

A Content Analysis of *Sports Illustrated's* Portrayal of Female Athletes and Its Impact on

Society

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**ABSTRACT**

This study utilizes a content analysis of *Sports Illustrated* covers from 1954-2016 to evaluate the amount and type of coverage permitted to female athletes through this source of print media. The covers were critiqued for both quantity and quality as it relates to the coverage afforded to female athletes and how it differs from the coverage of male athletes. The results from this study provide a foundation for those who wish to further explore and raise awareness on the issue of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of female athletes in sports media.

*Keywords:* female athlete, underrepresentation, misrepresentation, media, print, sport

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

As the years progress, it is more apparent than ever that sport is a huge business that continues to grow. Across the world, billions of viewers tune into television broadcasts of global events like the Olympic games and soccer or rugby World Cups (Bruce, 2008). Sports spectators can now access a variety of media coverage of sport via television, radio, newspapers, magazines, the Internet and even mobile phones. Sports talk shows, previews and reviews, fantasy sport competitions, video games and the news all exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and are highly viewed by sport spectators. Consequently, there is an overwhelming male focus during sports media coverage, which is rarely questioned (Kane, 1996). According to Bruce (2008), the association between sport and masculinity is so taken for granted that few people challenge the fact that media coverage is heavily weighted in favor of men.

According to a documentary conducted by the University of Minnesota's Tucker Center titled "Media Coverage and Female Athletes," 40 percent of all sports participants are female and 43 percent of college athletic scholarships are granted to females (2013). Female interest in sports has sky rocketed, with more young girls desiring to take part in some sort of sporting activity. Leagues such as the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), the Ladies' Professional Golf Association (LPGA), the National Pro Fastpitch League (NPFL), the Women's Pro Tennis Tour (WTA), and the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) have been welcome signs for fans searching for team-oriented play, affordable seats, and accessible sports stars (Wulf, 1997). In addition, the Olympic games have also been a platform for successful female athletes. Female athlete

at the interscholastic and intercollegiate levels have made great strides as well. With that being said, only 4 percent of media coverage is dedicated to women's sports (University of Minnesota's Tucker Center, 2013).

One of the oldest trends in research on gender in sports media is the shortage of women's sport coverage and the lack of respectful, serious coverage of women's sport (Cooky, Messner & Hextrum, 2013). A landmark U.S. study by Lumpkin and Williams (1991) found that only 8 percent of *Sports Illustrated* magazines from 1954-1987 contained a feature article concerning a female sports figure. Another study shows that women were featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* a scarce 4 times out of 53 issues in 1996 (Women's Sports Foundation, 1997). According to Taibai (2015), three local LA network affiliates dedicated about 5 percent of their coverage to women's sports in 1989. In 2014, that number was down to 3.2 percent. For almost every network examined throughout their study, coverage of women's sports was higher 10, 15, 20 and 25 years ago than it is today. Given these findings of declining coverage and the powerful role of the media in "normalizing gender beliefs and attitudes," it is important to continue to investigate the amount and types of coverage afforded to female athletes (Duncan & Messner, 2005).

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the North American sports media publication *Sports Illustrated* for the quality and quantity of coverage that has been afforded to female athletes on the covers of the publications magazines. The media has a way of impacting society through its depictions and portrayals due to the fact that they



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are able to reach the masses. Through the media's male driven focus, they are concurrently challenging yet reinforcing prevailing assumptions that sport is primarily a male domain. According to Dickson (2015), the formation of thoughts and perceptions about people, places, things, and ideas continually change as people change and mold to new experiences that they encounter. The aim of this study is to examine this specific form of sport media and come to a conclusion on whether there have been positive changes made as it relates to the quality and quantity of the female athletes portrayal on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* Magazines. These changes include an increase in the amount of female athletes presented on the covers of the publication and changes made to the way that these athletes are portrayed on the cover.

The covers of *Sports Illustrated* from 1954-2016 were examined utilizing a content analysis. These covers were analyzed with two different themes in mind, which focused on the amount of covers that featured female athletes versus the amount that featured male athletes. The quality of the coverage was also examined and compared. *Sports Illustrated* was selected because it is a noted publication that aspires to cover all sports and has been around for decades. The fact that the publication has been around for so many years is extremely helpful because it broadens the sample size and in the case of this study, it allows us to see if changes have been made in the way that female athletes are presented on the cover. The results and findings from this study are directly from *Sports Illustrated*; however, they hold relevance with larger issues and trends that exist throughout sport media in the North American region.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

1. Determine if *Sports Illustrated's* portrayal of the female athlete has changed as women's sports evolves.
2. Determine the differences in male and female portrayal throughout the magazine covers.
3. Discover reoccurring themes as they relate to the female athletes portrayal throughout *Sports Illustrated*.

### **1.4 Overview of Chapters**

The next chapter of this study will be focused on past literature and the findings of previous studies. It will also focus on trends in female sports participation, trends in female sport interest, the influence that the media can have on society and why the focus of this study is placed on women's sports. This particular chapter gives more background information and allows readers to have a better understanding on why the selected topic is important. The third chapter of this study will focus on the research method that was utilized. It will be described in detail what steps were used in conducting this study as well as the rationale, limitations, validity and reliability. The fourth chapter reveals the results of the study while the fifth chapter goes into detail on the findings and how the results can impact society. While the sixth and final chapter is used to discuss implications for further research, recommendations for the future and closing remarks.

In closing this first chapter, it is important to remember that the public depends on the media as a key news source, and because of this, opinions can be easily distorted. The way the media portrays both female and male athletes has a hand in the way that society

views them (Shaller, 2006). This problem holds relevance today because female athletes are not seen as equal to their male counterparts, which can ultimately affect the way that young girls view their bodies, the way that they feel about participating in sports and the way that society views the female athlete. Overall, it is clear that sports media presents “an essentially male-skewed world, one in which females have reason to wonder about their social position and role” (Melnick & Jackson, 1998, p. 550). While women’s sports have come a long way over the years, we still have to question if the media will ever begin to evolve in their approach to covering women’s sports.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Female athletes have received significantly less coverage within the media than their male counterparts (Kane, 1996). According to research completed by Messner and Cooky (2010), the media tends to praise men for their athletic ability in sports, but then seem to praise women only for physical attractiveness. Through this Literature Review, previous studies that revolve around the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of female athletes in the media will be presented as well as some background information on the evolution of women’s sports and the role that the media has played in shaping society’s views of the female athlete.

### **2.1 Trends in Female Sport Participation**

With women’s hasty postwar movement into the labor force and a re-energized feminist movement, what had been an easily ignorable connotation of female athleticism from the 1930s through the 1960s suddenly swelled into a flood of female sports participation-and demands for equity (Messner, 1988). Since the 1972 passage of Title

IX, women in the United States have had a legal basis from where they could push for greater equity in interscholastic and collegiate athletics (Messner, 1988). The law applies to any school that receives federal funding.

Prior to Title IX, women's opportunities for competitive physical activity were limited in America. The law required the American society to acknowledge that women have the right to partake in sports, and be on an equal playing field as it relates to men. Before 1870, sports for women existed in the form of play activities that were recreational rather than competitive, informal, without rules and emphasized physical activity (Gerber, Felshin, Berlin, & Wyrick, 1974). According to Bell (2008), as more women sought to become involved in physical activity, they became more competitive. Throughout the years, people moved towards the idea of Constrained Femininity, which refers to the historically and culturally constructed notion of a "disciplined" female body that is both athletically capable and works to meet the expectations of traditional femininity in terms of aesthetics and performance.

According to Garber (2002), in 1971, the year before Title IX became law, fewer than 300,000 girls participated in high school sports. Today, the number approaches 3 million, or approximately one in two and a half. The number of women participating in intercollegiate sports during the same time has gone from about 30,000 to more than 150,000 (Garber, 2002). In the last 20 years alone, the number of women's college teams has nearly doubled. Before Title IX, only tennis and golf had established professional tours. Today, there are also women's professional leagues for soccer, volleyball, bowling, boxing, lacrosse and basketball, just to name a few. Women began to break down the gender barrier, no longer limiting themselves to "feminine sports," even making inroads

into traditionally male sports of football, rugby, wrestling and jiu jitsu. In March 2015, former NCAA ice hockey player Dani Rylan announced the formation of the National Women's Hockey League, the first paying professional women's hockey league in North America (Ottaway, 2016).

According to Winslow (2013) in 2010-2011, there were 9,746 women's teams competing in over 20 different sports at the college level. The five most frequently offered college sports for women are basketball, volleyball, soccer, cross country, and softball (Winslow, 2013). Programs such as Connecticut, Notre Dame, and Baylor women's basketball often match or trump the popularity of their male sport counterparts.

Professional women's sports leagues such as the WNBA, is seen as one of, if not the most competitive women's sports league in the world. However, the players are subject to going overseas in the offseason due to the lack of money they receive in season. According to statistics that Barack Obama's website Organizing for Action (2015) demonstrates, females still struggle for equality in all aspects of life. In the job market, in sports and in salaries, women suffer disadvantages strictly because of gender (Organizing for Action, 2015; Eastman and Billings, 2000). To get a sense of the pay difference between the NBA and WNBA, the WNBA salary cap for 2012 was \$878,000 per team and the maximum salary for a player was \$105,000 (Steele, 2012). The Atlanta Hawks' Joe Johnson made more than \$219,000 a game during the same season, which was shortened due to a league lockout (Steele, 2012). According to Agent Bruce Levy, players could add to the average \$72,000 WNBA salary by playing overseas, where a typical seven-month contract started at \$40,000. Marquee players could make as much as \$600,000, including incentives, for one season. With virtually no salary restrictions, there

was an opportunity for two or three players to reach \$1 million, including bonuses.

Lauren Jackson, Candace Parker and Diana Taurasi made \$1 million playing overseas in the 2012 season (Steele, 2012).

While women do experience differences in media coverage and salary, they are still happy to be part of professional leagues that can give younger athletes something to aspire to work towards. There have been retired female athletes who have spoke about how they did not have many female athletes to look up to when they were young or a professional American league to work hard to play in after college, however they are happy that this is no longer the case and they can give younger players something to aspire to. In 2012, former WNBA Champion and MVP Lisa Leslie said, “Candace Parker has talked about how she saw us (1992 Olympic Team) when she was 8 or 9, and that showed her what she wanted to do. Diana Taurasi says the same thing. And now those young women are inspiring a new generation. It’s really come full circle” (Leslie, 2012).

## **2.2 Trends in Female Sport Interest**

While there are people who are fans of professional female sports in the United States and attend games, they lack in comparison to the amount of male sports fans and spectators. Which is why the WNBA has been forced to close and find new homes for franchises in the past and female soccer players have taken pay cuts. According to Tierney (2003), the leagues have faced struggles because no mass sisterhood is watching the games on television. While women are a growing fan base for the sport industry, it is still up for debate whether they are paying attention to leagues other than the NBA, NFL,

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NHL and MLB. According to the Tucker Center, roughly a third of fans of major sports are women (Ottaway, 2016).

According to Tierney (2003), women's professional basketball games draw only a third as many viewers as men's games, and half of those WNBA viewers are men. Men also make up more than half of the tiny television audiences for women's soccer (Tierney, 2003). With the exception of a few sports, such as tennis, gymnastics and figure skating, the typical person watching female athletes on television is a man. According to Tierney (2003), the problem for women's sports leagues is that fans of both sexes prefer watching men. Promoters of women's sports hoped that Title IX would help turn girls into fans, but at ESPN, the balance of the audience has remained fairly constant for more than a decade: three men for every woman (Tierney, 2003). Experts say women may enjoy sports when it is a social event, the family gathered around the set, a group outing to a game, on the other hand they are much less likely than men to watch a game alone. "For men, sports is more of a social currency, they need to know what happened in the game last night so they can talk about it with their buddies. Women don't have the same need" said Artie Bulgrin, the chief of research at ESPN (Tierney, 2003).

Female athletes have given the media countless opportunities to pay attention and cover their sports. In 2011 the Women's World Cup between the United States and Japan pulled in more than 13.4 million viewers. Also, the U.S. Open Women's Final in 2013 between Serena Williams and Victoria Azarenka pulled in a rating of 4.9, compared to the men's final between Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic, which pulled in a 2.8. Moments like these show that there is interest and there are people who want to see female athletes compete. It has been said that the Gopher's women's hockey team and the

WNBA's Minnesota Lynx have garnered interest from their winning records because "people want to see winners" (University of Minnesota Tucker Center, 2013). However, there are male teams with losing records who still receive more media coverage than the women on these winning teams.

According to an article from WNBA.com (2017), the league set records during the 2017 season featuring many new platforms for fans to engage with games, players and teams. The WNBA achieved its highest attendance in six years and set records for social media and merchandise during the 2017 regular season. The initiatives to further showcase the game to a global audience included a live 20-game schedule on Twitter, the launch of the league's first official one-day fantasy game with Fan Duel and the first live stream of a basketball game on TIDAL, a global music and entertainment service. In addition, Electronic Arts Inc. announced in August that a full roster of WNBA teams and players would appear in a video game for the first time when NBA LIVE 18 launched in the fall ("WNBA Scores Highest Attendance," 2017).

The WNBA tallied its highest total attendance (1,574,078) and highest average attendance (7,716) since 2011. The year was highlighted by double-digit attendance growth by the Los Angeles Sparks (+17.8%), Connecticut Sun (+15.3%) and Minnesota Lynx (+12.3%). They reached nearly 14 million likes and followers across all league, team and player social platforms this season, growing by 15% with the addition of two million fans from last season. The WNBA Facebook page achieved 1 million likes this season. In addition, the league broke records with more than 679 million impressions (+59%) and over 140 million video views (+233%) ("WNBA Scores Highest Attendance," 2017). The 2017 regular season also saw record sales on WNBAStore.com,



an increase of 18% compared to 2016. During its inaugural season on Twitter, the WNBA averaged 613,000 unique viewers per game. The Mercury vs. the Dallas Wings (5/14), the San Antonio Stars vs. the Wings (5/25) and the Mercury vs. the Lynx (7/14) were the three most-viewed games, averaging 1.1 million unique viewers. FanDuel contests received over 2.2 million total entries in the first season of the WNBA's one-day fantasy offerings ("WNBA Scores Highest Attendance," 2017).

Research shows that people prefer seeing images of female athletes in competition performing their sport and are more likely to attend or watch that sport if they are portrayed in that way over a female athlete being sexualized (Kane, LaVoi & Fink, 2013). This information raises the question, if women were more visible in the media and presented as athletes, would interest increase? Some may say that female athletes have a choice to be portrayed in ways that shows off their athletic competence versus being over sexualized. While they do have the option to say no, the amount of coverage that female athletes receive in the media is incredibly low. This means that for some athletes, they are faced with either being shown in the media and receiving some coverage or not being shown at all.

### **2.3 Why Women's Sports?**

Studies have found that media coverage of women's sports is inadequate when compared with coverage of men's sports (Kian, Mondello, & Vincent, 2009). Proof of this scarce coverage has been acknowledged across numerous media outlets including television, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet. Television news and highlights shows do not simply reflect fan interest in certain sports, as sport's commentators and

editors often argue. By continuously placing male sports in the media, they are helping to create and maintain interest for the sports they cover, thus becoming a key link in fans' emotional connection to the agony and excitement of spectator sports (Cooky, Messner & Hextrum, 2013). This in itself shows that the media plays a major role in building audiences for male sports. Meanwhile, their silence, marginalization, and trivialization of women's sports ensure smaller audiences for women's sports while ignoring the wants of fans of women's sports (Cooky, Messner & Hextrum, 2013).

A good amount of research on sport media has revealed the same disturbing result; professional female and male athletes are not portrayed in an equitable manner. According to Wolter (2015) media portrayals of male and female athletes are important because sport is a key place where gender norms are defined, circulated, and maintained. There are very few studies that have returned with positive results and even then there could have been factors that led to the somewhat equitable outcome. For example, Wolter (2015) found that there were no significant differences in the portrayal of male and female athletes on espnW and that female athletes appeared more often in the feature articles on the website, however espnW is dedicated exclusively to female athletes and fans so results in favor of females are to be expected. On the other hand, Kian, Vincent, and Mondello's (2009) study of Internet sport websites, proved equitable in terms of gender descriptors used, however the amount of coverage female athletes received still lagged far behind their male counterparts.

There have been previous studies that focus on female under representation on the covers of *Sports Illustrated*. L.N. Reid and L.C. Soley conducted one of the first studies on the magazine in 1979. They examined the covers of *Sports Illustrated* from 1956-

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1976. They discovered that during this time period there was only a range of 3.2% to 6.8% of female covers (Reid & Soley 1979). As it relates to the quality of female portrayal, Boutilier and SanGiovanni examined *Sports Illustrated's* 1979 "Silver Anniversary Issue" in 1983. This was a collection of photographs highlighting important sports moments over the past 25 years. They found these images to portray female athletes in passive or non-athletic poses at a rate of 60%; on the other hand their male counterparts were only pictured this way 44% of the time (Kane 1989). A recent study completed by the Department of Sociology at the University of Louisville found that of the 716 *Sports Illustrated* issues published between 2000 and 2011, only 35 of them had covers featuring female athletes (Weber & Carini, 2012). According to Weber and Carini (2012), of the 35 covers including a female, only 18 (or 2.5 percent of all covers) featured a female as the primary or sole image. Three covers included females, but only as insets (small boxed image), or as part of a collage background of both male and female athletes.

Thus, further research is needed to determine if a change has really been made in the portrayal of professional female athletes in sport media. Additional research is also necessary because there is no way to determine if a change has been made with so few studies. This current study will allow a more updated look at how professional female athletes are portrayed in the media as the female athlete has evolved with time.

According to Bruce (2008), coverage of female athletes still often reinforces existing gender ideologies. For example, despite the world champion Black Ferns rugby team being three-time world champions, rugby magazines appear to give more visibility to naked female models body-painted in rugby team colors. The media continues to present men's sport as the sport that is taken seriously, while gender-marking women's

sport. Because women have sprung into the mainstream sports world at a high rate in the past decade, one would assume they would receive an increased amount of media coverage (Shaller, 2006).

#### **2.4 Media's Influence on Society**

It is important to study how the media represents female athletes and sporting events because just like any other group, the media helps shape society's beliefs about them (Adams & Tuggle, 2004; Cooky, Hextrum, & Messner, 2013). Media coverage matters because it ultimately has the potential to strongly influence the way that society thinks. If the portrayals and representations are ill advised, then female athletes are left at a disadvantage. As Kirk (1993) argues: "Media culture is not merely consumed and discarded, but is utilized to construct personal identities ... the material the media supplies is not passively absorbed, but is actively appropriated as the stuff of people's sense of self, their place in the social world, and the bases of their hopes and expectations of the future" (p. 18).

When focusing on the media's influence, thinking about who produces sport coverage, could begin to answer many questions about how female athletes are portrayed. About 90 percent of sports editors are men, and 90 percent are Caucasian (Ottaway, 2016). The Women's Media Center's 2015 report on "The Status of Women in the U.S. Media" showed that just 10.2 percent of sports coverage in 2014 was produced by women. Women of color, who constitute over 70 percent of WNBA players, are particularly poorly represented in the media that cover them (Ottaway, 2016). One 2014 report revealed that just four sports editors at the US newspapers it surveyed were black

women, and the numbers of reporters were correspondingly small. All these statistics implore the question: Would we have more reporting on women's sports if more sports reporters and editors were women? And would the quality of that coverage improve?

Lindsay Gibbs, a sports reporter for ThinkProgress, took a wider approach when speaking on the media's role in society. "You have to be aware of the role media plays, and the role that you as a media member play, in covering things, and the ripple effect that has, and how many people are part of the system without realizing that there is a system," Gibbs explained. "You can't ignore the power structures that exist. You're dealing with huge cultural influences that still are about suppressing women and keeping them in their place, so you have to view women's sports in that context."

While popular belief may be that the media solely gives their audience what it wants, some researchers have reasoned that the style in which the media present men's sports actually helps build interest and excitement while concurrently silencing women's sports (Cooky, Hextrum, & Messner, 2013). According to Cooky, Hextrum, and Messner (2013), better quality coverage, from commentary to technical aspects, portrays men's sports as more exciting and therefore, more important. The lack of quality coverage and coverage in general of women's sports may send a message to the audience that female athletes and their sporting events are secondary to men. Duncan, Jensen, and Messner (1993) posited that viewers of televised sports are subjected to gender-biased framing that could cause them to construct meanings about female athletes that include stereotypes and inequities. The manner in which female athletics are covered by the media helps mold society's view of those athletics and could quite possibly create attitudes and values about which sports are appropriate for females. Therefore, media scholars have been led

to question, which came first; the lack of public interest in women's sports, or the lack of media attention (Huffman, Tuggle, and Rosengard, 2004).

According to Lepel and Darynlchuk (2009), student researchers at the University of Western Ontario in Canada sought to determine the influence of the sport media by examining Generation Y and its interpretation of mediated messages in female sport. The results shed some light on attitudes surrounding women's sport and how the media influences consumption habits. The researchers explicitly chose to study Generation Y's perceptions because of their recognized influence on societal trends. They have been raised in a culture infatuated with sport and have had more opportunities to participate in and consume sport than any previous generation (Lepel and Darynlchuk, 2009).

The twenty-four participants were recruited and divided into four gender specific focus groups. After being given a brief survey regarding their interest and preferred way of consuming sport, they entered a focus group session. They were asked a series of questions, which were later analyzed. Most participants admitted they had very little familiarity with women's sport and that their experiences were primarily limited to what little coverage was offered through the media. They were not going out and hunting for the information but were relying on what was presented (Lepel and Darynlchuk, 2009).

All of the Generation Y focus groups agreed that the overall quality of women's sports coverage in the media is lower than the quality of coverage for men's sports. In addition, the participants agreed that while the commentators for men's sports develop intriguing commentaries to keep viewers engaged in the game, the commentaries for women's sports are often dull and boring (Lepel and Darynlchuk, 2009). Men's sports are filled with statistics, letting viewers know exactly where one player stands in

comparison with others. In contrast, women's sports very rarely include their statistics. Implications of this research show that Generation Y viewers are open to consuming women's sport, but that the media needs to present them as equally forceful to men's sport. By improving coverage and fostering an exciting environment for women's sport, society will take an important step in closing the divide in this area (Lepel and Darynlchuk, 2009).

In closing this chapter, it is important to remember that despite societal changes and increased participation and opportunities among female athletes, coverage and portrayal is still lacking in quantity as well as quality (Shaller, 2006). Not only does the poor portrayal affect the media but also society as a whole. With regards to the research conducted by other academic scholars in past and recent years, we must take into account the possible negative effects these images of female athletes have had on how we, as a society, view women's sports.

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

So far, the work of previous scholars has been mentioned and background information on the lack of quality female representation has been presented. In this chapter, the method of the study will be explained in depth as well as the means for analyzing each cover. This study describes the ways that females are represented on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* since the studies that were mentioned in the previous chapters.

### **3.1 Content Analysis**

The method that will be utilized for this study will be a content analysis, which has been a common research method utilized to examine media coverage of women's sports. This method involves a systematic, quantitative analysis of content, usually texts, images, or other symbolic matter (Krippendorff, 2004). According to Payne and Payne (2004), "content analysis seeks to demonstrate the meaning of written or visual sources by systematically allocating their content to predetermined, detailed categories, and then both quantifying and interpreting the outcomes" (p. 51). Although content analysis cannot predict how the audience will interact with the content being analyzed, it can help researchers gain a better understanding of the message that is being sent (Margo, 2016).

As stated previously, this study will focus on whether the media influences the public's perception of female athletes based on the type and amount of media coverage that female athletes receive. Therefore, to help focus on both the type and amount of media coverage female athletes receive, each *Sports Illustrated* magazine cover from 1954-2016, will be examined and analyzed.

### **3.2 Rationale for Current Study and Approach**

Research continues to show that when female athletes are portrayed in the media, they are often shown in degrading and demeaning ways. With the evolution of women's sports and growth in female sport participation, some would assume that their portrayal in the media would grow and evolve as well. The present study analyzes the covers of *Sports Illustrated* for a little over six decades, to examine the quality and quantity of coverage afforded to female athletes. The information presented in the current study is



considered necessary to offer quantitative measures that can be used to validate or refute improvements in how female athletes are represented on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* since the previous studies that were mentioned in the literature review. Studies like this also show if things have remained the same and show why this is an issue.

*Sports Illustrated* has been around for decades and has a wide focus as it relates to the content that is displayed on the cover as well as inside of the publication. Because of this, it is one of the most respected sports publications within the media. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation (2016), *Sports Illustrated* reaches over 4 million readers. The reach of this magazine can point to the dominant influence that the images and content that is put out has on its subscribers. This magazine was selected for this study because it has been around for so many years, which means it provides a large amount of magazines to code. With that being said, it helps to see if there has been a difference in how female athletes have been portrayed over the years and if they have been featured on covers more now than they were in the past. Since *Sports Illustrated* reaches so many readers, it also points at larger implications that can reflect sport media as a whole. The selected approach of coding the magazine covers and utilizing a content analysis to relay the data was the best option for this study. Through this approach, not only is there an opportunity to analyze but it also provides an opportunity to relay how what is being analyzed can affect female athletes and how they are largely viewed by society due to the way that they are portrayed.

### 3.3 Method

The covers of 3,199 issues of *Sports Illustrated* from January 1954 to December 2016 were examined. *Sports Illustrated*, referred to by some as the “magazine that popularized sports,” is a publication that is regarded with distinction and respectability. The magazine has been around for decades and continues to see success. Every available cover found on the *Sports Illustrated* Online Vault during the studied time period was included in the sample. *Sports Illustrated* is known for having regional covers, in which different covers are released in different areas featuring the NCAA, NBA, NFL, MLB and NHL. However, the regional covers were not present on *Sports Illustrated's* Online Vault, therefore they were not included in the sample. Out of the 3,199 covers 161 of them did not feature athletes. These covers featured artistic images, animals or photos of venues in place of athletes.

|                | n    | %     |
|----------------|------|-------|
| <b>Male</b>    | 2799 | 87.5% |
| <b>Female</b>  | 176  | 5.5%  |
| <b>Both</b>    | 62   | 1.9%  |
| <b>Neither</b> | 162  | 5.1%  |
| <b>Total</b>   | 3199 | 100%  |

**Table 1. 1954-2016 *Sports Illustrated* Covers Broken Down**

## *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED'S PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE ATHLETES*

These covers were reviewed with a number of different themes in mind. The first was whether the person on the cover was male or female. If the cover did not feature a male or female it was listed under “neither” and if the cover featured a male and a female it was listed under “both.” Next, it was taken into consideration whether the person on the cover was an athlete. For this criterion, if the person on the cover could not be identified through notability or from having their name on the cover, but was taking part in a sporting activity, they were considered an athlete. For example, tennis player Tracy Austin was featured on the March 22, 1976 issue. While there is a photo of her, her name is also listed on the cover, if she was photographed in a way that would make it hard to identify her as an athlete, we had the ability to look up her name and determine that she was one. On the May 16, 1960 issue, there are males and females participating in tennis, track, and swimming. While the women were not identified by name like Tracy Austin, they are all still participating in sporting activities; therefore they were categorized as being athletes.

Finally, the portrayal of the athlete was examined. The 178 covers that featured just women, 2,799 covers that featured just men and the 61 covers that featured a male and female were separated into categories based on: whether the athlete was in uniform/dressed in athletic clothing (i.e. team warm up, other team attire, sports clothing), was in non-athletic clothing (i.e. casual clothes or professional attire), was nude, or if the person on the cover was not an athlete at all. After determining if the female was an athlete or not, 166 covers remained, while 2,806 were available for the men. From here the covers were examined and separated into categories on whether the

sport that the athlete plays could be identified on the basis of clothing or sporting objects or if it could not be identified.

To ensure reliability throughout this study, the covers of each magazine published during 1954-2016 were reviewed twice using the same criteria for each individual cover. Reviewing the covers more than once and using a double-checking mechanism ensured a higher consistency through the data by reducing the number of inconsistencies within each subjective interpretation. For example, on the January 30, 1956 issue skating champions Jenkins and Albright are pictured together. They are not in action or wearing their skating costumes, however they are wearing their Olympic team gear and the female athlete is holding her skates. During both phases of the analyzing process, this cover was marked as having both a male and female on the cover. For the next section, only the females' appearance was analyzed, because she was wearing her team gear she was placed in the category of wearing her uniform or athletic clothing.

Next, it was checked off that the sport she participates in could be identified due to the placement of her figure skates on the cover. In other instances like the August 6, 1956 issue there is a headshot of Olympic Diver Jeanne Stunyo. You can only see her face and parts of a towel that is placed around her neck. For the first category, the cover is placed under female however since her clothing is not visible and it cannot be determined if she is wearing athletic or non-athletic clothing, she was placed in the category of not having athletic clothing or a uniform. For the final category, it was determined that the sport the athlete participates in could not be identified from the photograph. On the October 29, 1956 issue, football player Paul Hornung is photographed in a similar way to Jeanne Stunyo. However, he is wearing his jersey and

shoulder pads, all of which is visible in the photograph. This cover was placed in the male category, as wearing his uniform or athletic clothing and it was noted that his sport could be identified. While the Hornung and Stunyo covers were similar because they were both headshots, the fact that the athletic attire was shown in the male cover and was not shown in the female cover led them to being placed in different categories.

### **3.4 Limitations**

The one limitation that exists for this study is the fact that every swimsuit cover for *Sports Illustrated* was not in the SI Vault. Using the swimsuit editions helps to show that models are getting the opportunity to grace a sports publication cover over female athletes. Which would further prove that the media would rather objectify women for the pleasure of males than to celebrate female athletes for their accomplishments.

In concluding chapter three, the results that are compiled from the methodology will help to determine if there has been a difference in the quality and quantity of coverage given to female athletes, the differences in the way that men and women are portrayed and any reoccurring themes as it relates to female coverage.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS**

After analyzing the covers of *Sports Illustrated* from 1954-2016, the results were obtained, compiled and presented through charts and analysis in this chapter. In order to better illustrate the findings, some covers were selected as examples for interpretation.

*SPORTS ILLUSTRATED'S* PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE ATHLETES

|  | <b>Males</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>Females</b> | <b>%</b> |
|--|--------------|----------|----------------|----------|
| <b>Athlete is in Uniform/Athletic Clothing</b>     | 2632         | 93.8%    | 141            | 60.7%    |
| <b>Athlete is not in Uniform/Athletic Clothing</b> | 147          | 5.2%     | 25             | 10.8%    |
| <b>Athlete is Nude</b>                             | 3            | 0.1%     | 0              | 0.0%     |
| <b>The Person Featured is Not An Athlete</b>       | 24           | 0.9%     | 66             | 28.4%    |

**Table. 2 Male and Female Cover Comparison**

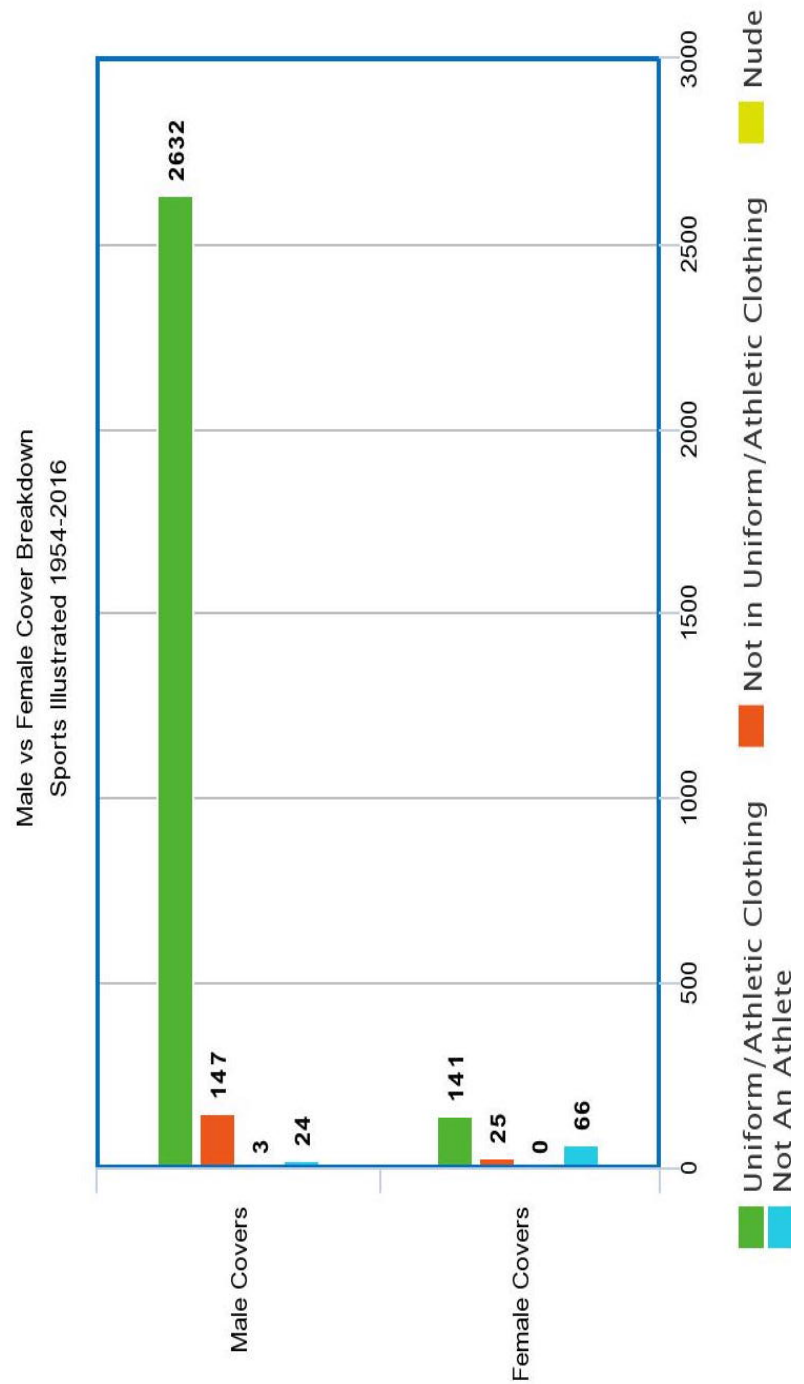


Figure 1. Male vs. Female Cover Breakdown

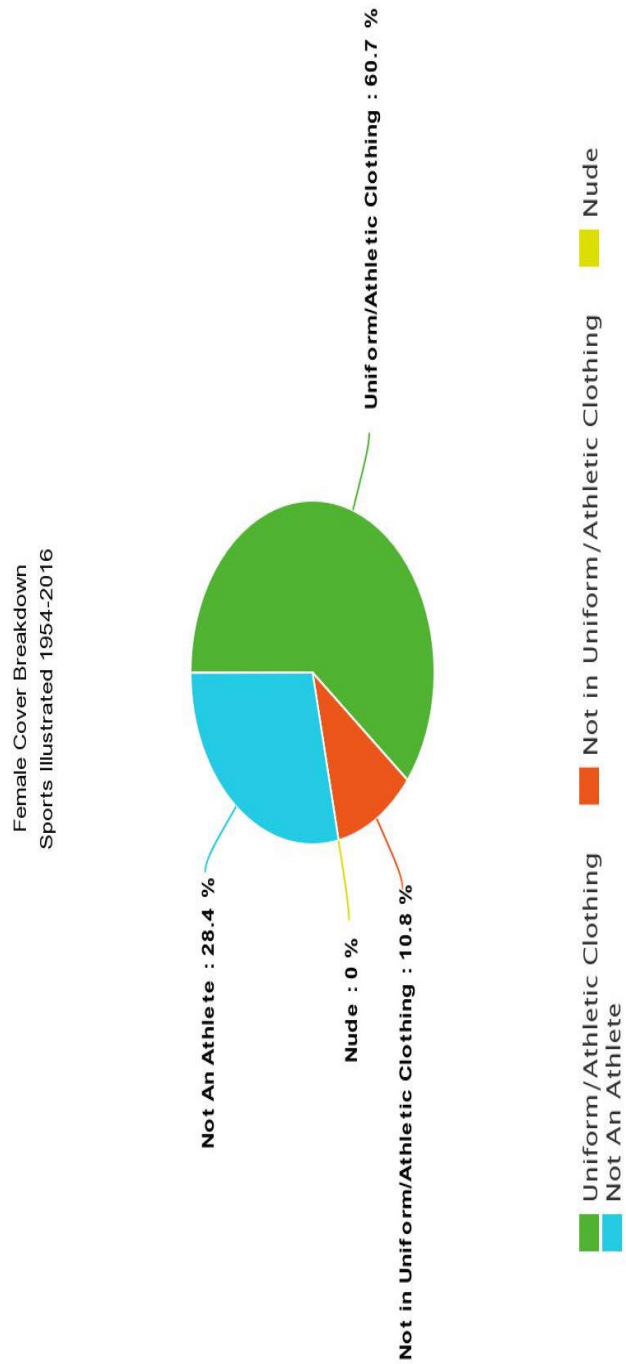


Figure 2. Female Cover Breakdown



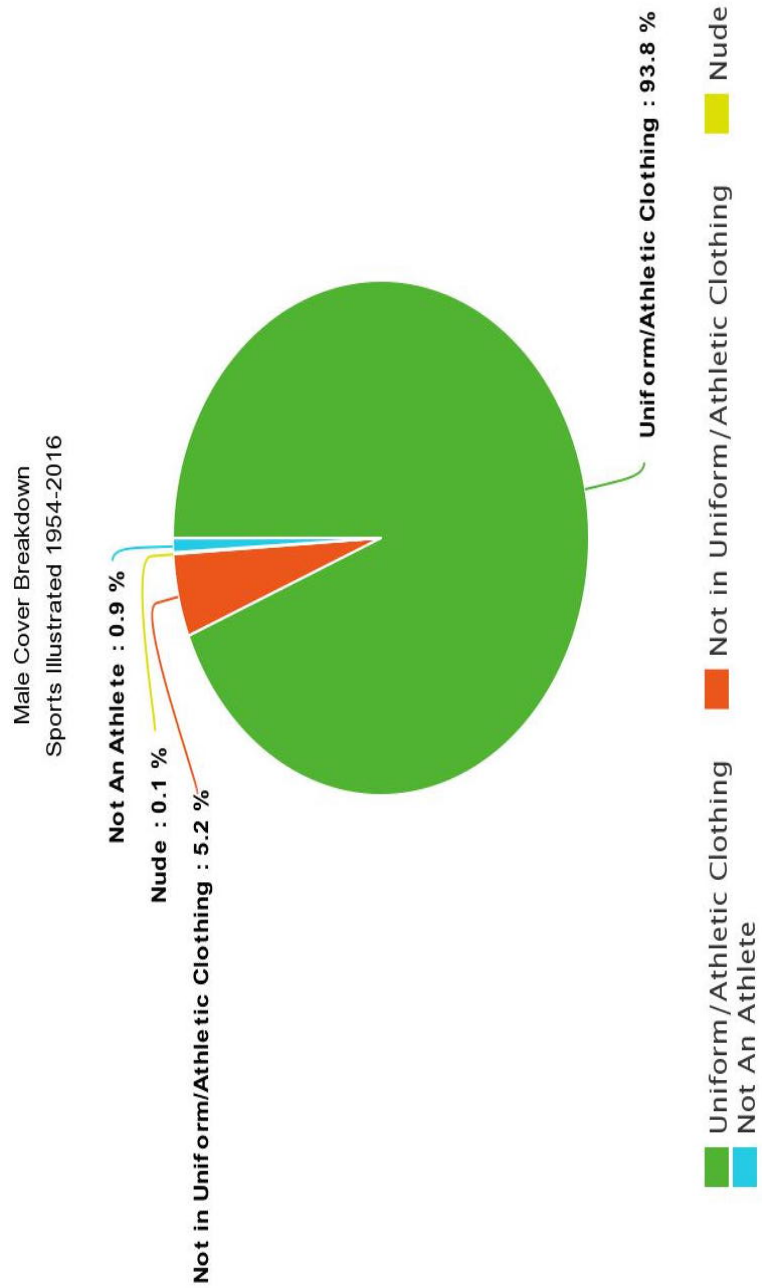


Figure 3. Male Cover Breakdown

|  | Males | %     | Females | %     |
|--|-------|-------|---------|-------|
| <b>Can Identify the Sport Played (Based off of Clothing or Sport Object)</b> | 2633  | 94.6% | 139     | 83.7% |
| <b>Can Not Identify</b>  | 149   | 5.4%  | 27      | 16.3% |

**Table 3. Athlete Identification**

While the focus of this study is the female athlete, having information about the male covers will help to better understand the significance of the study. The analysis showed that 87.5 percent ( $n = 2799$ ) of *Sports Illustrated* publications from January 1954 to December 2016 portrayed a male on the front of the magazine. 93.8 percent ( $n = 2632$ ) of the men depicted on the covers were dressed in their uniform or athletic attire that helped to identify the sport that they played. 5.2 percent ( $n = 147$ ) of the male athletes were not dressed in athletic attire on the cover; instead they were dressed in casual or business attire. For example, on the December 10, 2012 issue, LeBron James is dressed in an all black suit showing off his championship ring as he is honored as Sportsman of the Year.

0.1 percent ( $n = 3$ ) of the male athletes were pictured nude. All three of these covers were photos taken from the waist up while the athletes were shirtless. For males, this is not a big deal compared to how a female athlete would be viewed if she were pictured the same way. Finally, 0.9 percent ( $n = 24$ ) of the males featured on the covers were not athletes. On the October 11, 1954 issue, the male featured was a member of a college marching band while other covers featured males taking part in an activity, fathers with their families on vacation or attending a sporting event. Actors and comedians such as Chris Rock (December 25, 2000) and Will Smith (December 28,

2015) appeared on the cover as well. This now leaves the number of male athletes featured on the cover during this time period at 2,782, still a very large amount.

In 1.9 percent (n = 62) of the covers both a male and a female were present. In some instances, the female on the cover was not an athlete; they were typically models being used in secondary roles for the male athlete or spouses of the male athlete. If this was the case, it was noted that the female on the cover was not an athlete. However, when the female on the cover was an athlete, for this study the focus was placed directly on her and examined for the female athlete category. To better illustrate this step in the coding process, what follows is an analysis of a *Sports Illustrated* cover featuring Katie Ledecky, Simone Biles and Michael Phelps from August 22, 2016. The cover features all three Olympians wearing their gold medals from the Summer Olympics. However, since there are two female athletes on the cover their appearance and portrayal was then examined in the next category. On the other hand the June 13, 1988 issue featuring Mike Tyson and then wife Robyn Givens was noted under the category that acknowledged that there was both a male and female on the cover however it was noted in the next section that the female on the cover was not an athlete due to the fact that Robyn Givens was Mike Tyson's spouse and also an actress.

By having a category for covers that feature both a male and female, it shows that even when female athletes are on the covers of sports magazines, they often have to share the spotlight with a male athlete. With majority of the covers that were placed in this category, the female was placed in a secondary role or depicted in passive or sexually objectifying poses.

## SPORTS ILLUSTRATED'S PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE ATHLETES

While 5.5 percent (n = 176) of the *Sports Illustrated* covers during the studied time featured just females, after subtracting the covers that featured females who were not athletes and adding in the covers that the female athlete shared with a male, only 5.2 percent (n = 166) of the *Sports Illustrated* covers during this 62 year time period features female athletes. 60.7 percent (n = 141) of the female athletes were dressed in uniform or athletic clothing that could help the viewer to realize which sport the athlete played. 10.8 percent (n = 25) of the female athletes were not dressed in uniform but instead in non-athletic clothes. On the February 1, 1960 issue, Betty Snite is pictured in a jacket while looking over her shoulder. She is in a posed position with a black background. For a person who is not familiar with who Betty Snite is, at first glance it is easy to question if she is even an athlete. None of the female athletes were nude on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. At last, 28.4 percent (n = 66) of the females featured on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* were not athletes. The women in this category were typically swimsuit models, spouses of an athlete or used in secondary roles.

When it comes down to identifying the female athlete, for 83.7 percent (n = 139) of the female athletes, the sport that they played could be identified through their clothing or a sporting object that was also in the picture. Olympic swimmer Megan Quann is pictured on the cover of the September 25, 2000 issue in action swimming at the Olympics. From this photo it is easy to identify that this woman is an athlete but is also easy to identify the sport that she plays. The remaining 16.3 percent (n = 27) were not easily identifiable. During the same year, tennis player Anna Kournikova is pictured in an off the shoulder top while lying on a pillow and staring at the camera on the June 5, 2000 issue. While looking at this cover it would be easy for one to assume that she is a model

instead of a tennis player due to the fact that there is nothing in this photo that indicates that she plays tennis.

According to market research, the circulation for *Sports Illustrated* in 2011 reached 3,178,760 (Audit Bureau, 2011). In closing this chapter, it is important to recognize the reach that this magazine has especially when considering its online presence. These images have a global reach that can shape societal views. The results from this study bring light to the fact that if a publication with millions of subscribers reflects female athletes this way, then sport media as a whole likely does also.

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

While the results for the study were reviewed in the previous chapter, chapter five will discuss the findings as it relates to whether the media's portrayal of the female athlete has changed, differences in male and female portrayal, reoccurring themes and the way that society is impacted from the outcome of this study.

### 5.1 Media's Portrayal of the Female Athlete: Has It Changed?

The first research objective of this study was to determine if the media's portrayal of the professional female athlete has changed as women's sports has evolved. With Title IX being the legislation that calls for equity as it relates to males and females, it will be used as the focus point of this research objective. A common misconception about gender equity in sport stems from the thought that once new laws are implemented, such as Title IX, any and all disparities between men and women in sport will be eliminated (Messner, Cooky, & Hextrum, 2010). Prior to Title IX there were more female athletes gracing the

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covers of *Sports Illustrated* than there were after the legislation was passed. From 1954 to 1972 7.3 percent (n = 69) of *Sports Illustrated* covers featured a female athlete whether it was just the athlete or they were also featured with a male. From 1973 to 2016, the years after the legislation had been passed, the number of female athletes on the cover dropped to 4.6 percent (n = 103).

|  | <b>Before Title IX<br/>(1954-1972)</b> | <b>After Title IX<br/>(1973-2016)</b> |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| <b>Female</b>                                | 68                                     | 108                                   |
| <b>Both</b>                                  | 22                                     | 40                                    |
| <b>Female Featured Is Not<br/>An Athlete</b> | 21                                     | 45                                    |
| <b>Total Number of Covers</b>                | 943                                    | 2256                                  |

**Table 4. Females on Covers Before and After Title IX**

The results from this study show that *Sports Illustrated* has not improved the number of female athletes featured on their covers. In fact, the number has actually declined. Women were featured on more covers of *Sports Illustrated* between 1954 and 1965 than they were between 2000 and 2011. Aside from the limited number of covers, women's participation in sport was frequently minimized by sharing covers with male counterparts, featuring unknown women not related directly to sports participation, sexually objectifying female athletes, and promoting women in more socially suitable gender-neutral or feminine sports. With that being said, it is clear that the type of

coverage that female athletes receive when gracing the cover of Sports Illustrated has not changed either.

## **5.2 Male vs. Female Portrayal**

The second research objective was to identify the differences in the portrayal of the male and female athlete on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. Majority of the photos taken of the male athletes were taken while they were in action, participating in their sport. While there were some covers that featured the male athlete in a posed position, the majority of the male covers were not taken while they were in passive positions. Some of the covers featured headshots of different athletes. However, all of the male athletes were pictured in a respectable manner. The male athletes were photographed as active and in ways that showed off dominance. The focus of the male covers was almost always focused on their athletic achievement. This can be reflected in how much easier it is to identify the male as an athlete as well as the sport that they play, opposed to women. For males, 94.6 percent of their covers helped to identify the sport that they play while only 5.4 percent of the covers were not identifiable.

For women, there was a difference in the numbers, 83.7 percent of the covers that featured a female athlete helped to identify the sport that they play while the remaining 16.3 percent were not identifiable. Female athletes were typically shown in passive ways. More than likely posing for the camera in ways that were geared to place the focus on seductiveness rather than athleticism. The female athletes were often recognized for their looks and attractiveness while the focus was placed on the male's athleticism and athletic accomplishments. Female athletes were typically pictured in non-athletic and/or stereotypical ways.

In some cases the only way to identify that the female was an athlete was because of the athletic attire. Now many people may say that if the female athlete was on the cover dressed in her uniform, than that should be enough. However, it goes deeper than that. For example on the May 19, 2008 issue race car driver Danica Patrick was dressed in her racing gear featuring a face of makeup as she held her helmet and smiled at the camera. She was nowhere near her racecar while lacking the intensity that would be present on most male covers. By placing female athletes on covers in this way, it further perpetuates the stereotype that women do not belong in sports and if they are athletes, they should not be taken as seriously as men.

### **5.3 Reoccurring Themes**

The third and final research objective was to discover the reoccurring themes as it relates to the female athletes portrayal throughout *Sports Illustrated*. The first theme that was apparent when analyzing the covers was using female athletes as victims in moments of tragedy. There were seven issues that reflected this theme. From 1993-1995 there were a total of eight covers that only featured female athletes, four out of the eight covers showed female athletes in a time of tragedy. On the October 2, 2000 issue Marion Jones is pictured in uniform holding a beginning stance as she prepares to start a race. While the photo shows that Jones is an athlete the title takes a look into a troubling time in her personal life instead of strictly celebrating her achievements. The cover reads, "Under the Gun: The amazing Marion Jones presses on in Sydney after her husband's drug bombshell." Another example comes from the January 17, 1995 issue, featuring skater Nancy Kerrigan. This cover differs from the previous one that featured Marion Jones



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because the photo of Kerrigan is only of her face as she looks in agony. The title reads, "Why me? Why now? Why? Skater Nancy Kerrigan is brutally attacked at the Olympic trials."

The next theme that was apparent throughout the covers was that there was a large focus on individual sports over team sports as it relates to the female athlete. In the early years of the publication a large focus was on skiing, swimming, figure skating, tennis, golf and track. Men's team sports were often celebrated with 52.3 percent (n = 1672) of the covers being dedicated to players or teams from the MLB, NFL, NHL, and NBA. Men's collegiate football and basketball were also featured on the covers frequently. For female athletes, the team sport that was featured the most was women's soccer while women's basketball followed.

|                                   | <b>n</b> | <b>%</b> |
|-----------------------------------|----------|----------|
| <b>Top 4 (MLB, NFL, NHL, NBA)</b> | 1672     | 52.3%    |
| <b>Other Sport</b>                | 931      | 29.1%    |
| <b>NCAA</b>                       | 489      | 15.3%    |
| <b>Non Athletic Cover</b>         | 107      | 3.3%     |

**Table 5. Sports Covers Categorized**

The final reoccurring theme was male reference. This happens throughout sport media. The male reference usually ranges from a father, brother, coach or significant other and how this could have possibly impacted the females career. For example on the March 17, 1997 issue former Stanford star point guard Jamila Wideman is pictured with

her fathers face in the background. The title reads, "Family Portrait: the incredible journey of Jamila Wideman, Stanford's star point guard and the daughter of celebrated author John Edgar Wideman." The males in the female's lives are typically portrayed as having a significant impact on the athlete's life. In the case of Jamila Wideman, it is questionable why the fact that her father was a celebrated author needed to be mentioned on the cover when the focus should have been placed on her athletic talent.

In regard to the male reference, female athletes are sometimes mentioned in conjunction with a successful male athlete in the same sport. This happened multiple times as it relates to collegiate basketball. On the November 24, 2003 issue Diana Taurasi is pictured with Emeka Okafor. University of Connecticut's men and women's team were both number one at the time and the cover featured *Sports Illustrated's* top ten for both the men and women. On this cover, neither athlete outshined the other. They are both seen in their uniforms posing in similar poses with stern looks on their faces. From this cover you can tell that they are both athletes who are serious about what they do. The November 17, 2008 issue featured DeJuan Blair and Shavonte Zellous who both played for the University of Pittsburgh. The title of the cover was "Pitt Double Team." With the subtitle reading "He Wins, She Wins: DeJuan Blair and Shavonte Zellous lead the Panthers." The two are dressed in uniform and are both smiling as Shavonte guards DeJuan who is dribbling a basketball. This cover shows two young athletes who have fun doing what they do. It does not make it seem as though the male is more serious about than the female or the female is more passive than the male. It reflects them equally in the same light. Covers like these two are rare occurrences but positive examples of how females should be portrayed in an equal light to men.

#### 5.4 Impact on Society

The results from the content analysis show that there is a continuous flow of misrepresentation and underrepresentation as it relates to female athletes on the covers of *Sports Illustrated*. It also shows that when women are portrayed on covers, the way that they are portrayed differs from the male athlete in more ways than one. It is clear that when featuring a female athlete, the focus is typically placed on her attractiveness and appearance than her athletic ability. *Sports Illustrated* has the ability to reach the masses, and the results from this study can point to larger issues among sports media as a whole.

According to Tiggermann & Pickering (1996) young adolescent aged girls are developing in their gender identity and are exploring their sexual roles. Therefore, these portrayals can have a major impact during this stage in their lives. Sports media can also shape how children develop their ideas about gender roles. As early as first grade, children develop ideas about the "gender-appropriateness of athletics," which influences their "perceptions of and participation in athletic activities" (Harrison & Lynch, 2005). Boys are more likely than girls to believe they are skilled athletes, make sports a higher priority, and have a higher overall enjoyment of sports (Harrison & Lynch, 2005).

Unrealistic media frames of female athletes and women's sports harm young females by giving them an unattainable image of the athletic idols they look to for social comparisons (Ward, 2004). It is possible that the media's focus on appearance over athletic ability may cause young female athletes to focus on their looks over their athleticism, which will get in the way of them reaching their full potential as athletes.

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Female athletes constantly battle to adhere to the feminine social role, as well as the masculine athletic role that accompanies all levels of sport (Martin & Martin, 1995).

The way that female athletes are portrayed can also have an impact on how young women view their own bodies. The mass media is highly influential in an individual's beliefs about ideal body shapes and their assessment of whether their own bodies match the ideal (Daniels, 2009). With that being said, sexualized images of female athletes that focus on the body as an object instead of an instrument can lead to young girls viewing their bodies the same way. This could also lead to young athletes experiencing eating disorders, body dissatisfaction, reduced self-esteem, and self-monitoring due to the focus being placed on how the body looks versus what it can do athletically (Bissell & Zhou, 2004).

The way female athletes are portrayed can also have an impact on college-aged females also. Just like adolescent females, college aged females look to today's female athletes as role models. Even though they are older, college-aged females are still developing in their gender identity, and continue to explore their sexual role (Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996). Since this age group can still be in the developmental stage, they can still be highly influenced by sports media and their portrayal of the female athlete.

While in this context, sports media may have the biggest impact on young women; the way that females are portrayed throughout sports media can also have an impact on how other members of society view them. Sports fans are exposed to several articles and images regarding athletes throughout the course of a season (Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005). According to Eastman & Billings (2001), the media frames of these athletes are passed on to the viewing audience and consciously or subconsciously stored

in their memories. If these messages include gender misrepresentations, the audience may take this perceived “general knowledge” regarding the sports world and apply it to their general attitude about these groups in a societal context (Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005).

When a person constantly sees the same portrayal, they will more likely than not be influenced in a negative way and may transfer these portrayals from a sports perspective into their everyday life.

Sports media has the opportunity to impact the way that so many people perceive different athletes due to the fact that they are able to broadcast to the masses. The way an issue or athlete is portrayed may influence viewers and subconsciously affect the way they feel about different gender groups in a non-athletic context (i.e. business or educational environment) (Eastman & Billings, 2001). In this case with Sports Illustrated, the magazine has framed male and female athletes in certain ways and because of this, the audience will perceive these athletes in certain ways, some negative and some positive, and carry this perception with them.

In closing this chapter, it is shown that it is possible for *Sports Illustrated* to portray women in an equal light to their male counterparts as they did on the covers that featured players from the University of Connecticut and Pittsburgh. However, even with this glimpse of positive representation there are still so many other covers that misrepresent female athletes. It is time for the media to make a dedicated and conscious commitment to change the way female athletes are portrayed so that they can begin to send clear messages that female athletes can be competitive, attractive, and valued (Frisby, 2017).

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

One would think, that since there are more professional female athletes now than ever before, who are competing at high levels, they would receive more attention from sports media publications. Not only more attention, but also the type of attention would change as well. The results from this study showed that this is not true. If anything, male athletes still rule the world of sport media by a long shot. It is just as if not less common to find a female athlete on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* as it was six decades ago. Because of this issue, this chapter will feature suggestions for further research as well as recommendations for the future before the conclusion.

### 6.1 Further Research

In the future, it would be interesting to have a similar analysis with the cover stories being analyzed also. This way the language that is used throughout the article can also be examined to see if female athletes face the same portrayals throughout news articles that they do when photographed. An analysis of the text would give a better look into the themes that are typically placed in articles revolving around female athletes within print media. I think that it would be interesting to compare the language in the articles before and after Title IX to see if there have been any changes in the way that female athletes are written about in articles. If there is ever a sport magazine published that only focuses on female athletes, it would be interesting to see if the athletes are portrayed the same way or if an emphasis is strictly placed on their athletic ability.

## 6.2 Recommendations for the Future

In a day and age where the media has such an impact on society, it is important for journalist, reporters and editors to be aware of the message that they are sending out. Whether they realize it or not, they have so much control over what the audience sees and heavily influence their readers through their depictions of athletes. If more females enter into positions in sport media, things may begin to change. There is still a gender gap in sports and it shows through the general male dominance in sports coverage. It is important for up and coming journalist to understand how women have been portrayed and learn to avoid the same stereotypical portrayals in the future. It is also important for the reader and the general public to be conscious of how female athletes are portrayed on the covers of magazines such as *Sports Illustrated* and to avoid allowing these misrepresentations to have a lasting impression on how they feel about women's sports as a whole. Lastly, if readers and the general public have a problem with the way that females are portrayed, they should speak up and make a demand for change.

There is a possibility that the way that females are portrayed as well as the lack of coverage they receive, affects the way that society as a whole views the female athlete, it can also have a negative impact on young girls who aspire to play professionally. Young women, especially those participating in sports, look to today's female athletes as role models. These women are typically admired by these young women not only for their style of play, but also for their personal character and the activities and endorsements that they may be linked to while off of the court. Media publications and broadcasts should capitalize off of female athletes as role models to the next generation instead of hiding behind the idea that "sex sells."

### 6.3 Conclusion

This study revealed that female athletes are indeed given a significantly less amount of coverage within print media and the type of coverage that they receive is in some way or form a misrepresentation of who they are as athletes. Female athletes have constantly received less coverage than their male counterparts even after the passage of Title IX, which led to increased numbers in women's sports participation worldwide. It is clear that sports media has not adapted to the changes that have occurred throughout the ever-growing domain of women's sports. Not only do they lag in the quantity but also in the quality of female athlete depiction. Since 1954, only 5.2% of the *Sports Illustrated* covers have featured a female athlete without the presence of a male. Conversely, since this time there have been more and more women participating in sport and doing so at a high level.

The current research study also revealed three themes that were common around the magazine covers, with those three themes being: tragedy, individual sports and male reference. The biggest issue with the themes of tragedy and male reference is that they do not focus on the talent and athleticism of the female athlete. Specifically with the theme of tragedy, it places the athlete in a position of looking weak and passive as reflected in the photographs that are used on the cover. While male reference takes the attention away from the female athlete and attributes her success to a man. Although individual team sports were portrayed more often than team sports for women, there was attention given to racecar driving, snowboarding, skiing and judoka opposed to individual sports that are viewed as being traditionally feminine.



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There was in fact a difference in portrayal for male and female athletes. Furthering the idea that sports is a male domain. Females were typically misrepresented on the covers while males were shown as dominant and fearless. The poor portrayal of female athletes throughout print media and sports media as a whole needs to be further evaluated in order for more progress to be made for women in sports. Readers have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the talents and athletic abilities of male athletes but are not able to do the same for women. If readers and sports fans were able to see female athletes portrayed as athletes and familiarize themselves with their athletic talents and accomplishments, they may find themselves gaining more interest in women's sports.

One of the oldest trends in research on gender in sports media is the shortage of women's sport coverage and the lack of respectful, serious coverage of women's sport (Cooky, Messner & Hextrum, 2013). Male athletes and men's sport receive more overall coverage than women in sport news stories, game and event stories, or features on individual athletes in newspapers, magazines, television broadcasts, and Internet coverage (Kian, Vincent, & Mondello 2008). While there is a lack of female athletes within sports media, when women are given a chance to be placed in the forefront, it is rarely with the same regards and respect as their male counterparts. When female athletes are visible in sport media, they are often trivialized through images of them as sex objects, through unfavorable comparisons with men of their abilities, or by having their accomplishments and skill level minimized (Kane, 1995; Messner, Duncan, & Cooky, 2003).

While most sports fans are men, it is understandable why sports media gears a lot of their products towards them. In the United States, men's sports and male athletes are more popular among the general public so in order to turn a profit, you have to give people what they are used to and are expecting to see, which is male sports.

Unfortunately, most male readers want only to read about men's sports, so there is not a big demand for female inclusion. However, this does not mean that women should constantly be misrepresented and underrepresented.

According to Luther (2018), lots of people love watching women's sports and that number is always growing. However it is still harder to be a fan of women's sports because they don't have anywhere close to the same media infrastructure as men's sports (Luther, 2018). While we have exceptional access to so many women's events these days, if you want to be an engaged and informed fan, you have to actively search out where to get news about your sport or team and where you can watch games (Luther, 2018).

Following women's sports remains fundamentally different from following men's sports. Often, it feels like the mainstream media pay attention to women's sports primarily when women's sports are struggling, analyzing what went wrong and leaving out the media's own role in the demise (Luther, 2018).

There are so many talented female athletes, the media does not lack in options as far as whom they can place on their cover. With so many athletes, they do not lack opportunity's to acquire photographs that show off the athlete's sport competence. Some may question if women's sports have evolved through the years if they were strictly basing it on the media's portrayal and amount of coverage. Should female athletes have to sacrifice their dignity for publicity? In a world where your talent should speak for

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itself, women are frequently asked to go to farther lengths than their male counterparts to achieve equality in media coverage.

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