

Female Athletes in the Media: Impact on College Students' Body Image

By

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ABSTRACT

Body related concerns among those in the college population have become increasingly apparent with the rise in social media usage that can then lead to comparative thought patterns. Media images of athletes may be particularly impactful on female college students' body perceptions due to their potential for social comparison. The current study assessed the impact of performance-based and sexualized media images of popular female athletes on one's own body image. Eighty-four college females completed an online survey including multiple body image measures completed before and after viewing either performance-based or sexualized media images of famous female athletes. There were no significant effects on body image of viewing the different media images. Participants did rate the performance-based images as demonstrating significantly more empowerment, more positive body image than the sexualized images. Implications of these findings and future directions are discussed.

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CHAPTER I

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rise in focus on women in sports in retrospect is a positive event occurring throughout the past years. However, with recognition comes media portrayals that excessively focus on various aspects of the athlete other than their functionality or athleticism. Inaccurate representation of an athlete from an athleticism focus to a sexualized one has potential to alter viewers perceptions of their body. Body image can be defined as the merging of one's outer appearance with the perceptions obtained from both personal and cultural factors (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008). Body image therefore is multidimensional and can be influenced biologically, psychologically, or socially (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008). The variety of influences from multiple aspects of one's life as a result may increase their awareness of the body and how it may be perceived.

Media consumption has grown to be a consistent activity within our daily lives, whether it be the news, television series, social media, or magazines. This then increases the influx of outsider's opinions and what might be displayed as the ideal standard of beauty. The presentation of both male and female athletes in a sexualized light has the potential to affect not only how individuals perceive themselves, but also how they view others. While it may be common to think that the presence of bodily dissatisfaction is primarily present in those with eating or body dysmorphic disorders, a distortion in body image is present in many individuals who are also seemingly 'healthy' (Hosseini & Padhy, 2019). The creation of certain standards of beauty will affect many viewers due to issues with comparison and misrepresentation.

Due to social engagement, body image problems can occur through interaction with peers or family members, but the rise in societal pressures from the media can be another added strain to bodily perception. There seems to be an ever-apparent presence of body image concerns in past years leading individuals to question what the source of these issues may be. Through the combination of socialization and self-recognition as an individual gets older, the need for approval can elicit problematic behaviors (Hosseini & Padhy, 2019). This desire to attain approval from others combined with a comparison mindset (e.g., comparing one's body size/shape with others who might be perceived as “better” or “more successful”) can serve to further issues related to body image. These comparative behaviors develop rather early in an individual's life, through socialization or even through play with different children's toys (e.g., Barbie dolls) (Hosseini & Padhy, 2019). Due to body image concerns developing through multiple facets, an adolescent's developing mind may be influenced by several factors. The presence of bodily dissatisfaction can develop early in a child's life, with 40-50% of those aged 6-12 experiencing some form of dissatisfaction with either body shape or size (Hosseini & Padhy, 2019). Different expectations of attractiveness are shaped from an early age, which can hinder bodily perceptions and is becoming more apparent throughout the years.

The multidimensional approach to the development of bodily dissatisfaction indicates that there is a broad ability to affect many individuals. Prevalence rates of body image distortions or dissatisfaction varies with age and gender of individuals but have been reported to be as high as 71% in adolescents (Hosseini & Padhy, 2019). With rates

such as these present in those still going through the developmental phase, the likelihood of the individuals developing an increased awareness of how they are perceived may become more apparent when entering adulthood. The presence of bodily dissatisfaction is disproportionately apparent in girls more than boys, in older adolescents compared to younger adolescents, and in overweight more than underweight individuals (Hosseini & Padhy, 2019). There is an increased focus on specific populations that may be because of outside influences such as the set standard of beauty heavily pushed by the media, for example, showcasing models who are already tall and lean and further editing out imperfections (Tylka and Sabik, 2010).

Social Influence Theories

Self-Objectification Theory

The work done with self-objectification theory has been present for many years and is becoming more influential with the rise in media consumption. Certain depictions of individuals in the media can have a negative impact on the viewer's self-image. Objectification theory states that, through sexual objectification, women's overall qualities are often neglected to focus on their physical appearance, resulting in an emphasis on parts of their body rather than their whole being (Tylka & Sabik, 2010). As the portrayal of women in the media becomes more prevalent, there seems to be an excess in focus on how they appear physically rather than their achievements or overall function as a human (Tylka & Sabik, 2010). This can often be seen with the objectification of women in sports. The process of self-objectification occurs when there is a greater emphasis on how an observer views and evaluates an individual's body rather

than how an individual perceives their own physical appearance (Tylka & Sabik, 2010). This is often seen in an average individual but is excessively enforced in certain athletes where evaluation of aesthetic appeal is incorporated into performance in scoring (e.g., dance or gymnastics).

The increase in pressure from outside sources can impact an individual's self-image, leading to the potential for disordered eating behaviors. Outside pressures may be through images of overly sexualized individuals or from remarks made about appearance by public commentators. The use of appearance feedback and chronic body surveillance are both considered factors that are influential in the development in disordered eating symptomology (Tylka & Sabik, 2010). It is common to experience moments of insecurity throughout one's life, but when these thoughts become all-consuming it is harder to shift one's focus and different problematic behaviors may arise.

An individual, when experiencing these self-objectifying tendencies, may progress from a state to a trait level of self-objectification. When an individual applies these perceptions of objectification, but they remain context dependent and occur within the person, this would be considered state self-objectification (Vandenbosch et al., 2015). For example, when viewing various forms of media depicting the individual in a sexualized light, it is common to subsequently report greater feelings of insecurity after doing this than on an average day. It is critical to be aware of the frequency in activation of these perceptions because when accessed too much the likelihood of them affecting self-esteem and becoming permanent increases. If stability is present with these objectified perceptions across various situations for an individual, then trait self-

objectification is present (Vandenbosch et al., 2015). When there is an overabundance of media depictions of posed and sexualized models, celebrities, or athletes it is likely that this process becomes expedited. Women's objective in directing their gaze towards this form of media generally is through comparative thoughts, either upward or downward, whereas a male may engage more due to reasons related to attraction. Therefore, the process in which women engage with media presented to them differs because the engagement is related to how they themselves compare to those within the media.

Social Comparison Theory

A preoccupation with self-perception and others perception can lead to excessive comparison of oneself and with others (Tylka & Sabik, 2010). Women tend to attribute their self-worth to their appearance (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). With an increase in consumption of media depicting women in a negative light, a sense of comparison can impact how one may view themselves. Festinger's social comparison theory is based on when people compare themselves to others their self-evaluation is rooted in the outcome of these comparisons (Festinger, 1954). The constant consumption of various forms of media that portray individuals in a glamorous light can have a negative impact on an average individual. In their 2010 study, Tylka and Sabik proposed that the relationship between disordered eating tendencies and body surveillance elevates when engaging in body comparison. As previously mentioned with self-objectification theory, if this comparison behavior becomes chronic enough individuals will begin to engage in comparison without thinking about it.

Comparative behavior can occur often in everyday life, but the more these behaviors are acted upon the greater the impact it has on one's body image and self-perception. This is supported by concepts such as upward and downward comparison. Upward comparison can be described as the comparison with another individual that is perceived as superior to the self (Kim & Lennon, 2007). This is utilized in different media formats, whether it be using photoshop or with models with unattainable physicality, such as Adrianna Lima or Kendall Jenner. Therefore, comparison through the media facilitates a preoccupation with one's physical appearance and may lead to self-esteem concerns or problematic eating (Kim & Lennon, 2007). In contrast, downward comparison occurs when an individual compares themselves to someone seen as inferior to feel better about oneself (Kim & Lennon, 2007). Through downward comparison, individuals are still preoccupied with physical appearance, but now it is maintained through the lack of qualities in another person.

Integration of Theories

The effect of chronic exposure to athletes in a sexualized light rather than with focus on their abilities or successes can hinder how the viewer later perceives themselves and their own function. There is a process in how an individual develops a negative view of their body or function. With an increase in self-objectification through the media, an individual may proceed from a state to a trait level of objectification. When a trait level of objectification is present, how they are physically perceived by others becomes all-consuming and is likely to lead to chronic comparative behaviors (Vandenbosch et al., 2015). Festinger (1954) posits that an obsession with self-image can lead to basing self-

worth in how the individual stands when comparing themselves to others. Upward and downward comparison are used often to engage in self-improvement behaviors or feel better about oneself.

Body Image Disturbances and Media influence

The impact that consistent media focus has on an individual can lead to certain problematic behaviors that can affect both the self-image and potentially the physical health of the individual. Certain measures may be taken by athletes when there is pressure to look a certain way. A study on college students showed that when viewing several types of images (i.e., sexualized vs. performance) there was an impact in the frequency and tone of self-objectifying statements (Linder & Daniels, 2018). The sexualized image conditions, for both men and women, resulted in a negative impact on the participants self-description where more self-objectifying statements were used rather than physicality-based statements (i.e., “I am overweight” and “I am a soccer player”) (Linder & Daniels, 2018). Women who engage in negative self-talk can shift their focus from an ability’s mindset to an appearance one that will then decrease their self-esteem and how they view themselves (Linder & Daniels, 2018).

A continuation of body disturbance and chronic media exposure of sexualized depictions of female athletes can result in a decrease in healthy eating habits to attain a certain image (Bissell & Zhou, 2004). The ‘thin ideal’ is depicted in a variety of television programs and magazines. Bissell and Zhou in 2004 assessed the impact to over 200 female college students exposed to ‘thin ideal’ and body improvement television shows and magazines. The college women were asked to report level of exposure to

various television program and women and male sports, to then be compared to their responses on body image subscales associated with eating disorder symptomology (Bissell & Zhou, 2004). The results indicated that increased interest in television categories, such as bodily improvement, was related positively to the four eating disorder symptomology scales (Bissell & Zhou, 2004).

Societal pressures are incorporated within many forms of media leading to an inability to escape potentially harmful influences. When also integrating frequency in consumption of either sports related television or magazines, if there is a focus on aesthetic appeal sports (i.e., gymnastics, ice skating, swimming), viewers tend to have a higher drive for thinness (Bissell & Zhou, 2004). Fewer depictions of non-aesthetic or muscular female athletes in the media does not provide representation for many women in sports. The promotion of the most physically fit athlete winning an abundance of awards in the media emphasizes to those who may be vulnerable to a variety of disordered eating habits that to be successful, one must fit into a specific mold.

The internalization of the 'thin ideal' can influence body dissatisfaction resulting in a continuous cycle of problematic thoughts or behaviors. Comparative action between oneself and the pattern of beauty presented within the media was shown to be most influential with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating in the female population (Uchôa et al., 2019). A recurring pattern of beauty that is either not ideal or physically capable for the average individual can cause a negative idea of how one thinks they appear. While body dissatisfaction is most apparent with females, males too are susceptible to body dissatisfaction, resulting in potential disordered eating because of the

mass media (Uchôa et al., 2019). The bodily perceptions and actions taken to change the appearance tends to vary from males to females, however. Previous research showed that an underweight male was dissatisfied with their body, but an underweight female appeared very satisfied (Uchôa et al., 2019). The different ideas of physical perfection between genders generate different methods in attainment, such as weight training versus problematic eating patterns.

Media Portrayal of Male and Female Athletes

Athletes with a prominent level of success are likely to gain media focus, whether it be in print magazines, television, or social media. There generally is a difference in the way in which women and men are portrayed in the media. The relevance to the sport with how the individuals is portrayed has been shown to vary with men and women as well. It was shown that men are more likely to be portrayed in a way that is relevant to their sport and engaging in a sports related activity in a photo through an analysis of Sports Illustrated summer covers from 1955 to 2018 (Dafferner et al., 2019). However, there is typically a glamorization or sexualization with women athletes in the media with the way in which they are posed or dressed. Dafferner et al (2019) found through the assessment of Olympic athletes on the cover of Sports Illustrated that 58% of males were actively engaged in sports related activity while 79% of women were posed for the camera. The presence of women athletes in the media leans more towards aesthetic appeal with more athletes on the covers of Sports Illustrated primarily being drawn from aesthetic or lean sports (Dafferner et al., 2019). Mass media typically operates with an objective where they highlight what might be perceived as providing the most profit (i.e. lean models and

athletes resulting in increased sales) while in turn potentially causing harm to viewers self-esteem or eating behaviors. (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006).

The difference between how female and male athletes are portrayed generally is not received well and generates contrasting standards of attractiveness. Men in lifestyle, fitness, and sport magazines are clothed in some way where females may be presented in a bikini (Kim, 2014). The variability in focus between genders allows for the viewers depiction of appearance levels to be hindered. The information gathered through interviews of current and former athletes showed that despite similar levels of sexualization between genders, participants considered the males in the images to be more athletic (Kim, 2014). While the sexualization of athletes can impact the body image of viewers, there is also the potential that how an athlete is portrayed can change the way you perceive those in the media.

Research has shown that there is an impact on viewers mental and physical health when observing sexualized images of athletes, but the presentation of these images can also influence the perception of those within the image (Daniels et al., 2021). College participants indicated a difference in competence levels when assigned to both the sexualized and performance-based images of athletes (Daniels et al., 2021). The method in which the individuals are portrayed indicates a negative perception of the individual when there is an excessive focus on the physique and attraction. The process of sexual objectification of female athletes in the media impacts an observer's opinion, where they are viewed in a negative regard. Previous researchers have discovered that if the media image is depicted in a sexually objectified way individuals tend to consider them as less

competent, determined, intelligent, fully human, moral, capable, strong, and possessing less self-respect as an athlete in a performance-based image (Daniels et al., 2021). These negative descriptors of those seen in various forms of media can become harmful in how we might view ourselves, as it relates to social comparison theory. Despite this negative regard for those sexually depicted in the media, through upward comparison, if the individual resonates with the athlete, comparative behaviors may cause these negative thought processes to be applied to oneself.

The variation in how male and female athletes are presented to advertise either products or recent accomplishments is being recognized more by the public. Male research participants observing either sexualized or performance images of athletes made more comments about the advertising methods and lack of relevance to the sport in the sexualized conditions (Daniels, 2011). This indicates that despite the media's main objective in profiting off the male gaze, when the portrayal is not relevant to the female athlete, males have started questioning the necessity of the excessive sexualization. Importantly, the males in the study who viewed sexualized images did not make more comments about body shape or size than those viewing the performance-based images (Daniels, 2011). This challenges the idea that those more commonly portrayed in the media should be thin models or athletes, because the population media profits off most does not view body shape or size as a primary focus when viewing different depictions of athletes.

Summary and Purpose of the Current Study

The issues surrounding body dissatisfaction have a variety of origins, but the excessive consumption of media portrayals of athletes in a potentially negative light can

alter viewers' self-perception. As social beings, the desire to be accepted or positively perceived can lead to the engagement of certain behaviors, such as dressing or promoting oneself in a certain way to attain set standards of attraction. Individuals may utilize particular athletes as a means of upward comparison for motivating factors or downward comparison to better one's self-image or perception (Kim & Lennon, 2007). If comparative or objectifying thought processes become chronic, there is an increased likelihood of them becoming permanent (Vandenbosch et al., 2015). The pressures of media sources presenting either the 'thin ideal' or attraction standards impacts the process of how one may develop dissatisfaction with their body.

There is a shift in the level of emotional well-being when the presentation of the ideal beauty standard is apparent in multiple media formats, resulting in the inability of average viewers to escape these persistent pressures. The methods in which to attain these standards of attraction can be harmful on both a physical and psychological level. Beauty standards are promoted heavily within female-based media but are presented in a different light for males leading to different motives to attain set ideals for the different genders (Uchôa et al. 2019). This indicates that both genders can experience body dissatisfaction because of the methods used in promoting athletes, but there is a different mindset regarding the desire to either gain or lose weight. As body dissatisfaction becomes more apparent, discussion about the self and often other individuals can become quite negative in tone (Linder & Daniels, 2018). The overevaluation of either the self or more specifically body features can solidify these ideas about the self, but also the use of a negative inflection can expedite these to be a trait like feature of an individual.

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the potential impact of media images of women athletes on the body perception of college females. A secondary focus is to understand if and how college female athletes and non-athletes may be differently impacted by the media exposure. Specifically, we hypothesize that participants exposed to media images of athletes that are sexualized will be more negatively affected relative to body image than those exposed to media images of athletes that are sport / performance related (i.e., action shots during sport). Athletes are predicted to be more impacted by the images than non-athletes.

CHAPTER II

METHOD

Participants

Participants included 84 females between the ages of 18 to 26 years. The sample was primarily White/Caucasian (90.5%) graduate students (40.5%) who all identified as female gender. A majority of participants (69.0%) reported participating in organized sports/athletics during high school and/or college. Participants were recruited through social media platforms, including Instagram and Facebook, seeking college females between 18 and 26 to participate in an online study about body image and female athletes in the media. Table 1 provides a summary of the sample demographics.

Materials

Demographic Information. Participants reported gender identity, ethnicity, athletic experience (e.g., time frame and type of sport), and any history of an eating disorder diagnosis or medical condition that impacts weight gain/loss (see Appendix A).

The Sociocultural Attitudes Toward Appearance Questionnaire, Fourth Edition, Revised (SATAQ-4R). The original SATAQ (Heinberg et al., 1995) was developed to assess a woman's recognition and acceptance of appearance standards implemented by society. Revisions of the questionnaire in 2016 resulted in a female and male questionnaire that better assessed for “appearance” and “attractiveness” rather than “shape” (Schaefer et al., 2017).

Table 1

Demographics of the Full Sample (N = 84)

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Year in School		
Freshman	4	4.8
Sophomore	6	7.1
Junior	7	8.3
Senior	8	9.5
Graduate Student	34	40.5
Not Applicable	25	29.8
Gender Identity		
Female	100	100
Non-female	0	0
Ethnicity		
Caucasian/White	76	90.5
African American/Black	5	6.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	3.6
Hispanic	0	0
Other	0	0

The female scale consists of 31 items assessing seven different domains: (1) Internalization – Thin/Low Body Fat, (2) Internalization – Muscular, (3) Internalization – General Attractiveness, (4) Pressures – Family, (5) Pressures – Peers, (6) Pressures – Media, and (7) Pressures – Significant others (Lim, 2018). Each statement is scored on a five-point Likert scale with response options including 1 (*definitely disagree*), 2 (*mostly disagree*), 3 (*neither agree nor disagree*), 4 (*mostly agree*), and 5 (*definitely agree*) based on the participant's level of agreement (Lim, 2018).

Internal consistency is good (.82 or higher) for female subscales of the SATAQ-4R (Schaefer et al., 2017). Construct validity for both genders demonstrated a medium to large positive association with eating disorder symptomology and a negative association with measures of body satisfaction and global self-esteem (Schaefer et al., 2017). Lastly, the SATAQ-4R, female, test-retest reliability was also good (Internalization: Thin/Low Body Fat = .86, Internalization: Muscular = .90, Internalization: General Attractiveness = .86, Pressures: Family = .88, Pressures: Peers = .72, Pressures: Significant Others = .79, Pressures: Media = .85) (Schaefer et al., 2017). The overall SATAQ score was used in this study as a measure of body perception relative to societal expectations.

Body Dissatisfaction Subscale (BDS). The BDS is a subscale of the EDI-3 (Garner, 2004), which is a 91-item self-report of body image and clinical factors associated with eating disorders risk. The ten item Body Dissatisfaction subscale of the EDI-3 was developed to identify dissatisfaction of the body regarding the shape or size of certain regions. Responses are scored through a 0–4-point scoring system. The Body Dissatisfaction subscale resides under the 'eating disorder risk' primary scale of the EDI-

3 where reliabilities are in the high range (median = .94) across diagnostic and normative groups (Garner, 2004). Test-retest reliability of the eating disorder risk primary scale is .98 indicating consistent results across groups (Garner, 2004).

The BD subscale of the EDI-3 demonstrates good internal consistency, with a mean alpha of .947 (Barstak et al., 2023). Concurrent validity of the BD subscale has been demonstrated with multiple other measures of body image, including the EAT-26, EDE-Q, and Acceptance and Action Questionnaire. Intra-scale coefficients of the BD subscale are also in the acceptable range (mean = .689; Barstak et al., 2023). The BD subscale score was used in this study as a measure of dissatisfaction with one's body shape and size.

The Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS). The Objectified Body Consciousness Scale is a 24-item scale that assesses the magnitude with which females view their body as objects to be changed upon internalizing societal expectations (Mckinley & Hyde, 1996). Within the OBCS there are three subscales: (1) Surveillance, (2) Body Shame, and (3) Appearance Control Beliefs. Response options are based on a seven-point Likert scale (1 – *Strongly Disagree* to 7 – *Strongly Agree*) (Mckinley & Hyde, 1996). Scores from the OBCS include a total score and subscale scores. Scores are obtained on each OBCS scale by adding the responses provided for the items on each scale to then be divided by the number of non-missing items (i.e., didn't answer or answered '*not applicable*'; Mckinley & Hyde, 1996). Internal consistencies of each subscale for the OBCS are acceptable, including Surveillance scale = .89, Body Shame scale: .75, and Control Beliefs scale: .72 indicating a moderate to high relationship

between items. The OBCS demonstrates good test-retest reliability across both testing times with scores of .79, .79, .73 for the surveillance, body shame, and control beliefs subscales, respectively (Mckinley & Hyde, 1996). Total scores from the OBCS were used in this study as a measure of self-reported body objectification.

Media Images. Media-published pictures of female athletes from a variety of sports were selected through an online search. Two images for each of the 7 female athletes were selected, including one sexualized image (i.e., posed photo not in athletic gear or engaged in an athletic activity) and one performance-based image (i.e., in athletic gear, engaging in activity of their respective sport). The different athletes were chosen from a variety of sports to present the individuals with athletes with different physiques (i.e., muscular, lean, tall, short). The two types of images were selected because of the varied presentations of an athlete's body in the media and the impact it may have on viewers. Appendix B includes all images of each athlete that the participants were shown.

Media images assessment. For each of the media pictures presented, participants completed a brief self-report assessing their familiarity with the athlete and their impressions of the athlete and their portrayal in the image. The last item asked the participants to create a “tweet” about the photo that they might hypothetically post describing the photo (see Appendix C).

Procedure

This study was completed as an online survey developed and managed through Qualtrics, and employed a mixed model/repeated measures design, with participants

randomly assigned to media image group (i.e., sexualized images or performance-based images).

Prior to data collection ~~with participants~~, approval from Middle Tennessee State University's Institutional Review Board was obtained (see Appendix D). This study was an online survey study. Participants followed a link to the study. The first page consisted of the consent questions (see Appendix E). After consenting, participants completed the demographics form and the body image/perception questionnaires (i.e., SATAQ-4R, OBCS, and BDS) in random order. Upon completion of these assessments, participants then were presented with a group of 7 images, either the sexualized or performance-based images, presented one at a time and in random order with brief media questions about it following each image. After all images were seen and media questions answered, participants then completed the body image questionnaires again, in random order. Participants were instructed to answer the questions again with how they feel after viewing their images, whether similar or different than their original responses. The final items asked about the participant's use of various social media platforms. Finally, participants were presented with the debriefing form (See Appendix F).

CHAPTER III

Results

Body Image Analyses

It was predicted that observation of media athletes in sexualized images would elicit more negative body perception than observing athletes in performance-based images. Body perception was assessed through total scores obtained on the *SATAQ-4R*, *BDS*, and the *OBCS*. Repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted to test this hypothesis for each of the three body image assessments, with time as the within-subjects factor and media image type as the between-subjects factor. This hypothesis was not supported on the *OBCS*, $F(1, 59) = 0.598$, $p = .44$, $partial\ eta^2 = .01.$, on the *SATAQ*, $F(1, 53) = 1.37$, $p = .25$, $partial\ eta^2 = .03$, nor on the *BDS*, $F(1, 59) = .037$, $p = .85$, $partial\ eta^2 = .001$. There were no significant group differences in body image perception across time (i.e., before and after viewing the media images). Table 2 provides a summary of the body perception dependent variables by full sample and by media image group exposure. Exploratory analyses were conducted evaluating the potential impact of viewing the varied media images on body perception among participants who were athletes in high school or college and those who did not participate in athletics in high school or college. A difference score was created for each of the three-body image assessment measures (*OBCS*, *BDS*, and *SATAQ*) before and after viewing the media images. A two-way ANOVA (media image group by athlete group) was conducted to assess the effects of viewing sexualized or performance-based images on athletes and non-athletes on body

Table 2

Descriptives for Body Image Dependent Variables by Full Sample and by Media Exposure Group (Sexualized vs Performance)

	Full Sample (<i>n</i> = 72)	Sexualized Media (<i>n</i> = 32)	Performance Media (<i>n</i> = 40)
Variable	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
OBCS T1	108.45 (15.37)	106.00 (16.32)	110.43 (14.47)
OBCS T2	109.84 (17.16)	108.25 (18.90)	111.18 (15.67)
SATAQ T1	91.48 (16.39)	90.50 (15.81)	92.22 (16.99)
SATAQ T2	89.84 (16.81)	93.48 (17.63)	87.05 (15.81)
BDS T1	19.77 (8.73)	18.93 (8.40)	20.40 (9.03)
BDS T2	18.62 (8.70)	18.94 (8.32)	18.36 (9.09)

Note. OBCS possible scores range from 24-168. SATAQ possible scores range from 31-186.

BDS possible scores range from 0-40.

perception. There was no significant interaction between media image exposure type and athletic participation for the OBCS, $F(1, 55) = .329, p = .57, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .006$, the BDS $F(1, 55) = .124, p = .73, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .002$, or the SATAQ $F(1, 55) = .79, p = .38, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .015$. See Table 3 for descriptives for body image difference scores by media image group and athletic group.

Perceptions of Female Athletes' Portrayal in the Media

Exploratory analyses were conducted to assess the participants' perceptions of the athletes in their two different image types: sexualized and performance based. Table 4 presents the mean ratings for each athlete by image type. For analysis, a total body positive perception score was calculated, adding the 4 item ratings assessing perception of the athletes' bodily confidence and empowerment across all 7 athletes, resulting in a possible body positivity score between 35 and 140 for each group of athletes rated. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare body positivity ratings across sexualized and performance-based image groups. The t-test was significant, $t(65) = -2.61, p = .006$, indicating that those who viewed the athletes in performance-based poses rated them more positively ($M = 124.39, SD = 16.19$) compared to those who viewed the sexualized images ($M = 113.81, SD = 16.97$) regarding confidence, bodily empowerment, and a positive representation of the athlete. Table 4 shows ratings across athletes and media image type.

Table 3

Descriptives for Body Image Dependent Variables Difference Scores by Media Exposure Group (Sexualized vs Performance) and Athletic Participation (athlete vs nonathlete)

	Sexualized Media	Performance Media
Athletes	<i>N</i> = 19	<i>N</i> = 17
	OBCS Diff = -2.26 (10.26)	OBCS Diff = -.06 (8.16)
	BDS Diff = .05 (2.44)	BDS Diff = -.06 (2.77)
	SATAQ Diff = -1.84 (4.48)	SATAQ Diff = 1.24 (9.40)
Nonathletes	<i>N</i> = 6	<i>N</i> = 13
	OBCS Diff = 1.83 (11.58)	OBCS Diff = .85 (8.27)
	BDS Diff = 1.33 (2.94)	BDS Diff = .69 (2.10)
	SATAQ Diff = .33 (1.37)	SATAQ Diff = 0.00 (5.24)

Note. Positive difference scores indicate improved body perception; Negative difference scores indicate more negative body perception.

Table 4

Mean Body Positivity Ratings for Athlete Media Images

	Athletic Photos <i>M(SD)</i>	Sexualized Photos <i>M(SD)</i>
Simone Biles		
Q1: Positive body image	4.55 (.76)	4.39 (.79)
Q2: Confident in their body	4.66 (.78)	4.79 (.49)
Q3: Positive sport representation	4.66 (.67)	3.76 (1.37)
Q4: Promoting body empowerment	4.50 (.83)	4.42 (.87)
Alex Morgan		
Q1: Positive body image	4.58 (.83)	4.03 (1.13)
Q2: Confident in their body	4.63 (.71)	4.61 (.70)
Q3: Positive sport representation	4.74 (.50)	3.48 (1.33)
Q4: Promoting body empowerment	4.27 (1.07)	3.97 (1.21)
Naomi Osaka		
Q1: Positive body image	4.58 (.83)	4.27 (1.01)
Q2: Confident in their body	4.55 (.83)	4.58 (.61)
Q3: Positive sport representation	4.68 (.66)	3.73 (1.23)
Q4: Promoting body empowerment	4.42 (.86)	4.3 (.98)
Gabrielle Reese		
Q1: Positive body image	4.26 (.97)	3.69(1.36)
Q2: Confident in their body	4.49 (.76)	4.47(1.01)
Q3: Positive sport representation	4.28 (.97)	3.09(1.20)
Q4: Promoting body empowerment	4.08 (1.01)	3.94(1.19)
Jenny Finch		
Q1: Positive body image	4.28 (.97)	4.36(.78)
Q2: Confident in their body	4.36 (.90)	4.55(.75)
Q3: Positive sport representation	4.56 (.68)	3.48(1.18)
Q4: Promoting body empowerment	4.23 (.90)	4.39(.79)
Angel Reese		
Q1: Positive body image	4.46 (.76)	4.27(.88)
Q2: Confident in their body	4.44 (.94)	4.61(.70)
Q3: Positive sport representation	4.51 (.79)	3.55(1.33)
Q4: Promoting body empowerment	4.21 (.89)	4.3(.85)
Marion Jones		
Q1: Positive body image	4.19 (1.02)	4.09 (.98)
Q2: Confident in their body	4.54 (.77)	3.94 (1.14)
Q3: Positive sport representation	4.57 (.84)	3.21 (1.43)
Q4: Promoting body empowerment	4.32 (1.00)	3.79 (1.05)

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine potential differences in body perception of college females when observing media images of female athletes portrayed in performance-based or sexualized posed images. A secondary goal was to assess whether this potential influence was different for athlete and nonathlete college females. Finally, perceptions of the same athletes posing in the two different media image types were expected to differ.

The first hypothesis, that observation of media athletes in sexualized images would elicit more negative self-body perception than observing athletes in performance-based images, was not supported for any of the body image measures in this study. These results are in contrast to those reported by Bissell & Zhou (2004), who found increased eating disorders pathology among college students with increased exposure to television and magazine portrayal of “thin ideal”. The lack of significant difference across media image groups in the current study may have been influenced by the lack of experimental control over the participants’ actual viewing of the different images. Due to the nature of this being an online survey, there was no control for how long each participant looked at the images or if they viewed the image at all, instead simply clicking to the next screen. Although each image was presented on its own screen on the survey, there was no method in place to ensure the image was viewed, therefore no way to ensure their subsequent scale responding could have been impacted by the images.

The assessment of how athletes’ and nonathletes’ body perceptions were impacted by the viewing of the different types of images also showed no significant group

differences. Although no previous research has directly compared the impact of media exposure on body image of athletes and nonathletes, social comparison theory would suggest that participants who are athletes would identify more closely with the athletes in the images than would the nonathletes, thus be more likely to compare themselves to the images and be impacted by that comparison. One explanation for why these group differences were not found in the current study is the disproportionate number of athletes and those who never participated in athletics in the current study. Athletic participation was not a variable on which media image group was randomized. As a result, there were only 6 participants who were nonathletes who viewed the sexualized images whereas there were 19 athletes who viewed those same images. These results may have been impacted by the low and unequal samples across the four groups. Similar to hypothesis one, the lack of significance also may be due to there being no control over the viewing of the images. Additionally, some types of athletes (e.g., dancers, cheerleaders, gymnasts) may be more susceptible to negative body image influences than other types of athletes. This increased susceptibility may be due to the focus on physical appearance as part of the athlete's scores or success. The limited sample in the current study did not allow for analyses of different athlete type; nor did it allow for analyses of current college athlete compared to previous athlete. Future work in this area could target these specific athlete groups to assess their specific experiences with media impact on body perception.

An assessment of participants' perceptions of the seven athletes who were viewed was conducted to assess whether they perceived those in the sexualized condition differently than those in the performance condition. Results showed that the athletes in

the sexualized condition were rated less positively (e.g., less body confident, less empowered) than those in the performance-based condition. Close inspection of the means suggests that sexualized images were seen as portraying the athlete's sport in a less positive light than those in the performance-based images. Perceptions of the athletes themselves (e.g., their body confidence, etc.) were relatively unaffected across the two media groups. These scores may be due to the participant genuinely having less positive regard for the athlete in the sexualized condition, however, participants' ratings of each athlete may have been impacted by their familiarity with the different athletes. This can be true either positively or negatively depending on how their familiarity is perceived. For example, Angel Reese was one of the athletes viewed in this study, an athlete who has received excessive focus both positively and negatively in the media recently. Participants' familiarity with her may have impacted her ratings more than did their viewing of the specific images presented. The level of familiarity of an athlete may impact how they are perceived because if there is excessive exposure to the athlete on a day-to-day basis, viewing an image for a few seconds likely won't have an effect on the viewers' perceptions.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

This study had considerable strengths that allowed for a thorough analysis of the data. The study utilized psychometrically sound instruments to assess the presence of body image concerns. In addition, the seven different athletes whose images were included in the study included athletes from a variety of sports, and they were presented to the participants in a random order. The body image assessments and photos were

presented in random order to control for any potential order effects. The study also included athletes from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and with variation in body types (e.g., some tall and thin, some short and muscular). This allowed for an assessment of body image across different athlete physiques. Lastly, each of the images included in the study were valid for the type of image (i.e., performance versus sexualized). Although there were several methodological strengths in this study, there are some limitations that could be addressed in future research.

The area of research of body image as it relates to media presentations of female athletes has the potential to increase our understanding of how young adults are impacted by their exposure to these media. One primary limitation of the current study as well as previous studies in this area is the lack of diversity in the samples studied (e.g., Benton & Karzisia, 2015; Daniels, 2011; Daniels et al., 2021; Kim & Lennon, 2007; Linder & Daniels, 2018; Tylka & Sabik, 2010; Yang & Yin, 2023). It is critical in future studies to include an ethnically and racially diverse group of participants, especially given that the athletes in the media represent such a diverse population. Additionally, individuals from different ethnic or racial groups might respond differently to media images and how they relate to their own body image. For example, with social comparison theory, an African American individual may be impacted more by other African American athletes because of comparing to others who look like them. Additionally, studying a larger number of participants from a wider age range (including adolescents) could also be beneficial to assess potential variable influence on body image across the age span of adolescents to young adults.

A final limitation to this study is that it was conducted entirely online with no methodological control over the viewing of the media images. A more controlled exposure to each of the photos, such as asking validity questions about the photo, could provide a more direct measure of how viewing the image impacts one's own body perception. Future research may utilize brief videos of an athlete's performance versus a sexualized photo so participants are viewing what is presented to them for a set amount of time. Additionally, utilizing an eye tracker device to determine how long the individual views the photo and what areas of the image are viewed could provide a level of methodological control over the participants' viewing of the presented images. Addressing each of these limitations in future studies could provide valuable information about the impact of exposure to media images of female athletes on the body image of young women.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that viewing performance-based and sexualized images did not impact their own body perception in these young adult women. The results do, however, indicate that the participants had a much more positive view of the athletes when they were presented in a performance-based image than when they were presented in a sexualized image. This finding suggests that how the athletes are portrayed in the media does impact how one perceives that athlete's body confidence, empowerment, body positivity, and even their sport. Considering how inundated young women are with images via social media, continuing to study the potential influence of such exposure in methodologically sound ways is a worthwhile endeavor.

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Appendices

Appendix A
Demographics

1. Please specify your age _____
2. What is your current college year?
 - a. Freshman
 - b. Sophomore
 - c. Junior
 - d. Senior
 - e. Graduate student
 - f. Not applicable
3. Which ethnicity do you identify with?
 - a. Caucasian/White
 - b. African American/Black
 - c. Asian/Pacific Islander
 - d. Hispanic
 - e. Other
4. What gender fits you best?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Transgender

- e. Gender fluid
 - f. Other
5. What is your current height?
 6. What is your current weight?
 7. Have you had a history of eating problems or a medical condition that affects weight gain or loss?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. If yes, please state what condition(s): _____

Social Media Usage:

1. Which of the following social media platforms have you used in the past week?
(circle all that apply)
 - a. Instagram
 - b. Facebook
 - c. Tik Tok
 - d. Twitter / X
 - e. Pinterest
 - f. Snapchat
2. In the past week, how much time have you spent on these platforms (combined)?
 - a. 1-7 hrs (about an hour a day)
 - b. 8-14 hrs (about 2 hrs a day)

- c. 15-21 hrs (about 3 hrs a day)
 - d. 22 – 28hrs (about 4 hrs a day)
 - e. 29 or more (more than 4 hrs a day)
3. We are interested in how you use your social media platforms. Please rank the following in terms of the most common reason you use your social media to the least common reason you use your social media.
- a. Interacting/communicating with peers and family
 - b. Keeping up with world news and events
 - c. Keeping up with entertainment news and events
 - d. Keeping up with health and wellness factors
 - e. Keeping up with sports/athletes
 - f. Other: (please describe): _____

Appendix B

Media Images

Alex Morgan - Soccer



Naomi Osaka - Tennis



Marion Jones - Track



Gabrielle Reese - Volleyball



Jenny Finch - Softball



Simone Biles - Gymnastics



Angel Reese - Basketball



Appendix C

Media Image Questions

Who is this athlete? _____

How familiar are you with this athlete?

- Very familiar
- Slightly familiar
- Not at all

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements:

The athlete represented in the photo is demonstrating a positive body image.

- Mostly disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Slightly agree
- Mostly agree

The athlete in the photo is confident in their body

- Mostly disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Slightly agree
- Mostly agree

This photo generates a positive representation of this athlete's sport.

- Mostly disagree

- Slightly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Slightly agree
- Mostly agree

The athlete is promoting body empowerment in this photo (i.e., expressing how one might show their body image confidently)

- Mostly disagree
- Slightly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Slightly agree
- Mostly agree

Create a tweet (140 characters) about this photo:

Appendix D

Institutional Review Board Approval

Date: 6-13-2024

IRB #: IRB-FY2024-202

Title: Athlete's Representation in the Media and the Impact on College Student's Body Image

Creation Date: 3-8-2024

End Date:

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Glenn LaRiviere

Review Board: MTSU Institutional Review Board

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Exempt	Decision	Exempt
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Key Study Contacts

Member	Glenn LaRiviere	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	grl2w@mtmail.mtsu.edu
Member	Glenn LaRiviere	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	grl2w@mtmail.mtsu.edu
Member	Kimberly Ujich Ward	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	kimberly.ward@mtsu.edu

Appendix E

Informed Consent

Study Title: Female Athletes in the Media: Impact on College Students' Body Image

Protocol Number: IRB-FY2024-202

Approval Date: 4/25/2024

Principal Investigator: Glenn Rose LaRiviere

Institution: Middle Tennessee State University

You are being asked to participate in a research project. The following information is provided to inform you about the research project and your participation in it.

1. Purpose of the study: You are being asked to participate in a study about how viewing the presentation of either a sexualized or performance-based image of an athlete might impact your impressions and your self-perceptions.

2. Description of procedures to be followed and approximate duration of the study: After providing consent, you will fill out some self-report measures that assess your self-perceptions and provide some basic information about yourself. You also will view some different images of female athletes, either posed or athletic/performance based. After viewing each image, you will answer some questions about the image. The study should take approximately 35-40 minutes to complete.

3. Compensation for participation: MTSU students may receive research credit or extra credit for participation in their psychology courses.

Here are your rights as a participant:

- a) Your participation in this research is voluntary.
- b) You may skip any item that you don't want to answer, and you may stop the research at any time. Note that if you leave an item blank, you will be warned that you missed one, just in case it was an accident. You can still click that you don't want to answer. Some items may be required in order to accurately present the study.
- c) There are no risks associated with your participation besides possible discomfort with some of the questions.
- d) There are no real benefits to you from participating besides earning your research / extra credit for your class.
- e) You will NOT be asked to provide any identifiable personal information.
- f) All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private, but total privacy cannot be promised. Your information may be shared with people at MTSU (such as the MTSU Institutional Review

Board) or other agencies (such as the Federal Government Office for Human Research Protection) if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

Contact Information: If you should have any questions about this research study please contact:

Principal Investigator: Glenn Rose LaRiviere

Contact Information: grl2w@mtmail.mtsu.edu

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Kimberly Ujcich Ward

Contact Information: kimberly.ward@mtsu.edu

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Office of Compliance at 615-494-8918 or via email at irb_information@mtsu.edu.
(<http://www.mtsu.edu/irb>)

If you're ready to get started, please make your choice below before clicking the arrow button.

Thanks again for volunteering your time to this project!

I have read the information above. I am at least 18 years old. I believe I understand the purpose, risks, and benefits of the research, and I know what I will be expected to do as a study participant.

I consent to participate

I decline to participate

APPENDIX F
DEBRIEFING FORM

Thank you for your participation in our study. From this study, we hope to learn whether the variable presentations of women athletes in the media illicit different body image concerns. Comparative thoughts when viewing objectified images can result in greater body dissatisfaction. The questions you completed will help us identify a relationship between viewing objectified images of athletes and body image concerns and if sport participation impacts them.

If, after participating in this study today, you have concerns about your experience as it relates to stress or aspects of your mental health, the following resources have professionals who might be able to help you. Feel free to contact any of these service providers directly should you want help with any concerns about your emotional health.

MTSU Counseling Services

KUC 326-S (615) 898-2670

Office Hours: 8:00am - 4:30pm Monday - Friday

National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI)

Phone: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

Text "HelpLine" to 62640

Email: helpline@nami.org

For after-hour emergencies call Mobile Crisis: 1-800-704-2651. Or go to the nearest emergency room.