

ESPN Magazine Has Body Issues: Sport-typing, Microaggressions, and Textual Portrayals of Female Athletes

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The purpose of this text is to show that the different portrayals between genders can cause psychological damage to both female athletes and audiences and can lead to female athletes being taken less seriously. First, I will examine the history and relationship between masculinity, femininity, and sports. Then, I will see how stereotypes reflect athletes' actions and audiences' reactions. Next, I will look deeper into textual portrayals of females in sports and the effect that microaggressions have on meanings. Lastly, in my analysis, I will dissect the ESPN Body Issue interviews by examining word choice, titles, interview focus, and overall tone. I argue that the differences in these interviews reveal the gender gap in sports representation and portrayal, thus affecting the treatment of athletes. Attempts to create equality within sports journalism, as shown in the Body Issue, are not as equal as they seem.

Introduction

Once upon a time, when the first man and woman roamed the earth, God gave Adam a gift. The Creator presented Adam with a spherical object and said, "Go kick this around, run after it, and show off your strength. It's called soccer." Eve, intrigued, went to off to follow him. "Hold up, where do you think you're going?" God's voice boomed after her.

“Well, to join Adam in this wonderful looking activity,” the first woman responded. God laughed as poor Eve stood dumbfounded. “Goodness Eve, are you simple? Girls don’t play sports!”

There may not be any proof in Genesis that this confrontation really happened, but there is substantial evidence to show that in the realm of sports, men dominate. From the first Olympic Games in Ancient Greece to modern-day sports like football, basketball, and wrestling, the spotlight has always been on men. Athletic events allow males the chance to show off their masculinity. Men who like to play “manly” sports also like to watch other men play “manly” sports. A female participating in a masculine game, though, does not adhere to the male audience’s interests (Greer & Jones, 2011). Due to many men’s disinterest in women’s sports, many female athletes often feel the need to accentuate their feminine qualities (Cartey, 2005). Magazines have attempted to get men interested in women’s sports by printing female athletes on the cover.

In order to meet the demands of their consumers, many media outlets choose to sexualize female athletes. A prime example of such sexualization occurs in the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*. Every year, the magazine releases an issue portraying women in bathing suits, mostly models, though several issues contain pictures of female athletes. The target audience of *Sports Illustrated* is men (Lumpkin, 2009); thus the magazine tries to grab their attention by printing these provocative pictures. If most of these women are models, not athletes, why should they pose for a sports-centered magazine? At the same time, when the issue covers female athletes in swimsuits, the magazine is putting the focus on the athletes’ body appearance, not their athletic achievements.

In 2009, *ESPN* promoted the *ESPN Body Issue*, a celebration of athletic bodies in a non-sexual way. The annual release would portray not

only female athletes but male athletes, and *nude*. The aim of the *Body Issue* is to celebrate the hard-worked bodies of athletes, to have the audience gape at the toned legs and long arms, and wonder what exactly is hiding behind that baseball bat or those crossed arms. Above all, the *ESPN Body Issue* seeks to appreciate all athletes and all body types, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. The interviews paired with female athletes' photos, in contrast to males' photos, focus more on appearance or other trivial matters rather than athletic accomplishments and abilities.

In this article, I will examine the history between masculinity, femininity, and sports. Then, I will move onto how these stereotypes reflect athletes' actions and audiences' reactions, especially younger sports players. Next, I will look deeper into textual portrayals of females in sports and the effect that microaggressions have on meanings. Lastly, in my analysis, I will dissect the *ESPN Body Issue* interviews by considering word choice, interview titles, interview focus, and overall tone. I argue that the differences in these interviews reveal the gender gap in sports representation and portrayal, and thus affects the treatment of these athletes. Attempts to create equality within sports journalism, as shown in the *Body Issue*, are not as equal as they seem.

Background

For years, female athletes have been either absent or scrutinized in sports media. As Carter, Casanova, and Maume (2012) write, coverage of women's sports in both print and electronic media has been significantly less than coverage of men's sports. Title IX, passed in 1972, allowed for equal funding and opportunities for women's sports in educational institutions (Whiteside & Hardin, 2011). As a result,

viewership of women's sports has gone up but still lags behind men's events. Whiteside & Hardin (2011) mention this is due to the fact that women's sports are often televised at the same time as highly advertised men's games. Lumpkin (2009) writes that *Sports Illustrated* and other magazines feature significantly fewer female athletes than male athletes in order to interest their predominantly male audience. When female sports are covered, the more "feminine" sports and sexualized athletes get more attention (Carter, Casanova, & Maume, 2016). Athletes are sexualized through the process of sexual objectification, where they are reduced to their body or body parts rather than their athletic achievements, personality, or other non-appearance characteristics (Kaskan & Ho, 2015).

Female athletes are often treated as less than male athletes. They are placed in inferior positions and referred to as "girls," whereas male athletes are referred to as "men" (Kaskan, 2014). As Lumpkin (2009) writes, female athletes are also cast as "other." She continues on to say the media discusses female athletes' appearance more often than their athletic achievements. In soccer (also called fútbol), Pfitser (2015) explains that commentators, television broadcasters, and other media zero in on attractive players, rather than leagues, games, or other team members.

In an attempt to de-sexualize athletes' appearance and to combat the financial recession, *ESPN Magazine* began to release their annual *ESPN Body Issue* in 2009 (Clifford, 2009). The first issue featured athletes posing semi-nude and a special section called "Bodies We Want" where athletes were "in the buff" (McCarthy, 2009). Clifford (2009) notes that photos were accompanied by small quotes and information about the athletes (Clifford, 2009), but later issues contain longer interviews (Ain,

2012). Athletes featured in the *Body Issue* come from various sports, genders, races, sizes, and backgrounds. In order to dissect the interviews of these athletes, we must first examine how and why females are portrayed in the ways that they are.

Research Context

Manly and Manlier: Masculinity, Femininity, and Sports

“Feminine” and “masculine” are two words that have been thrown around tirelessly in conversation for years, with many people not using them in the right context. To try to find a universal definition for both words, however, is a difficult task. As Victoria Cartey (2005) notes, “Masculinity and femininity, of course, are not universal essences but are constructed through fluid meanings and behaviors” (133). Similar to the idea of race and gender, masculinity and femininity can be considered socially-produced myths rather than natural states (Knoppers & McDonald, 2010). These terms are loosely defined by how a person presents themselves to others. Certain sports and athletes are labeled either “masculine” or “feminine” based on such vague qualities. For example, as Pfitser (2015) writes, soccer gave men the opportunity to demonstrate their masculinity. Pfitser explains as well that because soccer is historically described as masculine game, the introduction of women to soccer results in a fear of “feminization” of the sport. Where masculine sports are characterized by strength, danger, and speed, feminine sports are marked by aesthetics, advanced skills, and cognition (Greer & Jones, 2011). In Greer & Jones’s (2011) study, the “masculine” sport was identified as basketball while the “feminine” sport was identified as volleyball. In regard to athlete appearance, participants rated the masculine female athletes as having more muscles and being

“bigger girls” than feminine female athletes. Such sport and athlete stereotyping is referred to as “sex-typing” and “sport-typing” (Greer & Jones, 2011). Greer and Jones (2011) define “sport-typing” as characterizing sports as masculine or feminine. Kaskan & Ho (2015) expand on this by explaining that “sport-typing” is based on binary constructs, assuming that there are only two genders. This sport-typing can illicit reactions from both athletes and audiences alike.

Girls Don't Play Sports! Audience and Athlete Responses to of Sport-Typing and Femininity

Identifying sports as “feminine” or “masculine” can be difficult and is subject to opinion. Greer and Jones used photos in their 2011 study on femininity and masculinity of female athletes to operationally define these terms. Masculine female athletes were portrayed as muscular, wearing athletic gear, and larger than the feminine athletes, who were lightly toned, wearing more sexual clothing, and thinner. Greer and Jones (2011) found male participants reported lower interest when a non-stereotypical athlete was featured. That is, a masculine athlete playing the feminine sport (volleyball) or a feminine athlete playing the masculine sport (basketball). On the flipside, women liked to see masculine athletes breaking gender norms, and had decreased interested when there were feminine athletes (Greer & Jones, 2011). Even though females tend to commit this stereotyping less often than men, sport-typing has a significant impact on young girls.

Stereotyping in sports can affect the younger generation's expectations for athletes. In Jeanes's (2011) findings, 5th grade female soccer players saw “aggressive” playing as intolerable. These girls explained that tackling hard and pushing players off the ball was not playing “nice” and was not how girls were supposed to participate. If a girl

played too dirty, she was ostracized, further reassuring the importance of playing with less contact. In addition, Greer and Jones (2011) note that the girls felt the need to accentuate their feminine qualities because they were engaging in a more masculine sport. Professional athletes, too, want to stress their feminine appearance.

Even women's sports players feel pressured to exemplify their feminine qualities (Cartey, 2005). As Cartey (2005) writes, female athletes have to appear healthy and physically attractive as well as femininely attractive in order to acquire an audience. Some athletes do so by posing on magazine covers baring skin. Cartey describes in detail how Brandi Chastain's 1999 World Cup goal celebration became controversially famous. In a 2000 Nike Ad, Chastain posed in the same stance, nude except for her cleats. She defended her decision by explaining she was showing off her hard worked body, not objectifying appearance (Cartey, 2005). Other athletes accentuate their femininity by showing off their heterosexuality, like soccer star Julie Foudy did in the 2000 *Sports Illustrated SwimSuit* cover (Cartey, 2005). Foudy is pictured running on the beach in a bikini, with her husband alongside her chasing a soccer ball. Instead of the highlighting Foudy's soccer skills or muscles, the focus shifts to her relationship with her husband (Cartey, 2005).

Cartey (2005) acknowledges the surfacing of an important debate between moderate and radical feminists regarding these athletes' willing portrayals of their lives and their bodies. Many radical feminists argue that when female athletes pose for body shoots, shine the spotlight on their husbands, and accept sponsorships with sexist undertones, they are hindering advances in feminism (Cartey, 2005). Much to these radical feminists' dismay, textual portrayals of female athletes can do just as much if not more damage as promiscuous pictures.

It's All in The (Microaggressive) Writing: Textual Descriptions of Women in Sports

Microaggressions are subtle forms of racism, sexism, and insults about other marginalized groups (Pierce, 1970). Microaggressions can be split into “microassaults,” “microinsults,” and “microinvalidation” (Kaskan & Ho 2015). Microassaults are the most blatant, like racism, sexism, and homophobia. Microinsults are usually unconscious, negative descriptions of someone, much like backhanded compliments. Microinvalidations deny the hardships of marginalized groups, usually with good intentions (Kaskan & Ho, 2015). Kaskan & Ho also define “assumptions of inferiority” as the idea that women are less physically/mentally able than men.

Assumptions of inferiority and microaggressions have been experienced by many women in sports. Female athletes are often referred to as “girls” while male athletes are rarely referred to as “boys” (Kaskan & Ho, 2015). During the 2012 Olympics, two female long jump medalists were asked “Okay ladies, now where is that Olympic Smile?” (Kaskan & Ho, 2015). Not only was the interviewer insulting the women by calling them “ladies,” but was also doing so by focusing on their appearance and specifically their emotional expression. Arguably, the reporter would never have asked a male athlete where his smile was.

Many ad campaigns that feature female athletes contain these microaggressions. In a 1996 Nike advertisement titled “If You Let Me Play,” various girls, wearing dresses, bathing suits, and braiding hair recite the positive outcomes of girls playing sports (Cartey, 2005). As Cartey elaborates, there are several problems with this campaign: first, all of the girls are doing traditional feminine activities and wearing feminine clothing. Second, the phrase suggests that girls need permission,

presumably from boys or men, to play sports. In attempt to empower women, the campaign has pictured a typical, sexist advertisement, females' need for permission from males, and misplacement of girls in sports.

Another ad campaign in 1996 has soccer player Mia Hamm reciting "Soccer Vows" about the women's toughness when playing soccer (Cartey, 2005). Throughout, there are close-ups of the players' intense faces and clips of them sliding through mud and tackling other players. Cartey (2005) argues that although the advertisement can be seen as empowering for women, the focus on marriage, relationships, and intimacy are still present, in line with conventional gender roles and descriptions. Similar descriptions of female athletes are found in writing and tend just as harmful, but less obvious.

Analysis

Method

The photos of both male and female athletes in the *ESPN Body Issue* are similar in position, exposure, and connection to sport. Overall, these pictures celebrate diverse body types. However, the interviews accompanying the photos are subject to problems. I will determine the length of each interview by looking at the number of questions asked. I will examine if article titles are more sport-oriented for male athletes than female athletes and the different types of words the author uses for each gender. I will see how focused the interview is on the athlete's sport or training routine rather than the athlete's physical appearance and compare between the genders. In my analysis, I used articles from 2012-2016 for seven female athletes and seven male athletes.

How to Reel in The Reader: The Title

Title differences in early *Body Issue* pieces are not as prominent but they are still present. Tennis star “Daniela Hantuchova loses the skirt,” but in running back Maurice Jones-Drew’s title he simply loses the jersey. Hantuchova loses a more feminine article of clothing, one that also has less of a role in the sport as compared to Jones-Drew’s football jersey. By first writing that Hantuchova loses a skirt and not specifying it as part of the sport (which the reader may not know), the author is unintentionally focusing on more feminine clothing. In another title from 2012, the “Manimal strips his fur,” where beach volleyball athlete Keri Walsh-Jennings just “gets naked.” First of all, by referring to basketball star Kenneth Faried as his nickname, but not bothering to provide nicknames for female athletes, the writer is highlighting only Faried’s athletic expertise and popularity, as well as his manliness. Second of all, by using the word “strips” for Faried rather than Walsh-Jennings’ “get naked,” he is given more of an active role in the process. Themes in titles differ between the genders as well.

In recent issues, overcoming hardships, confidence, and humor are highlighted in male titles. Cleveland Cavalier’s center Kevin Love’s title, “This injury is one of the hardest things I’ve dealt with,” leads the reader to admire all Love had to endure to repair his dislocated shoulder. Bryce Harper says his “Body feels pretty unbelievable,” providing the outfielder’s confidence in his frame (Pressman, 2015). Hockey player Tyler Seguin’s title is humorous and nothing to do with his sport, poking fun at his clicking joints. On the other hand, body image is the continued theme in the titles of female athletes. Many titles discuss the shape of the athlete’s body, like thrower Amanda Bingson’s noting that “Athletes come in all shapes and sizes” (Ain, 2015). Others try to pick at the athlete’s

perception of their own appearance, like beach volleyball player April Ross on “body image” (Ain, 2015). Some even focus on facial expression, such as “Jamie Anderson in only a smile” (Ain, 2014). Once again, narrowing in on emotions and facial appearance is specifically reserved for women. Female athletes’ “game faces” are deemed as important, but are only attractive if they are smiles. Zeroing-in on a women’s appearance is a type of microaggressive way to downplay their role in sports and athletic achievements. Next, I look at word choice and length in the body of the interview.

Diving into Details: Word Choice and Length

On average, males were asked an average of 15.85 questions while females were asked an average of 17.43 questions. Yet even though females were asked more questions, these questions were phrased differently than those presented to males. In male athletes’ interviews, many of the questions emphasized their manliness. Kenneth Faried was asked how his parent’s “toughened him up” to play sports, and Joffrey Lupal was pushed to talk about the “toughness of hockey players” (Ain 2013, 2014). Other violent terms and action verbs were used in male athletes’ questions like Tyler Seguin “fighting [for his] way in” and mix martial artist Connor McGregor discussing “verbal warfare” (Ain 2013, 2016). In contrast, women’s questions contain more passive verbs and are more condescending. With Hillary Knight, a female hockey player, the idea of toughness is not mentioned once. Why was it discussed in a male hockey player’s text but not hers? Hockey is sport-typed to be a more masculine game, so the interviewers may have thought that describing Knight as “tough” or using other “masculine” adjectives would be off-putting to readers. In soccer player Christen Press’s interview, her daily shot taking is labeled as “obsessive” (Ain, 2016). Instead of being praised

for practicing her sport and spending time improving her skills, Press is almost ridiculed for trying too hard. The interviewer asks how Kerri Walsh-Jennings “embraced” her height, implying that Walsh-Jennings’ height clearly affected her life negatively and she had to overcome it. Additionally, interviewer Morty Ain (2013) asks how much time she “took off” to give birth, like it was a conscious choice to go on maternity leave and she was forfeiting work time. Sydney Leroux was asked why she plays so physically, as if tackling other players for the ball was too aggressive in professional soccer.

Various words were repeated within both male and female articles. In female athlete interviews, “body/bodies” was mentioned 58 times compared to the men’s 54. Male athlete pieces mentioned “confident/confidence” more often than female athlete pieces. Female interviews discussed “femininity” five times, but male interviews lacked the words “femininity” and/or “masculinity.” Male interviews had 17 instances of competition words (“play” or “compete”) in contrast to females’ 12. These words affect the focus of the article; the more a text refers to competition, the more it focuses on the sport. The more a text refers to bodies, the more it focuses on appearance. In general, female athletes’ interviews feature more microaggressive terms when describing style of play, training routine, and appearance. Along with word choice and length, the overall focus of the interview is different for both male and female athletes.

Spotlight on the Sport? Focus and Tone of the Interview

Overall, 38 out of 122 total questions (30%) of all females’ questions were based on their body image in some way, compared to 24 out of 111 (21%) for males. Judging by these statistics, we can see that

even though on average female players were asked more questions, the majority of their questions had nothing to do with their sport or career.

Thirty-three percent of the questions asked for females were not focused on the sport that they played, compared to 32% for males. Although this seems to be a minimal difference, the content of the interview that was “off-topic” differs for males and females. Off-topic sections of Male interviews discuss humorous events or childhood stories. Vernon Davis talks about how he became the honorary captain of the U.S. Curling team and Tyler Seguin expresses his desire to see a kangaroo. When these interviews contain other topics, it affects the tone of the text. Because males relay funny stories, weird talents, or bucket list vacation spots, the articles seem more interesting. The text flows better and has a lighthearted tone. Conversely, off-topic sections of female interviews featured more body insecurities or difficulties. Nzingha Prescod admits her breasts get in the way in training, Hillary Knight describes her previous opinion on muscles not being feminine, and Christen Press is confronted about her bad posture and unusual game face (a smile!). In discussing deeper issues, the female athletes’ interviews tend to be more subdued. They are not as funny, do not read quite as smoothly, and have less entertaining anecdotes than male athlete articles.

Conclusion

It is clear that women are represented less in sports than men. Cartey (2005) explains that although viewership and popularity of women’s sports has increased, the way that this is achieved is questionable. Many women are thwarted with microaggressions that downplay their roles as athletes (Kaskan & Ho, 2015). In the *ESPN Body Issue*, some of these microaggressions can be found in the article titles.

Male titles tend to be about the overcoming a hardship, while female titles are centered around their appearance. Similar themes arose in the body of the interview.

Furthermore, male and female interviews differed in word choice. In the male interviews, “toughness” and “confidence” were repeated. In female athlete’s interviews, the words “body/bodies” are used much more often. No mention of masculinity or femininity exists in the male interviews, while femininity was discussed five times in female interviews. This lack of discussion on masculinity/femininity in male articles correlates with the fact that males are not as pressured as females to adhere to gender roles. Many of the female athletes discuss how they sometimes longed to keep their more feminine attributes. Though the average female athlete was asked more questions, a higher percentage of their interviews were unfocused, containing other frivolous topics like pregnancy or self-confidence issues. Male interviews contain a more lighthearted tone than female interviews. More easygoing interactions occurred in the males’ interviews than the females’, which can result in a more positive response to male interviews.

It is important to ask why interviews for the *ESPN Body Issue* are necessary if the magazine is supposed to highlight body image through photographs. I also questioned the decision to have the majority of the articles written by one journalist. I wondered if the author created an organized interview style and how he tried to give unbiased accounts. A few of these gaps in the conversation require more research to be done. The reason for including interviews in an issue primarily printed for photographs and the choice to have one consistent writer should be researched further to gain a better understanding of textual portrayals of female athletes.

The *ESPN Body Issue* has only been out for seven years, so there are only a handful of interviews. The author of these interviews is probably committing these blunders unintentionally, unaware that they are offensive, just like microinsults. It is important to note that there are also positive *Body Issue* articles. Natalie Coughlin (2015) and Emma Coburn's (2016) pieces contain unproblematic titles, a focus on the sport rather than the body, and do not simplify phrases.

Even if the purpose of *Body Issue* is not to showcase the articles, these text pieces are still important and are proven to be problematic. As shown in Jeane's (2011) study, the stereotypes and portrayals of female athletes influence how young girls see themselves as athletes. Women who witness microaggressions tend to have lower self-esteem and negative attitudes towards athletes' abilities (Kaskan & Ho, 2015). These portrayals can also affect the athletes themselves through increased stress, cognitive impairment, lack in motivation, and forced compliance to follow through with the stereotypes for fear of looking weak. (Kaskan & Ho, 2015). Such biological and psychological effects on women can prove why some conflicts surrounding female misrepresentation in sports are occurring today.

The tension between the United States Women's National Team (USWNT) and U.S. Soccer Federation (USSF) regarding compensation is a perfect example of why misrepresentation of female athletes matters. In March 2016, five USWNT players filed a counter-suit against the USSF (Das, 2016). That February, Das explained that the Federation had sued the players' union for proposing a new collective bargaining agreement, one that would increase pay. Because microaggressions on television and in print have created negative attitudes toward female athletes, as well as reinforced the lack of sincerity of these players, one reason why the USSF

was so reluctant to allow equal pay is because the women are not taken as seriously. In April 2017, a group of USWNT players worked with the USSF to draft a new collective bargaining agreement, which will last through 2021(Hays, 2017). Though the players now receive larger base and bonus pay and the USSF will provide more support for the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) to expand the player pool, the process took months and negotiations became heated (Das, 2017). Additionally, Das notes that the new agreement does not completely eradicate the wage gap between male and female players; the USWNT's increased salaries are still less than those of the men. Of course, some economic explanations for this pay disparity exist, but the gap is also thanks to large federations' lack of respect for female athletes. Once audiences begin to treat female athletes as more than objects, once the media begin to focus more on female athletes' achievements instead of their appearances, once people begin to view female athletes as *athletes*, we will see true equality on all levels.

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