

# Expanding the Boundaries of Sport Media Research: Using Critical Theory to Explore Consumer Responses to Representations of Women's Sports

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In 2005, the *Journal of Sport Management* printed Wendy Frisby's Earle F. Zeigler Lecture. The main thrust of Frisby's presentation was that critical social science is an underutilized framework for conducting research in sport management and that, as a result, we remain limited in our abilities to truly understand how institutions and organizations "are best viewed as operating in a wider cultural, economic, and political context characterized by asymmetrical power relations that are historically entrenched" (2005, p.1). Other scholars such as Cunningham and Fink (2006) reinforced the importance of doing this kind of critical work. In their review of key research findings in sport management literature related to issues of diversity they concluded that the vast majority of studies "operated from the paradigm of positivism" and thus our field "could benefit from an incorporation of different investigative paradigms" (p. 458). Finally, Shaw and Frisby (2006) called for an embrace of critical theoretical frameworks which empirically address the complexities of, for example, gender relations and (in)equalities found throughout the vast sport enterprise.

The purpose of this paper is to do precisely what these leading scholars have urged those who work in the field of sport management to do—ground our research in critical social science so that we may critique and challenge institutional ideologies and practices to promote social change. More specifically, we employed critical feminist theory to empirically examine how one of the most powerful institutions in U.S. culture—sport media—reproduce gendered relations of power, values, and ideologies in the coverage and promotion of women's sports. Beyond a theoretical analysis, our investigation has direct, tangible, and significant connections to the management of sport. By providing research-based information to scholars, educators, and practitioners regarding the ways individual consumers interpret images and messages associated with athletic females, this study calls into question bedrock cultural assumptions and practices about how best to increase fan interest in, and consumption of, women's sports.

In this article we outline in detail a study we conducted which expands previous research in sport media scholarship by moving beyond the limitations of content analysis, a methodological technique which has dominated studies looking at the amount and type of coverage given to women's sports in print and broadcast journalism. As Lynn, Hardin and Walsdorf (2004) have pointed out, "a valid criticism of content analysis is that it fails to account for an audience response to the [intended] messages" (p. 347). We therefore employed Audience Reception Research—a specific line of inquiry which

examines not only the meanings of media texts but audience interpretations and intended practices—to explore how particular images found throughout mainstream media impact fans' interest in reading about, viewing, and attending a women's sporting event.

An additional point of departure from previous sport media research was to empirically address whether the deeply seated cultural assumption that "sex sells" is the most effective way to increase interest in women's sports. Using a "mixed-methods" approach, results from both quantitative and qualitative analyses challenge the notion that sportswomen are best served when presented as pretty, "sexy babes" rather than as highly competent and dedicated athletes. We end our paper by discussing how the results from this investigation have direct implications for those who cover, promote, and market women's sports. As a result, our study provides critical information—and suggests alternative strategies—that sport managers can rely on in their day-to-day judgments and practices.

## Critical Feminist Theory

Critical social science in general, and critical theory in particular, were developed because many scholars became frustrated and disillusioned with traditional forms of scientific inquiry such as positivism (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). Scholars who embrace this particular paradigm argue that to truly understand society, we need

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to appreciate the complexities and contradictions of modern life. To achieve this goal, critical theorists focus their attention on how social relationships and belief systems are grounded in power and privilege (Fiske, 1993). Scholars who study sport from a critical theoretical lens examine whether sport organizations and structures privilege some groups over others (e.g., women vs. men; able-bodied vs. differently abled) based on asymmetrical power relations that reflect broader political, cultural, and economic considerations (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003). With respect to sport media coverage, a critical theorist would ask whose voices, perspectives, and experiences are seen as valid and dominant? Or who are considered the “real,” meaning the most important athletes by analyzing whom the media give attention and credibility to.

As a subset of critical theory, critical feminist theory assumes that society is structured around a series of inequitable relationships of power whereby women are systematically devalued and marginalized (Birrell, 2000; Hoerber, 2007). In her examination of the ways gender inequity is embedded in the culture of sport organizations, Hoerber argued that gender-based relationships are used to establish organizational logic, as well as common-sense beliefs and understandings, or what Fletcher (1999) refers to as “truth rules.” Critical feminist inquiry disrupts the status quo of these gender-related “truth rules” through an analysis of organizational structures, values, and practices. It does so by “critiquing taken for granted assumptions and establishing conditions whereby individuals can draw upon alternative vocabularies to produce new meanings and practices [within the organization]...” (Hoerber, p. 261).

We grounded our own study in critical feminist theory because we were interested in how the taken-for-granted assumptions, ideologies, and practices deeply embedded in media coverage of women’s sports—the status quo of the “sex sells” narrative—might be questioned and disrupted. In addition, we wondered whether an empirically-driven investigation informed by critical feminist theory would generate knowledge that could be used by individuals involved in the management of sport to develop and implement new strategies and practices that are managerially relevant and grounded in practical, common-sense understandings and decision making (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). In this sense, our findings could indeed enable sport managers to create alternative vocabularies, meanings, and practices, and in so doing, promote “healthy debate, critique, and social justice,” one of the fundamental goals of critical social science (Frisby, 2005, p. 8).

## Statement of the Problem

Over the past three decades, scholars have uncovered two patterns of representation in mainstream sport media: 1) female athletes, compared with their male counterparts, are significantly underrepresented in terms of amount of coverage (Fink & Kensicki, 2002; Grau, Roselli, &

Taylor, 2007; Kian, Vincent, & Mondello, 2008); and, 2) sportswomen are routinely presented in ways that emphasize their femininity and heterosexuality versus their athletic competence (Daniels, 2009; Douglas & Jamieson, 2006; Kim, Walkosz, & Iverson, 2006; Roedl, 2007). These trends have been remarkably resilient. They have been discovered in print and broadcast journalism, at different levels of athletic involvement (e.g., Olympic, college, and professional sports), and regardless of time period with respect to Title IX. Trends related to the amount and type of coverage have also been remarkably universal, ranging from images of Olympic female athletes in new media (Jones, 2006), to Academy Award-winning movies (Boyle, Millington, & Vertinsky, 2006), to newspaper and TV coverage around the globe that routinely focuses on the athletic exploits of males versus the physical—and sexualized—appearance of females (Bissell & Duke, 2007; Donohoe, 2003; Stone & Horne, 2008). Given such persistent and pervasive trends, we should not be surprised to learn that according to Duncan and Messner (2005), sportswomen continue to be largely invisible throughout the vast media landscape where they receive only 6–8% of all sport coverage. This ignores the reality of women’s overall level of involvement in that they represent approximately 40% of all sport participants in the United States. It also ignores another reality—sportswomen comprise approximately half of all those involved in intercollegiate athletics (Acosta & Carpenter, 2008).

Why do these findings matter? Because what Kim and her colleagues (2006) refer to as the “media-sports industrial complex” has enormous influence in framing how society views women’s sports. Scholars have long argued that one major consequence of these media patterns is to maintain women’s status as second-class citizens in one of the most powerful social, political, and economic institutions on this planet. The basic premise of this research is that because mainstream media under-report and trivialize women’s athletic achievements, they become an important mechanism for maintaining belief systems that relegate sportswomen to the sidelines (Bissell & Duke, 2007; Iannotta & Kane, 2002; Thomsen, Bower, & Barnes, 2004).

These findings also matter because they have direct implications for those who manage, market, and promote women’s sports. If, for example, those responsible for creating images about female athletes (e.g., sports information directors) base their marketing strategies on these cultural stereotypes, they may develop advertising campaigns which emphasize the “sexiness” of the sportswomen they are promoting rather than their athletic skills and achievements. Though the former approach may be well intentioned, its effectiveness is often unknown because there is a dearth of research-based information upon which these sport managers can call on to produce the most effective management strategies. We say this because in spite of the significant contributions made by sport media scholars, a significant gap in our understanding of women’s sports remains. Scholars have yet to

produce a body of evidence which provides direct support for how *representations of sportswomen are interpreted by consumers* (e.g., sports fans). Equally important, there is a paucity of research on how these interpretations may impact consumers' attitudes toward women's sports overall, as well as their intentions to support female athletes by, for example, viewing or attending a sporting event (Parker & Fink, 2008).

Those who examine the sports world are not alone in failing to generate empirical evidence regarding how media images are consumed. Scholars have disproportionately focused their efforts on interpreting the *meaning* of texts and have far too often ignored the various ways these texts are understood by members of the intended audience (Wood, 2007). To address this limitation, an area of investigation referred to as Audience Reception Research has emerged. "Reception research" examines not only the meanings of media texts, but audience interpretations and intended practices: "It is a basic tenet of reception research that meaning is never just [passively] transferred from the media to their audiences" (Schröder, Drotner, Kline, & Murray, 2003, p. 122). The notion that audiences are active participants in de-constructing media texts also means that what an individual brings to the media message, such as one's gender identity, is critical to knowing how that message will be received (Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Wood, 2007). In sum, media discourses must be analyzed within the broader framework of sociocultural roles and identities. This is precisely why scholars need to analyze which social roles/positions consumers occupy as a way to understand how they interpret various media texts (Fairclough, 1995). Social role/position is often referred to as "situated knowledge" whereby one's demographic profile (age, race, sex/gender,<sup>1</sup> social status) and lived experiences (level of sport participation) influence their interpretations and intentions to act (Harding, 2004).

Given this background, two research questions framed the nature and scope of our investigation: 1) How do consumers interpret particular media images and do those interpretations influence their interest in and support for women's sports; and, 2) How does one's social role/position in society influence the interpretation of a media image?

## Cultural Assumptions Underlying Sport Media Images

As we have demonstrated, there is a great deal of empirical evidence that sportswomen are disproportionately portrayed in ways that emphasize their femininity and heterosexuality rather than their athletic skill and mental toughness. A key question for scholars to ask is, why does this particular pattern of representation dominate media coverage and marketing techniques related to women's sports? We suggest that a series of cultural assumptions (not to mention stereotypes) underlie this

media trend and that these assumptions have enormous connections to, and implications for, the organization and management of sport. For example, it should come as no surprise that women's sports lag behind men's in terms of fan interest, especially as that interest pertains to attendance and reader/viewership given the historical associations between sport and gender (Kian et al., 2008). A commonly held belief among sport managers who want to counteract low attendance and viewership rates (e.g., marketers and advertisers) is that the most effective way to generate fan interest is to present sportswomen in ways that reaffirm traditional notions of femininity and heterosexuality (Kane & Buysse, 2005). This strategy, or so the argument goes, will reassure fans (especially male fans), corporate sponsors, and TV audiences that females can be fully engaged in sports but still remain the "real thing," meaning not too masculine or threatening to conventional gender norms (Boyle et al., 2006). This taken-for-granted assumption explains the desire to portray sportswomen as traditionally feminine rather than as physically big and powerful. It also explains why, when athletic females appear in ads as product endorsers, they often do so in sexually suggestive poses (Grau et al., 2007).

Such promotional strategies, and the cultural assumptions underneath them, are reflected in the common-sense notion that the best way to promote women's sports is to sexualize female athletes (Bissell & Duke, 2007). A recent version of this "sex sells" narrative is the *ESPN Magazine* profile of superstar basketball player, Candace Parker. Under the title, "The Selling of Candace Parker," we are told not about Parker's legendary career at the University of Tennessee where she led the Lady Vols to two national championships, nor her status as a member of the Los Angeles Sparks of the WNBA where, as a rookie, she was voted MVP. Instead we learn that:

Candace Parker is beautiful. Breathtaking, really, with flawless skin, endless legs and a C cup she is proud of but never flaunts...She is a woman who plays like a man, one of the boys, if the boys had C cups and flawless skin...a 6'4" stunner with the easy smile... will soon be the most recognized woman in American sports. (Glock, 2009)

And how will Parker become so universally recognized? Her agent, Aaron Goodwin, doesn't believe it will be about her accomplishments on the basketball court: "Women in tennis, golf—they're easy to sell. Team sports? Forget it" (Glock, 2009). Despite the views expressed by Parker's agent, there is little (if any) empirical evidence in either the research literature or popular press which indicates that promoting women's sports with a hypersexual overlay results in increasing viewer/readership, ticket sales, fan attendance, or TV contracts. Indeed, some research suggests just the opposite. In one of the few studies on how media images may actually influence fan behavior, Fink, Cunningham, and Kensicki (2004) examined how characteristics of athlete-as-spokesperson influenced attitudes toward an athletic

event, as well as intentions to purchase tickets to that event. The authors discovered that among college-age students, “highlighting the level of [skill] of a female athlete produced a stronger association than highlighting that athlete’s physical attractiveness” (p. 363).

The belief that sexualizing female athletes is the most effective way to promote women’s sports is problematic for a number of other reasons. First, such an approach ignores the majority of those who are most likely to support female athletes—young girls and women (Maxwell, 2006). Second, many marketing campaigns, especially those sponsored by professional sport leagues such as the WNBA, emphasize the wholesome, All-American girl-next-door nature of women’s sports. Part of this effort involves highlighting connections between fathers and daughters, and reaching out to the next generation of female athletes and fans. The underlying message is that women’s sports embrace traditional “family values” and that its appeal is cross-generational. Within this context a “sex sells” strategy is not only counterintuitive, but counterproductive. How many fathers (not to mention mothers) would accept the position that support for their daughters’ involvement in sports would be increased by having them pose nude in *Playboy*? And do we really believe that what draws fans, and maintains their interest, is how sexy sportswomen are versus how well they perform when a championship is on the line?

An additional reason why sexualizing female athletes might not be universally effective relates back to the point about trying to increase fan interest among heterosexual males. When *Sports Illustrated* produces its annual swimsuit issue where Serena Williams appears in a sexually provocative pose, males may indeed be more interested in buying that particular issue of the magazine. But doing so does not mean *by definition* that their interest in women’s sports has increased. On the contrary, we suggest that what males are interested in consuming when they buy the swimsuit issue is not a women’s athletic event, but sportswomen’s bodies as objects of sexual desire.

At the end of their study, Fink, et al. (2004) argued that future investigations should examine a variety of factors which may influence attitudes and intentions to act toward women’s sports in response to media representations. They point in particular to research which explores the “goodness of fit” between endorser and product as a key element for success in marketing campaigns because “positive attitudes [can be] molded through an appropriate fit of the endorser and the event” (Fink et al., p. 364). What are the “appropriate fits” when it comes to media representations of women’s sports? Which particular types of images will engender fans’ interest? Do sportswomen have more credibility when they are portrayed as serious, competent athletes, wholesome “girls next door,” or “sexy babes”? And does it matter who is doing the viewing? Addressing these salient and previously unexamined questions will broaden our understanding of the role and impact of the media in generating interest in and support for women’s sports.

## Method

### Audience Reception Research

Due to the dearth of studies exploring consumers’ interpretations of media texts, we measured how exposure to the various ways sportswomen are portrayed in mainstream media coverage and promotional venues—from athletic competence to “sexy babes”—impacts an individual’s attitudes and intentions to act toward women’s sports. We did so by employing the methodological tenets and techniques of Audience Reception Research. This particular approach allows scholars to obtain knowledge about the “interpretive repertoires” of consumers as they construct meaning from a specific media text. A central component of reception research is that who (and what) an individual brings to a media message is critical to understanding how that message will be received (Machill, Köhler, & Waldhauser, 2007). A second, and foundational, component of this investigative technique is the importance of the qualitative interview, frequently taking the form of focus groups (a more detailed discussion of which follows below).

### Media Image Domains and Categories of Representation

Consumers typically receive information about women’s sports from two primary sources or domains: 1) mainstream sports coverage (e.g., television, print media, new media) that focuses on the event itself and/or a profile of a female athlete or team; and 2) marketing and promotional materials (e.g., intercollegiate athletics media guides; sport marketing posters). In our investigation, we presented images to consumers from both domains because they dominate information provided to sports fans. Sport media scholars have identified specific categories of representation found in print and broadcast journalism, as well as in marketing campaigns that promote women’s sports or individual athletes (Kane, 2008). These categories represent a continuum of images ranging from athletic competence to those that feature sportswomen as objects of sexual desire. We relied on six categories that best capture the range of images found in previous literature:

- Athletic Competence (sportswoman portrayed in uniform, on court, in action)
- Ambivalence (some indication of athleticism is present, but the primary image features a non-athletic, off the court, feminine portrayal)
- All-American “Girl Next Door” (“wholesome” representation with minimal or no indication of athleticism)
- Hyper-Heterosexual (image of well-known female athlete explicitly linked to traditional heterosexual role such as girlfriend, wife, mother)

- “Sexy Babe” (image of “hot” female athlete which falls just short of soft pornography)
- Soft Pornography (representation that reinforces sexual objectification such as Olympic sportswomen appearing semi-nude in men’s magazines)

It should be noted that the images used in this study—and which serve as exemplars for each of the six categories listed above—represent both team (basketball and soccer) and individual (golf, tennis, and auto racing) sports. It should also be noted that all but one of the images were taken from a sport media outlet such as *Sports Illustrated* or ESPN.com. The image associated with the sixth category of representation—soft pornography—came from a men’s magazine. Figure 1 presents the specific images that served as exemplars for these six media categories.

### Research Design and Data Collection Techniques

Focus groups are particularly useful in Audience Reception Research when examining differences in perspectives/interpretations between groups or categories of people, and when one’s purpose is to uncover factors that influence opinions, behaviors, and motivations (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus groups also allow scholars to examine the interaction of media meanings and messages with active audiences (Schröder et al., 2003). A fundamental tenet of this research is that focus groups need to be homogenous in their makeup because homogeneity fosters consistency of analysis and helps to ensure participants’ comfort level (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

### Timeline and Composition of Focus Groups

From the fall of 2006 through spring of 2007, eight focus groups were conducted lasting approximately 90 minutes per session; all sessions were audiotaped. To

increase our sample size, we ran four additional focus groups in the summer of 2007. The number of study participants recruited across all 12 groups was 63.<sup>2</sup> All focus group sessions took place at a large, Midwestern public University. As mentioned, each focus group was homogenous by design and consisted of 4–6 individuals representing three categories of “situated knowledge”: age, sex/gender, and level of sport engagement. Each of these categories had two levels. For age range, the two levels were 18–34 and 35–54. These ranges reflect age-segmentation profiling techniques used throughout marketing research (Soloman, 2002). Sex/gender was male or female, and for level of sport engagement, we measured individuals’ sport background as high versus low. Table 1 details the breakdown of demographic factors for focus group membership.

### Level of Sport Engagement: Operational Definition

To understand how and why people engage in sports, scholars have frequently measured research participants’ athletic background (e.g., athlete vs. nonathlete). In other studies, sport consumption profiles have been generated as a way to divide individuals into groups or categories. We believe these approaches are one-dimensional and thus combined both types of categorization to create a more comprehensive consumer profile called “level of sport engagement.” Each participant’s sports identity was measured using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (Brewer & Cornelius, 2001). We measured sport consumption by frequency of reading/watching/listening to sport media, and by frequency of attending sporting events (Pritchard & Funk, 2006).

### Focus Group Protocol

Each focus group was led by a moderator. Using PowerPoint, the moderator presented (in randomized order) all images from Figure 1 which represented the six categories

**Table 1 Focus Group Membership Based on Demographic Characteristics (N = 12)**

Eight focus groups were conducted during fall, 2006, and spring, 2007.					
Gender	Age	Sport Background	Gender	Age	Sport Background
Female	18–34	Low	Male	18–34	Low
Female	35–55	Low	Male	35–55	Low
Female	18–34	High	Male	18–34	High
Female	35–55	High	Male	35–55	High
Four additional focus groups were conducted during summer, 2007.					
Gender	Age	Sport Background	Gender	Age	Sport Background
Female	18–34	Low	Male	35–55	Low
Female	35–55	High	Male	18–34	High

Athletic Competence



Chamique Holdsclaw (Professional Basketball)  
WNBA Web Site

Ambivalence



Katie Smith (Professional Basketball)  
Calendar for Charitable Organization

All-American “Girl Next Door”



Michelle Wie (Professional Golf)  
*Sports Illustrated*

Hyper-heterosexual



Mia Hamm (Professional Soccer)  
*ESPN.com*

“Sexy Babe”



Serena Williams (Professional Tennis)  
*Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*

Soft Pornography



Danica Patrick (Professional Auto Racing)  
*FHM Online Men’s Magazine*

**Figure 1** — Specific images used to represent the six categories of media representations.

of media representations outlined above; there was one image per category. The moderator, trained in focus group techniques,<sup>3</sup> led the discussion, paying particular attention to our two research questions. There were three phases of data collection. In Phase I—Free Association—participants were asked to write down privately (i.e., not share with the group) how each of the images made them feel. Focus group members were encouraged to “free associate” whatever 2–3 words popped into their heads. In Phase II—Quantitative Response—participants were again shown each of the six images in randomized order and asked to privately indicate on a 7-point Likert scale to what degree the image in question increased their interest in women’s sports based on four levels of fan consumption which reflect an increasing level of commitment/investment: 1) reading about; 2) watching on TV; 3) attending a game; and 4) buying season tickets. In Phase III—General Group Discussion—participants were given the opportunity to share their responses from Phases I and II with the entire group. The moderator reminded participants that there are no right or wrong answers and that honest responses were needed. Probes (i.e., follow-up questions) were used during this phase to gather richer, more in-depth qualitative data, as well as greater clarification and deeper levels of specificity. The moderator was careful not to ask leading questions.<sup>4</sup>

## Data Analysis

As the study protocol indicates, we gathered quantitative as well as qualitative data. Doing so allowed us to “cross-check” participants’ verbal responses in Phase III with their written responses from Phases I and II. This technique enhances the precision and the contextual findings of the overall data (Schröder et al., 2003). With respect to the qualitative results, both authors independently examined transcripts from all 12 focus groups and then discussed the individual (i.e., separate) findings with each other. Before these discussions we independently looked for patterns or themes in the participants’ reactions to the images under consideration. We did so by utilizing discourse analysis, an investigative technique first developed by scholars such as Stuart Hall in the 1970s and used widely throughout sport media research (Boyle et al., 2006). Discourse analysis calls for an examination of the data until participants’ answers reach saturation. Saturation refers to “the point when [scholars] have heard the range of ideas and aren’t getting new information” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 26).

Each author focused on participants’ overall feelings (such as like/dislike) toward women’s sports after exposure to the six images, as well as how the images affected one’s intentions to act toward women’s sports, meaning did any image increase their interest? When we met to compare our findings we noted how much agreement there was between us. In particular, we agreed about the dominant themes which emerged overall—collapsed across all focus groups—as well as themes associated with focus group membership based on age, sex/gender,

and sport background. On the few occasions where we did not agree, it was relatively easy to reach consensus. For example, one author highlighted some dismissive remarks made about women’s basketball in one of the focus groups consisting of 18–34 year-old males. Though the other author had noted this finding, she did not give it the same weight. However, after rereading the transcript she agreed that it was important enough to include in the results.

With respect to the quantitative data, due to the small sample size, we confined our statistical analysis to frequency distributions. We first looked at overall trends and then explored response patterns as a function of participants’ age, sex/gender, and level of sport engagement.

## Results

Recall that Phase I of the focus-group protocol involved free association, meaning how did participants feel about each of the images they were just shown? In Phase III, participants were asked to reflect and provide greater detail on their initial “gut” reactions from Phase I. As a result, we present findings from Phases I and III together. First, however, we provide results from Phase II of the protocol—quantitative measurements.

### Quantitative Results: Findings by Categories of Media Representations and Situated Knowledge of Focus Group Participants

Findings from mean scores overall (collapsed across all 12 focus groups) provide a general overview for how study participants rated each of the six images (using a 7-point Likert-type scale) in terms of increasing their interest in reading about, watching on TV, attending a game, and purchasing season tickets.

**Overall Results.** A clear and consistent pattern emerged whereby the image associated with athletic competence—Chamique Holdsclaw—prompted the greatest interest in women’s sports. In sharp contrast, the two images associated with sexualized representations of athletic females—“sexy babe” and soft pornography—were least likely to generate interest across all four levels of fan consumption. The pattern that best reflected this finding was that *11 of the 12 focus groups gave athletic competence their highest ratings, while eight focus groups gave soft pornography their lowest rating.* As Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate, mean scores steadily decreased as we moved along the range of images from athletic competence to soft pornography. In fact, the more an image resembled a “sex sells” narrative, the lower the average score across all focus groups. For example, the image of Chamique Holdsclaw received an overall mean score of 4.43 for reading about, and 5.02 for watching women’s sports on TV, while the image of Danica Patrick produced a mean score of 2.38 and 2.40 on these same two measures of

sport consumption, respectively. The remaining images representing ambivalence, “sexy babe” and “girl next door,” also prompted substantially less interest than did athletic competence. Figure 2 highlights these findings in greater detail.

The pattern of athletic competence as the one image which consistently produced high-interest ratings was even more pronounced for the fan consumption variable “attend a sporting event.” As Figure 3 indicates, the competence image received an overall mean score of

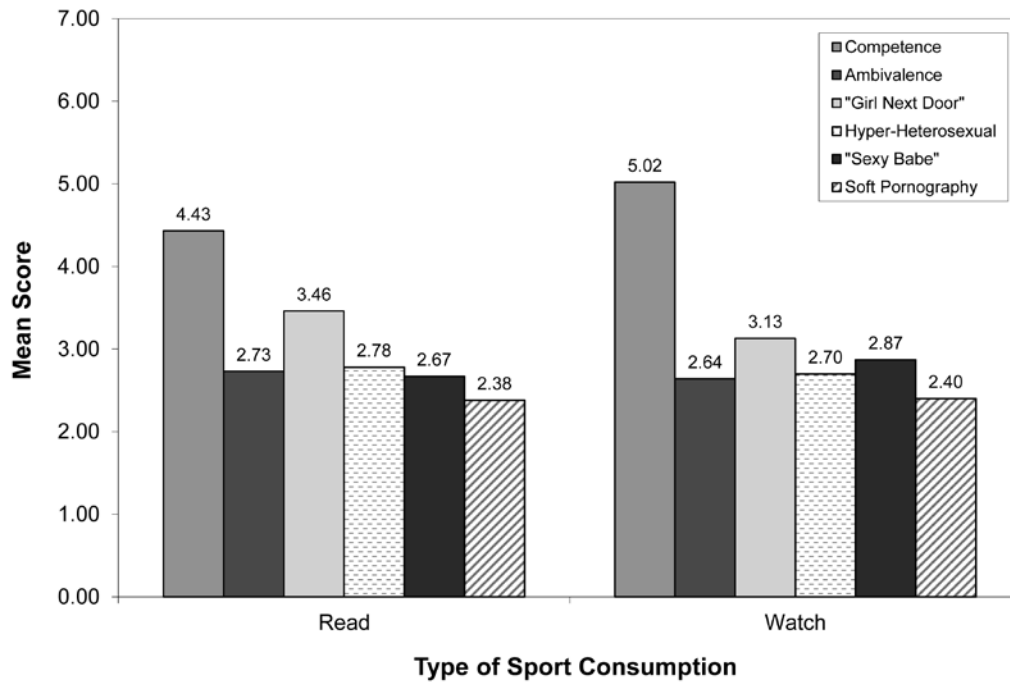


Figure 2 — Overall impact of image on interest in reading about and watching on TV.

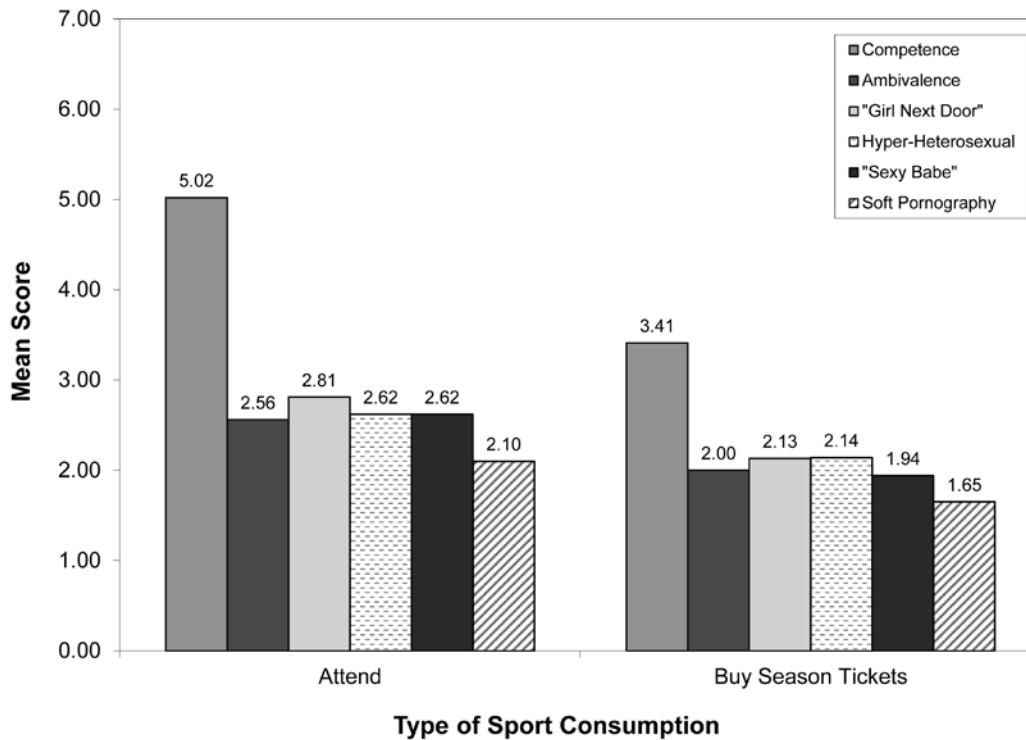


Figure 3 — Overall impact of image on interest in attending event and purchasing season tickets.



5.02. It is noteworthy that there was a significant drop off in ratings for the remaining media categories and that, once again, the soft pornography image elicited the lowest overall response ( $X = 2.10$ ). Note that across all 12 focus groups there was little interest in purchasing season tickets; all mean scores were in the bottom half of the Likert-scale. This particular finding is not surprising in that no single image would, in all likelihood, prompt such an intense reaction that an individual would want to go out and buy season tickets. See Figure 3 for greater detail of these results.

Because “purchasing season tickets” did not induce significant fan interest, we removed this variable from any further analysis. In addition, due to space limitations, we confined our presentation of the quantitative results to those which pertain to the variable “attend a sporting event.” We focused on this particular sport consumption option because, when compared with reading or watching, it requires the highest level of consumer investment and is considered the best way (certainly, financially) to measure interest in women’s sports. Therefore, the results presented below focus exclusively on interest in attending an event and highlight ratings as a function of study participants’ sex/gender, followed by a sex/age-level interaction. We also eliminated one’s level of sport engagement from our results. We did so because first, ratings between the two membership groups (high and low) did not reveal any major differences or trends, and second, due to space limitations, we wanted to concentrate on those findings where substantial differences did occur.

**Findings Related to Sex/Gender of Respondents.** In this analysis, we compared the ratings of all female participants to those of all males regarding their level of interest in attending a women’s sporting event. Consistent with the findings reported above, both female and male respondents were significantly more interested in attending events after viewing the image of athletic competence ( $X = 5.46$  and  $X = 4.38$ , respectively). There was one interesting gender difference, however. Females gave soft pornography their lowest rating by a wide margin ( $X = 2.10$ ), while males gave the image of ambivalence their lowest score ( $X = 2.12$ ). Figure 4 provides greater detail of results for all female and male respondents.

**Findings Related to an Age by Sex/Gender Interaction:** This analysis examined the interaction of age and sex/gender whereby mean scores of all younger (18–34) females were compared with mean scores of all younger males. An identical approach was undertaken for the older age range, 35–55. The results from younger females revealed a familiar theme—competence received the highest rating by a wide margin ( $X = 5.00$ ), while soft pornography received the lowest, ( $X = 1.55$ ). Interestingly, younger males gave “sexy babe” ( $X = 3.40$ ) and soft pornography ( $X = 3.40$ ) their second highest rating, whereas younger females gave their second highest rating to the hyper-heterosexual image ( $X = 3.00$ ). See Figure 5 for a detailed breakdown of these results.

In terms of the older age range, the response pattern for males and females was remarkably similar, though

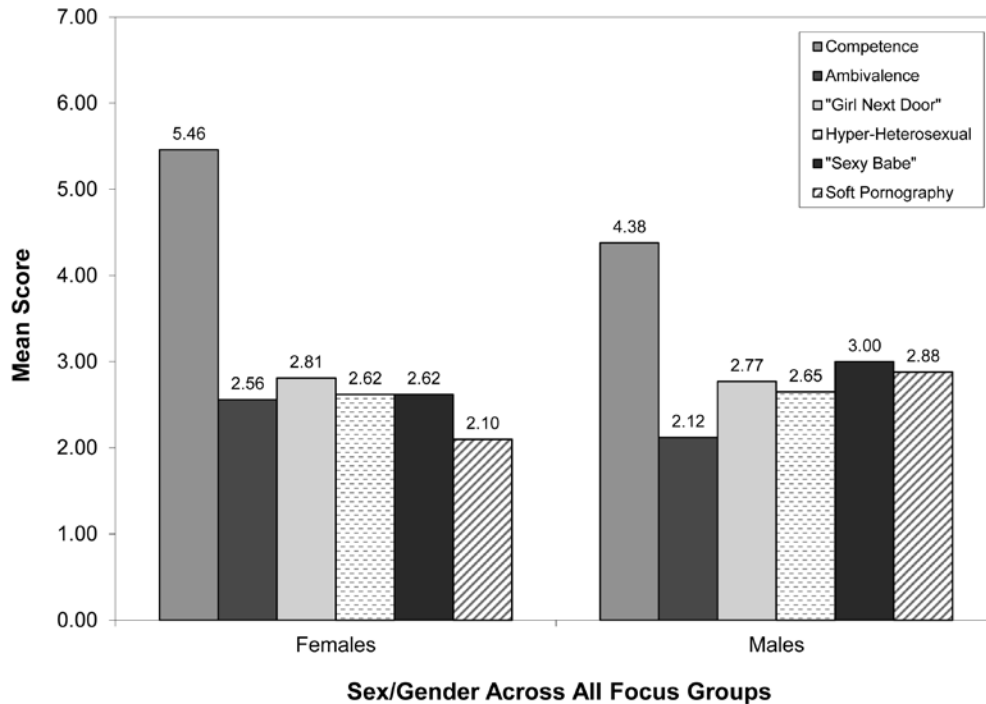


Figure 4 — Impact of image on interest in attending event by sex/gender of respondent.

males were somewhat more muted in their ratings. Both groups expressed the most interest in attending women's sports after viewing the image associated with athletic competence ( $X = 6.13$  and  $X = 4.73$ , respectively), and were least interested after viewing the soft pornography image ( $X = 1.53$  and  $X = 2.19$ , respectively). Both groups also

had a considerable drop off in their ratings after the competence option was considered. It should be noted that older females responded very favorably after seeing Chamique Holdsclaw display a high level of athletic skill—they gave her the highest rating given to any image across all 12 focus groups. Figure 6 provides greater detail of these findings.

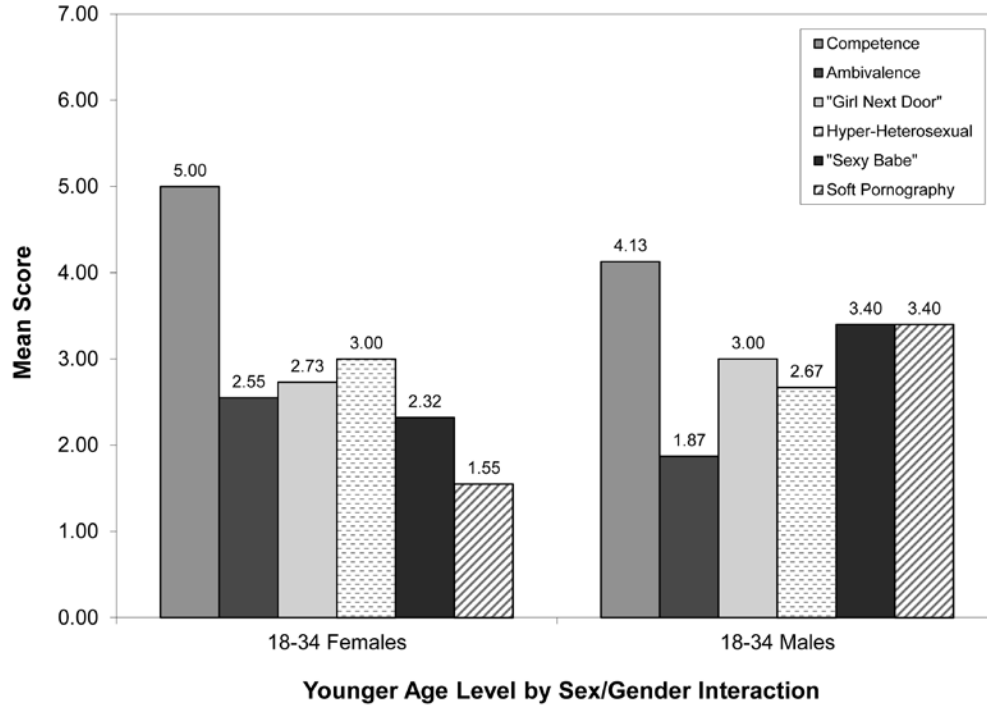


Figure 5 — Impact of image on interest in attending event: age (18–34) by sex/gender interaction.

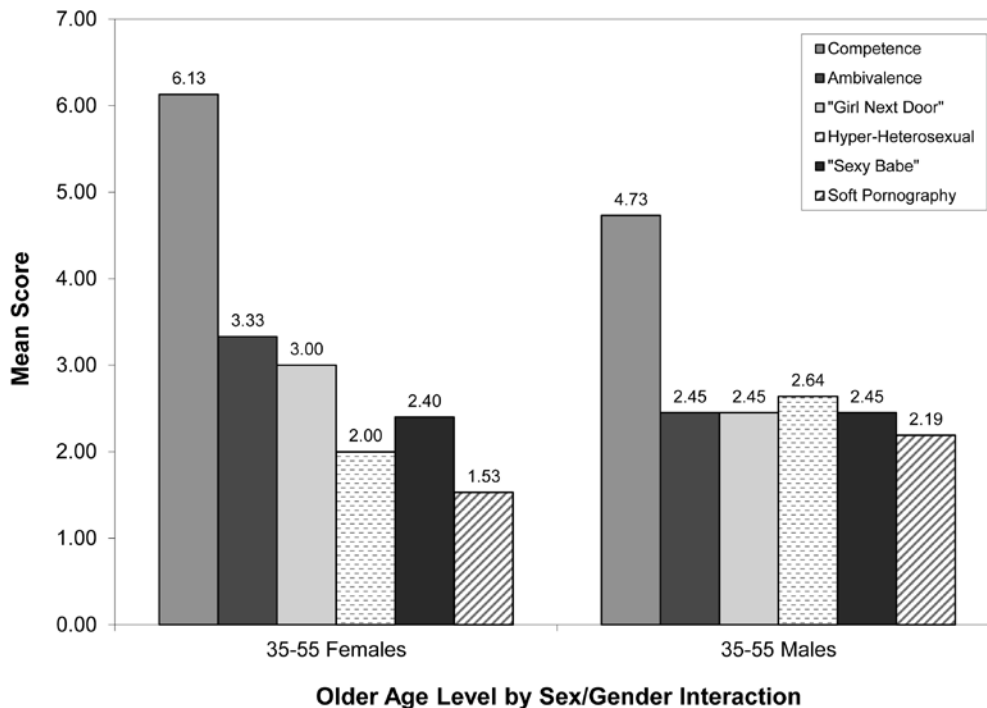


Figure 6 — Impact of image on interest in attending event: age (35–55) by sex/gender interaction.

## Qualitative Results: Findings by Categories of Media Representations and Situated Knowledge of Focus Group Participants

**Athletic Competence: Chamique Holdsclaw/WNBA.** Of all the images under investigation, this one produced the most positive and impassioned responses. Words or phrases used to describe this action photo ranged from “strong,” “determined,” and “talented,” to “powerful” and “intense.” During the discussion phase, participants emphasized that Holdsclaw possessed a high degree of athletic skill and determination. As one 18–34 year-old female noted: “She looked fierce and strong... and the [whole event] seemed very exciting. This [image] would definitely make me want to go to a WNBA game.” In a similar fashion, a 35–55 year-old male reflected the overall sentiments of his focus group: “I was excited for her. I felt that she was really driven... It made me feel like cheering, ‘Come on! Let’s go!’” A common response was reflected in the following remark from an 18–34 year-old female: “This image really sucked me in ... Yeah! I want to be there. I want to be part of that feeling.” And from a male in the 35–55 year-old age group: “This is the one shot that made me give [high ratings] on attending [an event]...because I wanted to be there with those folks.”

An unexpected—and interesting—finding was the reaction to the competence image from one focus group of 18–34 year-old males. In what generally could be described as a “backlash” response, some of the males in this particular group did what the moderator never asked them to do—*make direct comparisons to men’s sports*. Though a few group members noted that Holdsclaw was “actually playing and not just posing,” and that “she looks focused and has some drive,” others pointed out that “you show your dominance by dunking...and they have a smaller ball [in the WNBA].” Another group member stated, “As far as athletic prowess, [the WNBA] is at a [lower] level...it’s not as fast and [they] can’t dunk. I don’t get jaw-dropped with their athleticism.” It should be emphasized that these same respondents did not have a similar reaction to images of women in individual sports. It was only when reacting to the “men’s” sport of basketball that they made such pejorative comparisons, a kind of circle-the-wagons mentality that defended “their sport” by putting down what they considered the lesser, inauthentic version of women’s basketball.

**Ambivalence: Katie Smith/Calendar Shoot.** At first glance, using a “mixed message” image for marketing purposes seems logical, as the image is positioned between athletic competence on one hand and “sex sells” on the other. Based on cultural assumptions about how to most effectively market and promote women’s sports, such an approach should give you the best of both worlds. Recall that in the calendar shoot, Smith is portrayed as “sexy” in her evening gown, but is also shown holding a basketball. Reactions to this dual-message image turned off—and in some cases offended—all groups equally.

Words or phrases describing this image were “fake,” “phony,” and “boring/blah.” One response which emerged across a number of focus groups was a major disconnect between her role as a professional athlete and images that downplay that role. One older female expressed best this sentiment: “She’s trying to be something that she is not... she looks so uncomfortable.”

There were some gender differences in reactions to this “mixed message” image. Women, especially in the older age range, were more negative than were males overall. Said one 35–55 year-old female: “This [photo] is so cheesy, so fake, it totally turned me off.” In some cases, participants did respond in a manner that the producers of the calendar shoot were looking for—a positive reaction that saw Katie Smith as well-rounded, meaning not just a one-dimensional basketball player. An 18–34 year-old female expressed the views of a few of the participants: “She looks genuine and happy...she is trying to say to other women, ‘you can be athletic and strong and [still be] beautiful.’” This perspective, however, was clearly a minority one. The overall sentiment was expressed by an older male: “I’d much rather see her playing basketball...I’m sure she has talent. Let’s go watch the game and not this.”

**All-American Girl Next Door: Michelle Wie/Sports Illustrated.** The major theme which emerged from this image was a sense of disconnect between Michelle Wie, professional golfer, and the *Sports Illustrated* portrayal of her as a fashion model. The notion of disconnect was summed up by an older male: “Is this a wedding? Is this a corporate event she’s attending? What does this [image] have to do with golf?” This type of reaction was consistent across all focus groups. A younger female said: “I was wondering what the point was,” while another stated that, “It’s very out of place [in a sports magazine].” The key finding of the disconnect theme was that real (i.e., authentic) golfers don’t appear on a golf course dressed in a wedding gown, and that an image which downplayed athleticism did not facilitate an interest in women’s sports. From an 18–34 year-old male: “This picture confused me...[because] I don’t even know what they’re going for...this wouldn’t make me want to watch women’s golf.” And from an older male: “This was actually one of my lowest ratings...because it had nothing to do with sports.”

There was a minority viewpoint that Michelle Wie’s picture was “tasteful” and “classy” and demonstrated that she was a “whole person, not just an athlete.” And for some respondents, Wie’s image did generate an interest in women’s golf. From a younger male: “I got the sense there is more to the story than just golf...which intrigues me [to read more]...it’s the whole person, maybe more of a life story.” In spite of this latter point of view, the overall sentiment was expressed by a 35–55 year-old female: “If she would sell herself because of how [athletically] talented she is...I would probably be more apt to read the article.”

**Hyper-Heterosexual: Mia Hamm/ESPN.com.** Across all focus groups, this image elicited what can best be

described as a neutral response. Words and phrases used to describe participants' reactions were "red carpet celebrity," "paparazzi," and "gossip column [material]." Like the images of Michelle Wie and Katie Smith, respondents expressed a sense of disconnect between the message behind the image and the reality of women's sports. From a 35–55 year-old female: "It doesn't indicate sports to me...so it didn't draw me in one way or the other." From an 18–34 year-old female: "It's kind of a neutral photo. It didn't make me feel anything about sports." And a younger male indicated that: "It's a glamour shot...I gave it low numbers because it's not really about sports."

Some respondents had a positive reaction to the image due to their preexisting knowledge about Mia Hamm. In this sense, they affirmed one of the basic tenets of Audience Reception Research—the interpretation of any particular image results from what the reader/viewer brings to the encounter. For those respondents who recognized Mia Hamm, there was a greater level of support for her in particular and women's sports in general. From a 35–55 year-old male: "I just remembered the World Cup and her involvement in that...the mention of her name would have made me more interested." For the vast majority of participants, however, the way in which Hamm was portrayed (off the court, out of uniform, in a posed manner) did not translate into much interest in women's sports. As one 18–34 year-old female noted: "None [of the non-action photos] have compelled me to want to attend sporting events...it's about the excitement of attending the event...putting you there at the game and really feeling the excitement..."

**"Sexy Babe": Serena Williams/Sports Illustrated.** The image of professional tennis star, Serena Williams, generated interesting gender differences between the focus groups. From female respondents, words/phrases used to describe Williams were "she's flaunting it," "sex appeal," and "I'm embarrassed for her." A number of female participants also indicated a sense of disconnect between the image in question and what actually happens when women play sports. As a younger respondent stated: "Is this about tennis or [her] fashion career?...I was confused. Is this [really] about sports?" In contrast to these reactions, male respondents, especially younger ones, thought that Williams was "hot," "sexy," and "very lustful." A few younger males even said this image made them more interested in watching: "The [photo] really has nothing to do with [women's sports], but seeing this picture would make me want to watch more tennis."

The "sexy babe" image of Williams elicited criticisms from both male and female respondents. One older woman provided a typical response: "I didn't like the sexuality, but I did like that she's a strong, athletic woman" and "I'd rather see her [portrayed] on her skills rather than her looks." What did the male respondents have to say? From an 18–34 year-old: "I thought [her portrayal] was more about sex than being athletic...what made it disconnected for me, and from sport and for her as an athlete, is that she has big arms and shoulders, she's an imposing person...[the photo] really plays up

the sexual side [and ignores] the obvious work that she's put into her physique." This particular critique occurred in many of the focus groups as revealed in the following statement from a younger male: "I think that [a sexually suggestive image] would hurt your cause because most females who watch sports want empowerment." Some older males were actually turned off by a "sex sells" approach: "I don't want to see her with that dopey [sexually suggestive] expression on her face...I want to see her on the tennis court."

**Soft Pornography: Danica Patrick/FHM Magazine.** This image produced a number of intensely negative reactions, especially from the vast majority of females and older males. In this sense, there were gender and age differences in terms of the level of intensity and the nature of respondents' reactions. Words/phrases used by female respondents included "degrading," "sell out," and "demeaning herself." In contrast to these sentiments, many younger males—who were clearly not offended by this provocative image—used words/phrases to describe Patrick as "hot," "sexy," and "she's a knockout." But for most older males and females, this sexualized portrayal created an enormous backlash toward Patrick and the producers of the image. Older women in particular expressed outrage and were deeply troubled by the fact that Patrick would agree to be portrayed in this manner: "I was shocked [at how she was] objectified...and I certainly wouldn't attend the sport if this is how it is." Another woman from the same focus group opined: "Even though she is suppose to be really talented...you have to sell yourself [as a woman]...But to sell yourself out?!" This type of reaction came from younger women as well: "I put all '1s' [lowest ratings]. This would not make me want to go watch her because it's degrading to females." Finally, one younger female pointed to the counter-productive nature of a "sex sells" approach: "She's making a name [for herself], carving the sport open for women and I really respect her for that...so this was, 'Oh, my god! Please don't do this. Don't pose like this'...I have no respect for her doing that."

These negative responses were not confined to female participants. One older male indicated that this image was all about sex (and nothing about sports) and therefore wondered how it could possibly increase fan interest: "It doesn't really make you want to read about her. It just seems like a cheesecake shot, pretty sexist and pretty demeaning." And from another older male: "They're selling sex...If that were my sister I'd come in, I'd slap the photographer, and I'd grab her and leave." Though younger males were not nearly as troubled by Patrick's sexually provocative pose—"she's a knockout and then the car just adds to it"—most of them also indicated that this image did not increase their interest in car racing: "Here's this incredibly beautiful woman [so] let's throw her on top of a car in high-heeled shoes...but it does nothing to pique my interest in Indy racing" and "I thought she was hot...I think sex sells, really...but there is no sport incorporated with [this image]."

## Summary and Discussion of Key Findings

### The Backlash Effect

There were a number of major themes which emerged from this investigation as well as some unexpected—but compelling—findings. The empirical issue at the heart of this investigation was whether “sex sells” in terms of creating interest in and support for women’s sports. Findings from discourse analysis revealed that in the vast majority of cases, a “sex sells” approach created what can best be described as a backlash effect. We say this because sexualizing athletic females offended and alienated the core fan base of women’s sports—women and older men. As a result, the deeply ingrained method of promoting women’s sports was actually counter-productive. Even when younger males, a prime target audience for sport managers, acknowledged how “hot” and “seductive” they thought the sexually provocative images were, they also made it clear that such images did not substantially increase their interest in women’s sports, especially as it pertained to attending sporting events.

In terms of “mixed message” or ambivalent images (commonly found throughout mainstream media and promotional techniques), results indicated that being all things to all groups ended up being unappealing to just about everyone. In addition, most respondents found such techniques to be so forced, so phony, that they were not drawn in enough to become interested in reading about or watching a women’s sporting event, much less attending one.

### Selling Competence Was the Most Effective Strategy

In sharp contrast to the sexualized images, the photograph of Chamique Holdsclaw driving to the basket in front of a packed house received overwhelmingly positive reactions from the majority of respondents regardless of their age or gender. This image substantially increased women’s interest across all consumer options, and 35–55 year-old males indicated they were much more motivated to attend an event after viewing this particular image. As one younger female put it: “[Holdsclaw] was very powerful and confident in what she was doing which made me proud.” The sole exception to this finding occurred in one focus group consisting of 18–34 year-old males. These younger males responded favorably to the sexualized images of Danica Patrick and Serena Williams. However, like every other demographic group, in the final analysis, they gave competence their highest ratings. And in response to the moderator’s probes, they also indicated that although “sexy” images piqued their interest in reading about or watching women’s sports on TV, their desire did not go far enough to want to attend a sporting event.

Taken together, these results directly challenge one of the bedrock cultural assumptions regarding how best to promote women’s sports. Across the board, we discovered a remarkably consistent trend: Athletic prowess received

the highest levels of fan interest, while sportswomen as “sexy babes” received the lowest. In sum, these findings offer empirical evidence which underscores scholars’ long-held assertions that sexualizing athletic females trivializes their efforts, and as a result, suppresses interest among potential consumers.

### Implications for Sport Managers

As we have noted throughout this paper, there is a dearth of scholarship in what should be for those involved in the management of sport a rich and compelling site of investigation and analysis. More specifically, adding Audience Reception Research—particularly if it is informed by critical social theory—to the repertoire of sport management scholars can have an enormous impact on how society views and acts toward various political, economic, and social institutions such as women’s sports. We say this because our investigation, though limited in scope, challenges and disrupts a commonly held yet largely unexamined, contentious, and influential narrative: the deeply entrenched belief (and practice) that sexualizing sportswomen increases interest in and support for their athletic endeavors.

Frisby (2005) argues that sport management scholars “are well positioned to question how structures and practices related to policy development, marketing, the media...perpetuate and contribute to the bad and ugly sides of sport” (p. 4). We suggest that the media’s role in routinely and systematically sexualizing the accomplishments of athletic females is certainly a “bad and ugly” aspect of sport. We further suggest that to comprehensively address this gender inequity, it is essential to communicate research findings beyond academic journals and conferences and transmit empirically-based information to various practitioner stakeholder groups. For example, findings such as ours could be presented at national conferences aligned with sport management organizations such as the National Association of Collegiate Marketing Administrators and the College Sports Information Directors of America. Doing so enables us to educate those who influence or create images and texts which appear in newspaper ads, schedule posters, and media guides. It is equally essential that studies grounded in critical social science appear in curricula throughout sport management programs around the globe. With respect to our particular study, current and future sport management students who will eventually produce images of athletic females should be exposed to research findings and professional techniques (e.g., marketing strategies) that can provide alternative and empowering forms of representation. If our (and subsequent) investigations influence those engaged in the management of sport, we will further an important goal of critical social science—to expand an organization’s managerial knowledge, skills, and repertoires.

The notion that media portrayals and promotional strategies which emphasize the athletic skill of female athletes can be an effective approach for increasing fan interest may be gaining ground in applied sport business settings. For example, the most popular women’s sport

in the United States is intercollegiate basketball. Attendance figures released by the NCAA indicate that during the 2008–09 season, women’s college basketball topped the 11 million mark for the third straight year (Johnson, 2009). There is anecdotal evidence that the success of women’s college basketball is tied to the way March Madness and the Women’s Final Four are covered and promoted by ESPN. And what is their strategy? ESPN mimics the same approach used with men’s college basketball: an emphasis on game strategy, individual profiles of star players which focus exclusively on their athletic accomplishments (e.g., Maya Moore from the University of Connecticut), conference rivalries such as North Carolina vs. Duke, and legendary coaches and pioneers such as Pat Summitt, Vivian Stringer, and Geno Auriemma (Kane & Maxwell, 2008).

Imagine the fundamental shift which would occur if, for example, personnel within sport organizations relied on the information cited above to map their marketing campaigns and media coverage. What would happen if these same sport managers rejected the approach advocated by those who believe in the tried (but untrue) conventional wisdom that the most effective way to market athletic females is to turn them into objects of sexual desire? What would the result be if instead, they created images which celebrated these gifted and dedicated individuals simply and unapologetically *as athletes*? For the majority of participants in our study, it would be a strategy they would readily and heartily embrace. The key point here is that sport managers need to know their audience and understand what motivates them to more effectively attract future spectators (Robinson & Trail, 2005). In our investigation, respondents consistently—not to mention passionately—indicated that what motivated them to pay attention to women’s sports were images which emphasized athletic competence. This suggests that if sport marketers focused on women as highly skilled and accomplished athletes they could increase attendance which, in turn, would increase revenue and ultimately motivate fans to develop an ongoing (and lasting) affiliation with a team.

## Concluding Remarks

We began this paper by highlighting the position advanced by Wendy Frisby and her colleagues that the field of sport management is best served when we add theoretical perspectives and investigative techniques such as critical social science to our scholarly repertoires. The findings from our investigation challenge and disrupt what Shaw and Frisby describe as taken-for-granted assumptions which impede any significant organizational change to prevailing practices. Perhaps even more relevant to our study is the fact that traditional managerial beliefs and practices “pit gender equity against organizational effectiveness” (Shaw & Frisby, 2006, p. 486). If sportswomen were portrayed in ways that emphasized their athletic competence, it wouldn’t be “lowering the standards” to advance a particular (e.g., feminist) agenda in response to women’s sports advocates and media critics. As our findings suggest, what would be advanced is the organization’s bottom line.

We are not naïve to the reality that in some (or even many) cases, sex does indeed sell. Witness the circulation numbers for *Sports Illustrated’s* annual swimsuit issue, for example.<sup>5</sup> The crucial distinction however, is that *sex sells sex, not women’s sports*. We also know that ours is an isolated study which needs to be replicated and extended by sport media scholars. For example, data need to be gathered from a broader geographic area outside the upper Midwest, and from demographic groups based on their racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as their socioeconomic status. Future studies should also include a more diverse set of images representing a broader array of individual and team sports.

As we move into the 21st century, those involved in the management of sport may continue to embrace the notion that promotional strategies which sexualize sportswomen are an effective, even necessary, technique for creating and sustaining interest in women’s sports. If that is the case, athletic females will continue to be, as Lynn and her colleagues (2004) point out, stripped of their “power both in sport and society at large” (p. 336). If, on the other hand, scholars can challenge, disrupt, and undermine traditional gender relationships employing critical social science in general—and critical feminist theory in particular—young girls and women may actually experience sport as a site of empowerment. It is our hope that this investigation makes an important contribution toward that effort.

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