazine, there were five feature articles. The first was a swimsuit issue, picturing both male and female athletes in their swimsuits with no mention of their athletic accomplishments beyond what sport they played. (Further, while nearly all female athletes were pictured in a bikini, most of the male athletes were pictured in long shorts and many wore tank tops). The second article was a story about Sheryl Swoopes, one of the best basketball players in the WNBA. However, the article had little to say about her playing ability as it focused on her decision to turn down an opportunity to play on the U.S. National Team in order to stay home with her two year old son. The third article was a WNBA preview that provided an in-depth analysis of the upcoming season. However, the last article of that preview was a full page story entitled "How I spent my summer vacation" in which various players detailed their lives beyond the WNBA. The third article in the feature was entitled "Over the top" and focused on Stacy Dagila, the top U.S. women's pole vaulter, yet, much of the story focused on the fact that female pole vaulters competed in swim suits in order to make the event more "interesting" for the audience. The final article was about Karen Smyers, a triathlon champion in arguably one of the most physically demanding sports of our time. However, rather than focusing on her athletic accomplishments, the article detailed her fight with breast cancer; in fact the byline read...."Karen Smyers, wife and mom, will do whatever it takes to win a tougher race -- against cancer".

This is just one issue of the magazine, but it provides an excellent example of the manner in which female athletes are dealt with within its pages. While it does provide coverage of female athletes, it often does little to challenge the existing stereotypes of female athletes and female consumers.

As Andrews (1998, p. 11) noted regarding NBC's coverage of the Atlanta Games, ..."NBC manufactured their own Olympics reality centered around events deemed appropriate to female viewers, and infused with sentiment designed to resonate with the female psyche". Similarly, *Sports*

*Illustrated for Women* appears to present female athletes in a manner that feminizes the content of their accomplishments (through personal anecdotes, descriptions of their athletic clothing, focus on female athletes' roles as wives and mothers, etc.) and, subsequently, trivializes their *athletic* accomplishments. In a manner very similar to NBC's Olympic coverage, *Sports Illustrated for Women* seems to avoid the threat of women invading the sacrosanct bastion of male superiority in sport even as they provide greater coverage. As Andrew's (1998) commented:

.....female athletes, and the very notion of female sport participation, are becoming more centrally located within the inventory of popular American cultural practices and experience. Conversely, the politically progressive presence in the Olympic spectacle were neutered by the demeaning way in which NBC chose to represent women. Despite - in fact because of- being the focus of NBC's Olympic reality, female athletes and consumers were portrayed and engaged in ways that subtly devalued their very existence....NBC's marketing....normalized hierarchically differentiated representations, embodiments, and experiences of gender, within and through coded circuitry of its televised discourse (p.16).

Such notions are directly supported by the photographic images from the magazine. The majority of photographs of female athletes in *Sports Illustrated for Women* were non-action shots. Even though the magazine's marketing theme purports to "give voice and vision to the stories of women in sports", this 'vision' appears to be a stereotypically feminine one. For example, a story regarding women of the 1996 gold medal Olympic basketball team who were preparing to play in the WNBA displayed seven pictures, but only one was an athletic action photograph — Jennifer Azzi dribbling during a game. One other photograph showed the players on the podium after receiving their gold medals. The rest were totally non-sport related and ranged from a 'made up' Rebecca Lobo holding a basketball, to a pregnant Sheryl Swoopes with her husband, to Lisa Leslie in only a bra and underwear. Marion Jones, perhaps one of the greatest athletes of our time, was pictured on the cover dressed in angel wings. Venus Williams was named the "Female athlete of the year" and yet the picture accompanying the article showed her in a low cut, skin tight, revealing dress with a tennis racquet in hand. The underlying message seemed to be: you can play sports, but make sure you're feminine as you do it.

Even when *Sports Illustrated for Women* provided coverage to "traditionally masculine" sports, the pictures within the articles served to feminize the athletes. For example, in one issue, the magazine provided a story regarding Laila Ali, a female boxer; however, the accompanying picture showed Ali posed, clad in boxing gloves, with eye makeup, eye liner, and lipstick. Similarly, there was a story of Cheryl Haworth, Olympic weight lifter, in which she was pictured standing, with a barbell resting on her shoulders, covered only in feathers and feathers blowing all around her. In the 2000 Summer Olympics preview issue, there were 11 full-page pictures, only one of which was an athlete in action.

In comparing *Sports Illustrated for Women* to *Sports Illustrated*, it was clear that the coverage provided to female athletes in *Sports Illustrated for Women* was decidedly different than that provided to male athletes in *Sports Illustrated*. While we don't want to suggest that a magazine for females about female athletes has to mirror *Sports Illustrated* to be successful in advocating social change, such a comparison can serve to concretely highlight the ways in which female athletes are depicted in gender appropriate manners rather than as pure athletes. There were significantly more 'personal' and 'sport struggle' articles in *Sports Illustrated for Women* and significantly fewer 'sport related' articles than in *Sports Illustrated*. Such journalism serves to send a potent message: that female athletes and their on-court activities are not interesting in their own right. Further, these articles tend to exaggerate socially construed notions of femininity. For example, in a story regarding Lisa Leslie, a prominent WNBA player, much of the article focuses on her modeling career rather than her basketball career and she is quoted as saying, "my mom took us out of that tomboy stage and instilled femininity in us" (Wolff, 1997, p. 61). Similarly, in the same article, the focus on Swoopes was her pregnancy and the last line read, "play the game, play it hard, and eventually a man will take notice" (Wolff, 1997, p. 62). Furthermore, in an article on Marie-Jose Percec of France, the first athlete to win consecutive Olympic 400-meter gold medals, there is a line that reads, "Asked if she'd rather pose in a track uniform or evening wear, Percec (above on a Paris runway in Paco Rabanne) says, "a designer gown, I love them". (Layden, 1997, p. 98).

Additionally, several articles tended to focus on women's weaknesses and their supportive or subservient roles to men. For example, in the first issue of *Sports Illustrated for Women*, there was an entire article regarding allegations of sexual abuse among female volleyball players by their male coach. The headline on the cover read, "The coach as a sexual predator: Are young girls safe?". Another article within the same issue was devoted to a story of a former star basketball player from Villanova who decided to become a cloistered nun. Given the vast amount of accomplishments by female athletes in the same time period, these choices seem peculiar at best. In this case, media constructions of supposed 'reality' seem to adhere strictly to the status quo and serve to further entrench public attitudes that women's sport is not valid in and of itself.

#### *Towards an Explanation of Representation*

A possible explanation for such contrasts between the article and photography content in the magazine comes from Duncan and Hasbrook (1988). These authors coined the term "ambivalence" to describe the mixed messages that the media sends. Ambivalence refers to the way in which a sport magazine (in this case, *Sports Illustrated for Women*) can combine positive portrayals of female athletes with subtle messages that tend to trivialize female athletes' sport performances. Kane and Greendorfer (1994, p. 39) suggest that ambivalence allows "those in power to acknowledge (and therefore accommodate) the social changes that have taken place within the last two decades while simultaneously offering resistance through the maintenance of the status quo".

Perhaps another reason for the overt attempts to focus on femininity is the blatant homophobia that exists within women's sport (Krane, 1997). Focusing on female athletes' personal lives with their husbands or boyfriends (e.g., showing a pregnant Sheryl Swoopes, discussing Mia Hamm's marriage, pointing out that Shea Ralph and her mother "tend to talk boys not basketball") sends a strong message that female athletes are, indeed, heterosexual. In contrast, the sexuality of male athletes is rarely discussed or questioned. By expending such effort to 'prove' that female athletes are heterosexual,



their athletic accomplishments are subsequently trivialized. As Griffin (1998) noted, the problem in women's sport is not homosexuality, the problem is homophobia.

While reasons for negative coverage of female athletes, such as ambivalence and homophobia, are difficult to conclusively deconstruct, the functionality of the medium itself allows for much clearer perspective. *Sports Illustrated for Women* is produced by the Time/Life corporation (as is SI) whose overriding purpose is to make a profit. Without profitability, both magazines would cease to exist within the corporate mega-structure of Time/Life. Hilliard (1984) long ago argued that feminization is crucial in attracting sponsors and paying customers and that the female athletes themselves benefit from this feminine image through greater endorsements. He suggests:

the athletes and journalists, as participants in an ongoing commercial athletic system, may enter into an unspoken complicity to present an image that emphasizes underlying femininity. Sponsors of the male events have no analogous concerns. The players are already perceived as being consistent with the traditional masculine image (Hilliard, 1984, p. 261).

As this research clearly demonstrated, coverage within both magazines has continued on an uninterrupted course of male domination. Yet, *Sports Illustrated for Women's* marketing theme purports to "give voice and vision to the stories of women in sports". This seemingly glaring division can be reconciled under the rubric of profitability: by consciously creating a perception of equity for female athletes that is more rhetoric than realism (Andrews, 1998; Eastman & Billings, 1999), 'women's sport magazines' can claim their magazine to be an avenue toward equity, but still package women's sport in an unoffensive, 'status quo' manner in order to satisfy advertisers and the general sports readership. Following this ideological perspective, *Sports Illustrated for Women* would only occasionally, if ever, challenge the latent ideologies that underlie sport and gender. That is, as long as the powerful forces remain in the same white, conservative, male-dominated structures (such as Time/Life), ideologies of female athletes as essentially different than male athletes will rarely be challenged — even in arenas where the attention to women sports is stated as a principal goal.

### *Possible Limitations & Future Research Recommendations*

Many of the conclusions that have been discussed in this research are based on the assumption that *Sports Illustrated for Women* purports to portray female athletes with some level of representational parity. This assumption is not unfounded (their own marketing theme purports to "give voice and vision to the stories of women in sports"), but is difficult to accurately substantiate. What a magazine's masthead suggests as their driving force may not actually be their true mission in a landscape of constantly changing economic, political and social market circumstances. With readership demands and financial advertising quotas, the veritable mission of a magazine may be unclear to the readers (and, at times, to the publishers of the magazine). Yet, while the comparison of content to a magazine's stated mission may be tenuous, the pictorial and textual analysis of *Sports Illustrated for Women's* content within a broader, cultural sphere remains the same.

Another possible limitation of this research is the relatively short sample period. At the time of the analysis, only nine issues of *Sports Illustrated for Women* had been produced. Future research should continue to examine how femininity is constructed in both *Sports Illustrated for Women* and *Sports Illustrated* over a more extended period of time. This would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of shifts in representation or persistent trends over time.

The general conclusions drawn from this research could be examined further through qualitative interviews with media representatives. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups, future research could better determine the respective roles that ambivalence, homophobia and profitability play in determining media content. This would, of course, require a high level of intimacy and trust between the researcher and the subject, but, if achieved, could produce enlightening insight into the cause of traditional female representations.

Future work should also examine *Sports Illustrated for Women* in relation to other magazines within the genre of women's sport (e.g., *Real Sports*, *Sports Illustrated for Women*, *Oxygen*, *Jump*). This research could help determine how women are represented within the combined pages of female sport magazines and not strictly in relation to male representation. Further, these representations could

be compared with traditional women's magazines (e.g., *Good Housekeeping*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *McCall's*, *O*) to determine if the traditional female stereotype is found with much less frequency in women's sport magazines, or if stereotypical representations of women remain the same – only with a sporty backdrop.

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Table 1

Photograph and Article Content of *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women* by Gender

	Photo Content				Article Content									
	AA	DPP	NSS	P	PER	V	SR	SC	SS	SV	HP	HS	F	
Sports Illustrated (Total Photos = 958)					(Total Articles = 817)									
<b>Males (862)</b>	572 (66%)	84 (10%)	204 (23%)	2 (00%)	<b>Males (735)</b>	46 (6%)	13 (2%)	636 (87%)	31 (4%)	4 (00%)	1 (00%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (00%)
<b>Females (96)</b>	33 (34%)	5 (5%)	53 (55%)	5 (5%)	<b>Females (82)</b>	12 (14%)	2 (2%)	66 (80%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)
Sports Illustrated for Women (Total Photos = 787)					(Total Articles = 288)									
<b>Females (717)</b>	401 (56%)	134 (19%)	171 (24%)	11 (2%)	<b>Females (280)</b>	46 (16%)	7 (3%)	119 (43%)	17 (6%)	16 (5%)	10 (4%)	19 (7%)	28 (10%)	18 (6%)
<b>Males (70)</b>	15 (21%)	9 (13%)	46 (66%)	0 (0%)	<b>Males (8)</b>	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (75%)

Note: AA = athletic action; DPP = dressed but poised and pretty; NSS = non-sport setting; P = pornographic; PER = personal; V = victim; SR = sport related; SC = sport critique; SS = sport struggle; SV = sport victory; HP = health personal; HS = health sport; F = fashion.



