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ANALYSIS OF GENDER PORTRAYAL IN SPORTS MEDIA AND ITS EFFECT ON
ATHLETE BODY IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze and understand how collegiate athletes’ consumption of sports media affects their mental health and body image. The objective was to determine if any significant differences between male and female athletes and their reaction and relationship to sports media exists. Secondary research was collected from various scholars and studies surrounding gender in sports, the history of sports media, and what has already been said about the media’s effect on athletes’ body image. Primary research in this study involved a survey distributed to college athletes who attend U.S. universities and two focus group discussions with student-athletes from the Pennsylvania State University. The survey included personal questions surrounding media consumption and body-image satisfaction, and answers were then analyzed and measured quantitatively. The focus groups were divided into a male group and a female group as a qualitative method to examine any similar or different conversations and themes amongst the two genders. Findings revealed that while college-level athletes do consume sports media daily, the media alone has minimal direct effect on their body-image satisfaction. Body-image levels among both male and female collegiate athletes depend more heavily on sport-specific factors that are amplified by the media. Thus, effects on body image have less to do with gender but more so with internal elements of specific sports, such as uniform, popularity, and coaches. Additionally, the findings revealed that both male and female college athletes are very aware of socially appropriate media portrayals of athletes, and both groups believe the media industry is progressing with more equal and morally responsible publications. Practical implications include a better understanding of college athletes’ psyche surrounding media they consume and are a part of. Findings can be used to actively promote and encourage mental health among all elite-level athletes.
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Chapter 1 : Introduction

Recent disparities between the men’s and women’s basketball “March Madness” tournaments have become evident, startling fans and athletes across the nation. Viral videos and images surfaced on social media, revealing drastic differences between the 2021 men’s and women’s basketball facilities. Included in these images are the men’s fully equipped weight room compared to the women’s single rack, the men’s substantially larger supply of gear and goodies given to them from the National College Athletics Association (NCAA), and the meekly packaged meals given to the women compared to the men’s immense buffet-style meal arrangement. Stanford sports performance coach Ali Kershner shared the images on her personal Twitter account, calling the NCAA out saying, “In a year defined by a fight for equality this is a chance to have a conversation to get better” (Kershner, 2021). Falsely citing the problem as being due to “limited space,” the NCAA later apologized for the disparities in a conference addressing the issue. “I apologize to the women’s student-athletes, coaches and committee for dropping the ball on the weight room issue in San Antonio, we’ll get it fixed as soon as possible,” NCAA Senior Vice President of Basketball Dan Gavitt said (Cash and Dzhanova, 2021). Coming from an organization that claims to be a supporter of gender equality, the apology was not enough for many female athletes who are stunned and ashamed of the imbalance between men’s and women’s representation.

Vividly shown in the viral images and from my own personal experience as a woman in college athletics, female athletes are not provided with the same opportunities, resources, marketing, or equipment as male athletes. This is not to blame schools, programs, or even strictly the NCAA, but I do believe that sports media and the portrayal of gender in sport has some degree of influence on the inequality that has persisted for decades. Not only are tangible and
physical inequalities present within college athletics, but I hypothesize that emotional and physiological ailments may be a result of the concrete gender polarity, specifically coming from the media’s role.

The sports and entertainment industry is growing rapidly, and the market leaders involve mainly collegiate and pro-level sports. In 2017 alone, the global sports market generated over $91 billion dollars in revenue, which was up from $76.1 billion in 2013, and continues to spike exponentially with the rise of digital media (Bartos, 2019). Being a dominant capital figure in media and entertainment, sports rely on photographers, journalists, sponsors, and producers to portray athletes and events in the most captivating way possible. While schools, sports leagues, and athletic sponsors may be making a tremendous amount of money off of their athletes, little to no consideration of the athletes’ mental health or representation is prioritized.

College athletes become both consumers and subjects of sports media, giving them a unique stance and position in the media industry. Not quite professionals yet, college athletes are at a period in their life where they may reach a breakthrough or ending to their sports careers. While some sports and schools are more popular than others depending on the division and conference, most colleges have an array of media personnel, actively covering and projecting these athletes, mainly to bring attention to the school. The more attention college sports get in the media means more money is brought into the school and program. This may entail more money for facilities, gear, and other amenities given to the athletes in return for their performance and media popularity. Thus, a constant cycle is circulated around media coverage, popularity, and resources. Factors such as sport, school, and gender can be accounted for when the issue of unequal representation come into play, fueling this never-ending cycle.
Athletes, especially at an elite-level, can be considered celebrities. From Michael Phelps, the world’s most decorated Olympian of all time, to Serena Williams, the second-most Grand Slam single title winners of all time, the names and faces are known. Any spectator who has watched broadcasted or live sporting events can testify that the things athletes are able to accomplish are incredible. As a competitive athlete in a Division 1 program, I have been lucky enough to witness some remarkable performances in sports, both at a collegiate and national level. For most athletes, their fame is a result of their abundant talent and physical abilities. However, with the fame comes the onset and increasingly growing subjection to the media.

The way the media portrays these “celebrities” may have a psychological and emotional impact on generations of athletes at any level. Win or lose, athletes’ performances are publicly dissected by the media, opening a door to criticism and judgement. Howard Ferguson in his book, The Edge, said, “Mediocre people play it safe and avoid criticism at all costs. Champions risk criticism every time they perform” (Ferguson, 1990, p. 120). The same as any celebrity, athletes are humans too, and they are most certainly not perfect. Yet, it is natural for society to closely examine those they see in magazines and on television. Some athletes in the media are even idolized and considered role models to other athletes, placing the media’s portrayal of them on a pedestal. The question then becomes: what kind of representation does this pedestal present to other athletes?

Organization of Thesis

This thesis includes a literature review of (a) the road to equality in women’s sports; (b) media coverage of women’s sports; (c) oversexualization of women’s bodies; (d) racial discriminations; (e) audience perception; (f) dangers of self-objectification; (g) psychological
Chapter 2: Literature Review

My secondary research and review of literature covers the fundamentals of gender in sport and ways in which the media has covered athletes in the past and present. First, the historical influence and factors of women’s sports in particular are examined, as female athletes are still facing distinct discriminations in the world of sports. With women joining the community of organized sports comes the gradual production of female athletes in the media. My research then dives into perceptions and portrayals of women in sports, and intersectionality is researched and examined surrounding race and ethnicity as well. Investigation around past and present portrayals of gender in sports media give insight on why inequality may exist within the sports industry. Next, I review what other researchers and scholars have discovered about the sports media market and ways in which audiences perceive certain media portrayals of athletes. Understanding sports media consumers’ stances on current behaviors in the industry is important for conceptualizing ways in which college athlete consumers consume media. Finally, my research examines past studies and statistics on self-objectification and psychological effects the media has on its “models,” including athletes. I then review ways in which the media has shifted or progressed since the inclusion of women in sports. Examination of literature helped me
develop deeper understanding of gender portrayals in sports media and ways in which college athletes in my study in particular may feel about the topic.

The Road to Equality in Women’s Sports

Women have been engaging in sporting activities since as early as 800 B.C., according to ancient Greek author Homer. In his epic poem, The Odyssey, Princess Nausicaa is described playing ball with her handmaidens next to a riverbank on the island of Scheria. Yet, organized athletic events did not become established for women until the 20th century (Bell, 2008). In contemporary American society, the development of women’s sports continues to face marginalization and hindrances. It exists as an honest reality that sport history was systematically gendered, focusing on masculinity and men’s historical development, with zero inclusion of the other sex.

America has traveled a long road with women’s rights, including women’s suffrage, the 19th Amendment, equal pay, and Title IX, and the lists of modifications and calls-to-action surrounding these rights continues to exist in today’s world. Prior to Title IX, a federal civil rights law made in 1972, women’s rights in America did not allow for equal participation as men in competitive sports. Early women’s sports existed more as forms of recreational play with later emphasis on physical fitness rather than competition. In the 1800s, activities such as horseback riding and showboating were the extent of sporting activities that were acceptable for women, with swimming becoming a fashionable activity later in the 19th century. Few rules and regulations were put into place for women, and they were encouraged to refrain from too much exertion, as it was not deemed as “lady-like.” Strenuous physical activity for a woman was thought to be especially hazardous, according to published doctor Edward Clark, because during
menstruation she was “periodically weakened” (Clarke, 1874 cited by Bell, 2008, p.2). Many early opportunities for women to participate in organized physical events were thus prevented due to this wide-spread dogma that it was unsafe. However, as more and more women sought to become involved in physical activity, they naturally became more competitive, forming informal clubs of their own by the late 1800s. Eventually, collegiate co-ed athletic clubs began to appear, mainly for social reasons, igniting the development of female collegiate sports (Bell, 2008).

Women did not become recognized within college sports right away. However, “competition was within college between students (intramural) rather than between the institutions (extramural)” (Bell, 2008, p. 5). All physical activities that women were able to participate in were results of clubs, sorority events, and designated days dedicated to allowing women to play. Women were not participants of intercollegiate sport until basketball was introduced at Smith College in 1892 (Gerber et al., 1974). Basketball then quickly spread to other colleges, and students began to demand for more intercollegiate play.

Stimulated by the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 and eventually the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the status and strength of women and minorities began to develop and progress. By 1966, the Division for Girls and Women in Sport (DGWS) appointed a Commission on Intercollegiate Sports for Women (CISW) to assist in conducting intercollegiate competitions, and in 1967 the commission was renamed to Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (CIAW). Thus, the women’s movement in sports increased rapidly towards the same status as men’s sports, with the inclusion of women’s gymnastics, track and field, swimming, badminton, volleyball, and basketball in the national championships by 1972 (Gerber et al., 1974). Title IV was also established in 1972, which was made to provide everyone with equal access to any program or activity that receives Federal financial assistance, including sports.
Title IV states, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights). This essentially means that federally-funded institutions, such as public schools, are legally required to provide girls and boys with equitable sports opportunities.

Although many debates and further agreements between the National College Athletics Association (NCAA) and CIAW regarding women’s equality in athletics were to be made in years to follow, Title IV marked the beginning of active involvement of women’s sports in collegiate athletics and beyond. According to the Women’s Sports Foundation, “before Title IX, one in 27 girls played sports. Today that number is two in five” (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2016). College women’s athletic participation has increased from 15% in 1972 to 43% in 2001, and in 2004, the average number of teams offered for female athletes per university was 8.32, up from 2.50 per school in 1972 (Carpenter & Acosta, 2005). In 1981-82, women’s championships became a part of the NCAA program. Today, the NCAA sponsors 46 women’s championships, 41 men’s championships, and three combined championships in all three of its divisions (NCAA, 2020).

While the historical background of female sports is a bit messier than males’ in competitive athletics, events and movements of the past few centuries helped provide women with (almost) equal opportunities as men. Women’s sports have come a long way, but progress is still essential in a variety of areas when it comes to gender equality. In a 2009–2010 NCAA Equity Report, women received 48% of the total athletic scholarship dollars at Division 1 schools, although they received only 40% of total money spent on athletics, despite making up
53% of the student body (Bracken & Irick, 2011, p. 22). Furthermore, while women’s college sports continue to grow, the number of these women’s teams with female head coaches has dwindled greatly over the past few decades. This number is down from 55% in 1981 to roughly 40% in 2016 (Stark, 2017). On a professional level, a gender wage gap is still very prominent, despite the many efforts and protests for equal pay. While some argue that the reason for the wage gap is that male sports bring in more revenue, the question then becomes: who is responsible for the promotion and hype surrounding male sports? The simple answer is advertisers, producers, and sport marketers. This pronounced display of gender inequality in sports is in the hands of the media.

**Media Coverage of Women’s Sports**

There is ESPN, and there is ESPNW. There is the NBA, and there is the WNBA. That “W” placed at the rear end of these major sporting networks and organizations blatantly separates women from the world of sports. It must be assumed that any sporting channel or outlet automatically represents male-only sports. These names of major programs and athletic associations deliberately disassociate women from the “masculinity” of sports. Sports coverage is immensely powerful in shaping norms and stereotypes about gender. Media can challenge these norms, promoting a balanced coverage of men’s and women’s sports and a fair portrayal of athletes. However, while women make up 40% of all participants in sports, they somehow receive only 4% of sports media coverage (UNESCO, 2019). The lack of media coverage then creates a rippling effect in the world of women’s sports, which leads to fewer fans, fewer sponsors, and fewer currency. While having coverage in the media is important for the growth of
women’s sports, the issue of how women are displayed in that 4% of sports media arises an entire new multitude of issues to be discussed.

It is of no surprise that early coverage of female athletes depicted these women as anomalies. Prior to the 20th century, the world of sports was lawfully made a male-dominated arena. While women had been participating in the same physical activity as men for centuries, not in an organized league, they were still gawked at for partaking in such “masculine” behavior. What is particularly interesting about the gendered nature of sports is the degree to which different sports are socially categorized as traditionally feminine and masculine, and various scholars have determined explanations on how the media originated these groupings (Lopiano, 2000).

The stereotypes instilled within the media began centuries ago, and media platforms today still struggle to challenge and eradicate the belief that women’s participation in sport is less valuable than men’s involvement. In a study done on the effect of sex and gender-schematic processing on sport participation, Sherri Matteo (1986) classified male-appropriated sports as placing emphasis on physical contact, aggression, and autonomous behavior (like basketball, soccer, and football) and female-appropriated sports as placing emphasis on aesthetic and beauty (like gymnastics and ballet). In addition to gender studies surrounding sports, scholars have discovered that sex typing of sport is likely to be reflected in descriptions and images of female athletes in the media (Jones et al., 1999). Thus, a never-ending cycle of historical stereotypes influencing media and media reinforcing stereotypes onto present society commences.

Various content analyses of print and digital media coverage of athletes have been conducted to compare media descriptions of female athletes by the different gender-appropriated sports they participate in. One study in particular examined print media coverage of U.S.
women’s Olympic gold medal teams (Jones et al., 1999). Observing the highly successful years of 1996 and 1998 for Team U.S.A, this study provided a great opportunity to detect how descriptions of these women’s successful performances reflect beliefs about gender in sport. The results of the Olympic study echoed the theories and claims made by Matteo on gender appropriation in the sports media. All five of the gold-medal-winning contests described within the print media contained “high frequency of gender stereotypic comments that were clearly related to the overall gendered nature of the sport” (Jones et al., 1999, p. 188). The results suggest that despite the high achievement of these women in traditional male sports (hockey, soccer, and basketball), print media coverage frequently deemphasizes the task aspects of their performance and instead focuses on performance-irrelevant aspects. For example, many female athletes were compared to their male counterparts in the sport, as publications commented on how her performance looked “almost as strong as” a male athlete. The task of the print media for covering successful females in male-appropriated sports clearly demonstrates de-emphasizing performance and producing condescending comments comparing women to their male counterparts in this study. Contrastingly, the results of this study showed promising media coverage of athletes in the female-appropriated sports.

The trend for the athletes playing female-appropriated sports in Jones, Murrell, and Jackson’s study leaves some sense of optimism, learning that the print media coverage tended to describe their performance in greater detail. For example, a gymnast’s movements and scores are described as opposed to her beauty or elegance. While this is hopeful in the terms of performance descriptions in media, the results also indicate that the accounts of the female athletes playing female-appropriated sports had the highest frequency of female stereotypic comments. Thus, “the beauty and grace of the gymnast was still the main point of emphasis,
even with the U.S. women’s gymnastics team winning the gold medal for the first time in Olympic history” (Jones et al., 1999, p. 189). Whether the sport is traditionally “masculine” or “feminine,” each category seems to determine the direction in which the media goes to paint the athlete. Coverage of female athletes in sports media is growing, but the issue now lies in how the athletes are being covered.

**Oversexualization of Women’s Bodies**

While coverage of women’s sports is lacking in various media outlets, ranging from magazine covers to TV ads, the little coverage that is shown often emphasizes women’s bodies and appearance rather than athleticism. Sexual objectification entails the representation of a woman as a “collection of body parts” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 174), which might be juxtaposed with a visual portrayal of a woman as a total person. Thus, an indicator of sexual objectification can be described as “the extent to which the angle of the photo as well as the emphasis of the image-segmented female athletes is segmented into different body parts” (Frisby, 2017, p. 26).

Primarily female-favored sports, such as gymnastics, beach volleyball, and synchronized swimming, get the most media coverage for women. Sure, women may thrive athletically in these sports, but these sports happen to have something else in common- the scarce body coverage of their uniforms. A relatively obvious way in which sexual objectification can be conveyed in pictures is through unnecessary body exposure, as in the case of a person who is wearing less clothing in a photo than she would wear normally. Oversexualization of women’s bodies in the media extends far beyond just sports, and a larger social issue is at hand in this concept. Stand in line at any grocery store, and you will see displays of sexualized women in
dresses, bikinis, and caked-faces of makeup. In magazine advertisements alone, there is evidence that sexual objectification occurs more frequently for women than for men, and women are three times more likely than men to be dressed in a sexually provocative manner (McCall, 2012). This is not to say that men are not oversexualized in the media as well, but it is certainly more observed across female media coverage. Men are naturally fit into society’s standard of masculinity without makeup, photoshop, and lack-of clothing. Women, on the other hand, must prove their femininity to society with their appearance, and the media establishes this requirement through its excessive oversexualization of feminine features on women. This further emphasizes the societal mold that the sports media world plays in placing athletes in different lights according to sex and the need for further inclusion and equality in women’s sports.

In a study analyzing the images produced by *Sports Illustrated* magazine covers from 1954-2016, much discrepancy was found comparing the portrayal of women and men in the images (Murray, 2018, p. 33). The majority of the photos used for the male athletes depicted action shots of the athletes participating in their sport, with the rest of the images being “respectable” headshots (p. 33). Hence, the emphasis was directly on the athletic competence of the male athletes on these covers, with 94.6% of the covers clearly identifying the sport they play (p. 33). For women, however, only 83.7% of the covers inferred an identifiable sport, and the majority of the photos exhibited the women in a very passive, pose-like way (p. 33). An example of this is in a cover photo of Danica Patrick in May of 2008, as she poses in uniform next to her racecar, wearing a full face of glam makeup, smiling at the camera. While she was in fact wearing her uniform as she would in a race, the photo lacked any organic intensity that realistically is shown during her sport as it would if the photo was an action shot (Murray, 2018). These types of images emphasized attractiveness and seductiveness rather than athletic ability.
Despite the fact that these women in these covers are very beautiful and well-photographed, the aim and result these cover photos only further supports stereotypical gender views and unnecessary sexualization of women, and it scrutinizes female athletes’ bodies for appeal, not function.

Female athletes in traditionally male-dominant sports are perceived in a more negative light in terms of their athletic abilities when oversexualized in the media. In a research study examining the influence of women basketball players’ depictions in the media on user perception, the more oversexualized images of these women had a negative effect on perceptions of athletic talent as opposed to action-shot images of the women (Harrison & Secarea, 2010). This study included an experiment that used manipulation of variables, such as descriptions and images of the athletes in an artificial publication and examined the reactions of the audience depending on these variables. When the athlete was depicted in a sexualized manner, “participants disapproved more of the high-status athlete and believed she had less athletic ability than the low status athlete” (Harrison & Secarea, 2010, p. 27). Hence, this implies that oversexualization leads to negative perceptions of athletic competence, completely defeating the purpose of showcasing athletes in sports media. Female athletes have strong, capable bodies just as any male athlete, yet the sports media world appears to have a different agenda for the publicity surrounding women, using sex-appeal and beauty to overrule performance and talent. Sociologists have suggested that the sexualization of women athletes in mass media serves to reinforce patriarchal power and devalue women’s athleticism (Alper et al., 2002). Some have proposed that “a way to limit female power is to sexualize and, therefore, trivialize women athletes” (Daniels, 2009, p. 402). This adds more fuel to social and sexist stereotypes surrounding men and women in sports, diminishing the athletic competence of women.
Racial Discrimination

Among the disproportionate ratio of men to women on covers of sports publications, evidence has also found further intersectional discrimination pertaining to race. As the subgroup of women of color appear even fewer times than white female athletes, this further reiterates the media’s role in supporting the problematic ideal type of a woman and athlete. In another study of *Sports Illustrated* magazine covers, researchers found that African American women were depicted on only 5 of 1,835 covers between 1954 and 1987 (Lumpkin & Williams, 1991). Feature articles about African American women were also rare (Lumpkin & Williams, 1991). Other ethnic groups, such as Hispanic, Asian, and others, are similarly meagerly covered in sports media, especially those who are women. Conventional beauty and societal standards placed on women can be the origin behind this marginalization of colored women. The American culture that the media has created tends to favor a “heterosexual, white ideal body over other bodies. The white ideal body has been described as being thin and conventionally beautiful” (Frisby, 2017, p. 23). The problem with the support of harmful cultural ideals between society and the media is that the ability to fit into this perfect mold of a female athlete is virtually impossible.

Despite being one of the most successful female athletes, with 23 grand slams and countless championship wins, tennis player Serena Williams has been continuously racialized and objectified by various media outlets. From hate tweets to condemning remarks made by sports broadcasters, Williams is one of many female athletes experiencing such commentary, solely based on physical features. After winning the French Open in 2015, Williams was “compared to an animal, likened to a man, and deemed frightening and horrifyingly unattractive”
Descriptions of her incredible win and accomplishment were not trending on Twitter, but instead users were commenting on her physique, comparing her to a gorilla and describing her as frightening and manly. This is not only extremely dehumanizing and callous to say about any person, but comments like this further contribute to larger social issues like racism and sexism.

Further comments made about Williams have attacked her physique in a very objectifying and sexualizing manner, including a The Telegraph’s Matthew Norman, who claims Williams can never be the best tennis player, due to her body type. Norman writes, “Generally, I’m all for chunky sports stars ... but tennis requires a mobility Serena cannot hope to achieve while lugging around breasts that are registered to vote in a different US state from the rest of her” (Norman, 2006 cited by Desmond-Harris, 2017, p. 2). Comments like this one can hinder the conception of aspiration and achievement in athletes, as it claims that one must be gifted with the proper body type to succeed in a sport.

Expanding upon the idea of women being objectified and physically critiqued in sports media, Serena Williams is often compared to her opponents, not in terms of her skill or performance, however. Of no surprise, the world’s greatest woman tennis player is extremely strong and fit, yet many media sources decide to frame this asset in a very derogatory light. Writing for Rolling Stone in 2013, Stephen Roderick observed, “Sharapova is tall, white and blonde, and, because of that, makes more money in endorsements than Serena, who is black, beautiful and built like one of those monster trucks that crushes Volkswagens at sports arenas” (Roderick, 2013, p. 2). While the disappointing truth may be that women who look for like Sharapova do in fact receive more endorsements based off of problematic cultural beauty standards, comments like this one only push the injustice down further into a very racist and
judgmental trench. Why would comments like this need to be included in publications referring to athletic opponents anyways? All athletes should justifiably be judged on their tennis skills, not their body composition. This degrades women from athletes to objects, focusing only on their physical features. Being as successful as she is, Serena Williams is faced with constant spotlight coverage, good and bad. This is common amongst any celebrity or highly-accomplished athlete. With avid success comes the impending burden of body objectification, sexualization, stereotyping, and racism, all posing a constant threat to female athletes and their image in the media.

**Audience Perception**

If oversexualized and marginalized female athletes are what consumers see, what does this say about the intended target market for sports media? Depending on the type of media or brand, most sports advertisements and publications target fans, meaning the demographic of the age group is very broad. Fans can be children who are interested in a sport, athletes who are competing in sports, and older fans who enjoy watching and learning about sports. Even though sports fans can be any age and gender, many publications like *Sports Illustrated* tend to attract a predominantly heterosexual, male audience (Lynch, 2013). Some sports media outlets use sex appeal and body objectification as a selling tactic, ignoring the true objective of sports and what athletes accomplish. As the statement “sex sells” remains a truism among many advertisers, many sports platforms succumb to this theory by displaying oversexualized and objectified female athletes.

Studies have shown that the oversexualized depiction of athletes in media effects many viewers’ perceptions of the athlete and his or her competence. More precisely, the competence
and skills of athletes were diminished the more their photos were presented in a sexual or provocative manner. In one study examining sports magazine covers, the “sexualized targets were also seen as less intelligent, strong, capable, determined, and as having less self-respect,” and women were presented this way more often than men (Nezlek et al., 2014, p. 6). Star athletes are used in advertisements because they are successfully strong, capable, and determined. Yet, when athletes are sexualized, these positive attributes are diminished, particularly for female athletes. This study not only shows that oversexualizing and objectifying bodies of any gender is detrimental to viewer perception of the athlete, but it also infers the reason as to why women continue to be subjected to stereotyping and discrimination in the sports media world. If female athletes are the ones being publicly displayed more provocatively, than they will be the ones who are categorized as less athletically capable in the eyes of the public.

Athletes, especially women, are often perceived as objects, merely physical bodies, rather than as complete persons when they are oversexualized, focusing more on images of body parts than face or performance. Within this context, sexualization, defined as “an intentional heightened emphasis on the physical, sexual characteristics of an individual,” can lead to objectification (Nezlek et al., 2014, p. 2). Objectification can occur within interpersonal encounters and through visual mass media, and it cannot be avoided in today’s age of mass media on seemingly unlimited platforms. An important and possible consequence of objectification, self-objectification, is an immense consequence of this, and can lead to problematic perceptions of another consumer category- the athletes themselves.

**Dangers of Self Objectification**

While female athletes are faced with challenges regarding media coverage and comparisons to their male counterparts, the amount of inappropriate exposure these women
receive in the media often results in self-objectification. Many studies provide clear evidence that public coverage of idealized and sexualized media images results in distorted body image perceptions in girls and women, and researchers have examined the connection between sports media exposure and the negative effect on body perceptions of young girls and women. While women have faced a multitude of other challenges throughout history, one of the biggest challenges today stems from societal pressures and internal struggles, including women who play sports.

Objectification theory posits that girls and women develop their primary view of themselves through the observations of other individuals (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997 cited by Smith, 2016). Self-objectification occurs “when an individual ceases to evaluate their own body with respect to its value and function, instead appraising it on its value and attractiveness to others” (Fredrickson et al., 2011, p. 690). By the supporting evidence that most sports media of female athletes’ values attractiveness over talent, objectification is a very predictable result of these publications. The same goes for social comparison theory, claiming that when ones see how images are portrayed in the media, he or she subconsciously compares themselves and their lives to the images. Comparison to unrealistically glamorized and sexualized images in the media “leads to upward comparison, resulting in feelings of inadequacy, leading to negative moods and body dissatisfaction” (Major et al., 1991 cited by Smith, 2016, p. 286). Consumers take in and process what is produced and displayed in the media, and in the digital age the world is in currently, there is no avoiding what pops up on our screens. It is simply a human reaction to compare and analyze exhibitions and descriptions of the lives and aesthetics of other individuals. It is also a human response to misinterpret toxic media trends that lead to unhealthy lifestyles and standards. While other audiences of sports media take in perceptions of what they believe
athletes should look like, the athletes themselves may take that belief one step further, projecting unfair expectations onto themselves and their image.

Being athletes at an elite level and on a large platform, while also going through everyday young-adult life, college athletes are important and understudied audiences involving the effects of sports media. In one study, researchers examined the effects different images in sports media had on female collegiate athletes. Ultimately, the study concluded that photographs of athletes engaged in their sport resulted in less objectifying self-statements for women than photographs of models and athletes in a sexualized context (Daniels, 2009). For participants of female college athletes, negative mood states were detected when the images were of fitness models and more traditionally feminine sports. The pose-like and objectifying images that surround most traditionally feminine sports led other like-minded female athletes to feel more poorly about themselves and their abilities. Conversely, exposure to general sports media of athletes showcasing their talents had negative correlations between body dissatisfaction. The female athletes preferred to see other women showcasing their athletic abilities and felt more comfortable about their own physical appearance as a result. Another study found athletes in feminine sports (e.g., gymnastics) and at Division I schools were more affected by body image concerns than athletes in more neutral or masculine sports and lower-level schools (Varnes et al., 2013). This provides evidence that images of athletes in sports media do effect athletes and their perception of themselves in their sport.

Not all hope is lost in sports media, however, and there have been recent strides to try to overcome the image of a female athlete as being only an attractive and sexual being. In 2007, Nike Athletics created an ad in response to radio host Don Imus’ racist and sexist comments about the women’s Rutgers basketball team. Nike sarcastically thanked Imus for moving
women’s sport forward, showing that “Nike understood that equality for women’s sports still required time” (Smith, 2015, p. 296). Later that same year, Nike introduced a new ad campaign that questioned why female athletes had to be judged first by their appearance and what that had to do with their athletic talent (Smith, 2015). This advertising strategy of fighting prejudices proved to be highly successful for Nike, and the brand continues to advocate for gender equality in their ad campaigns, being one of the leading companies in sports apparel. Female athletes and their relationship with sports media can be very positive and motivational when displayed in a very powerful light, and the media has the influence necessary to alter the way the world sees women in sports.

**Psychological Effects**

Clear evidence and psychological factors exist surrounding correlations between exposure to glamorized media resulting in distorted body image perceptions in women, and researchers have gone a step further to examine the link between sports media exposure and the negative perceptions of oneself among the athlete community. Girls and women who participate in sports may be “especially likely to consider media images of women athletes to be a reference group for their own self-concept” (Daniels, 2009, p. 404). They may be more likely than non-sport-involved individuals to compare themselves to women athletes. Through this objectified representation of female athletes, the media repackages what society expects the athletic body to look like, as opposed to presenting the true talent of all women in sports. As a result, athletes may force judgement upon themselves and their physical capability, based solely on images seen in sports media. Self judgement can not only effect mood and daily performance, but it can lead to larger psychological and physical damage in the long term.
Athletes are essentially the largest subgroup of consumers of sports media, which makes the effect of these publications imperative to the development of women in sports. In one study examining female athletes’ responses to photographs of women in health, fitness, and sports magazines, the subjects compared themselves to the more glamorized and idealized images of adult women athletes and were left feeling “depressed” and “discouraged” because they felt they would never personally look like these women (Thomsen, Bower and Barnes, 2004 cited Daniels, 2009). In the same study, after seeing the over-sexualized images, physical appearance became “especially salient for female viewers, and they made negative statements about their appearance” (Daniels, 2009, p. 416). This demonstrates the potentially negative impact that certain images of female athletes have on other female athlete viewers, focusing on appearance rather than athleticism.

Contrastingly, images of women that focus on their athleticism may direct women to motivationally think about their physical abilities rather than how their bodies look. In one study surrounding adolescent and college-level female athletes, the performance images of women athletes provoked more physical self-descriptions than the other images, suggesting that “these images trigger an instrumental focus in female viewers” (Daniels, 2009, p. 415). In addition, these statements about physicality tended to be positive in emotional tone. In sports media images that showcase real athletic bodies without sufficing to societal and objectified norms, the female athletes represent all different shapes and sizes of athletic build. Skinny, broad, tall, short, and everything in between, female athletes are capable of being successful in any sport they strive to train for. Performance-based images of highly successful athletes is largely effective in sports media, as it creates a very constructive cognitive impact amongst consumers. While the media has the potential to negatively impact athletes’ mental health, the mass media also have
the ability to make a positive impact on the lives of both athletes of every level and bring out the best in them.

The psychological effects that beauty-based media publications have on female athletes can potentially inhibit performance in their sport. It is common knowledge that physically hard work and dedication lead to improvement and successful gains in one’s sport. However, most athletes and coaches have described sports as “10 percent physical and 90 percent mental” (Meggyesy, 2016). Motivation and drive are a few of the main mental abilities that athletes need to be the best, so it is important that they fuel their brains and bodies with these mental faculties. However, when mental health is impaired due to pressure and objectification from the media, the detriment eventually progressive from a mental to physical state.

One study analyzing female softball players found that self-objectification predicted motor performance on a throwing task, even after age and prior experience were controlled for (Fredrickson and Harrison, 2005 cited Daniels, 2009). Girls who self-objectify at higher rates performed worse on the task, “showing that these girls actually moved their bodies in restricted ways in the physical world” (Daniels, 2009, p. 417). This can infer the idea that female athletes indirectly take orders from the media to act and perform a certain way. The mental damage that results from harmful and objectified images can then be inferred to hinder female athletes’ performances.

The psychological difficulties that many women in sports endure can lead to more serious dangers, like eating disorders and body dysmorphia. Research indicates that women who are dancers, models, and athletes are among those possibly at high-risk for developing eating disorders (Borgen and Corbin, 1987). Within these populations, factors such as high level of competition and leanness being linked to success have been found as possible influencing
reasons for developing eating disorders (Garner and Garfinkel, 1980). Being put on display, in a high-achieving arena for the world to watch, elite athletes are exposed and are accustomed to high amounts of media and publicity. If the media is destructive to the mental state of female athletes by the way they display these women, one could infer that higher-level athletes are at a higher risk of developing psychological disorders. To be noted, the media are not the only source to blame for such serious risks. Characteristics of female athletes are almost parallelly shared with those who have developed eating disorders, such as “high self-expectations, rigid and obsessional approach to reaching goals, perfectionistic, and high emphasis on emotional control” (Stoutjesdyk and Jevne, 1992, p. 272). While stimulus of these traits could be sourced to other factors like coaches, teammates, and other cultural burdens, the media could add fuel to the fire by placing more pressure on the athlete. If sports media displays athletes as only glamorous, lean, and feminine, then it is only natural for female athletes to feel as though that is what it takes to be at that elite level, altering their bodies in every way that they can to get to that picture-perfect image.

While older research indicated that athletes experienced better body-image than non-athletes, the growth of media exposure of oversexualized female athletes has caused a dramatic increase in body dissatisfaction among higher-level athletes. Three studies that involved collegiate female athletes reported that athletes at lower competition levels (Division II and III) were more satisfied with their body shape than non-athletes (Robinson & Ferraro, 2004), while a fourth study reported that Division I volleyball players were significantly more dissatisfied with their body shape than non-athletes (Hoag, 2012). Comparing non-athletes to volleyball players across all three competition levels distinguished a trend between body shape dissatisfaction and competition level, with Division I athletes reporting the most body shape dissatisfaction (Hoag, 2012).
These findings can indicate that body dissatisfaction increases as athletes perform at more elite levels. Other factors such as type of sport and other influences might exist as outside variables, but it is significant to note this trend, along with the growing trend of sports media and coverage of female sports.

**Progression and Strategies for Change**

Times have changed since the era of men-only athletics. However, while sports media has progressed with women’s coverage, strategies for further change in coverage of female athletes continue to be pushed across society and media outlets. The mass media has become one of the most influential shapers of society, which is why it is extremely important for equality of all genders, races, and sexualities to be represented, especially highly-publicized groups like athletes (Mughal 2013). With any large-scaled progression in society, comes numerous regressions and setbacks. The representation of female athletes in the media has had its ups and downs, but many have hope and strategies for a better future of women’s sports.

Women make up more than half of the world’s population, yet struggles to equalize media coverage and representation between men and women remain a challenge, despite recent triumphs. In 2019, the FIFA Women’s World Cup had just come to an exciting highpoint in France. The USA collected their fourth trophy and the tournament attracted more than one billion viewers across the globe (FIFA, 2019). In this same year, on the BBC Sport website, “nearly half of the homepage stories featured women’s sport, and it also made up over half of the ‘most-watched’ video clips” during that June-July period (Bowes, 2020). While this is a positive shift in volume of women’s sports coverage, it appears that this trend only occurs during the absence of men’s sports. For example, in this case, when football started back up in August,
sports media coverage was “business as usual,” directing attention mainly to men (Bowes, 2020). Not only is coverage of women’s sports lacking, but when progression begins to show, media outlets revert back to male-dominated publications when it comes down to year-round statistics.

Despite the tremendous incline in women’s participation in sports, a multitude of studies have found that coverage of women’s sports has actually declined throughout the years. For example, one study examined six Summer and Winter Olympic Games telecasts from 1996–2006 and found no significant increase in the amount of coverage afforded to female athletes across the years (Billings, 2008). Significant within this study is the fact that coverage of women’s sports actually decreased as years progressed. For example, studies found that in NBC’s prime-time coverage of the Beijing Olympic Games, male athletes received 8.4% more air time than female athletes, and this difference was nearly two times than that found in the 2004 Athens Games (a 4.6% differential favoring men). Even more significant with this theory is a more recent study that analyzed television coverage every five years from 1989-2013 (Cooky et al., 2013). The percent of air time received by female athletes during these sports telecasts was quite small in each period examined: 1989 = 5.0%; 1993 = 5.1%; 1999 = 8.7%; 2004 = 6.3%. However, in the most recent study, female athletes received only 1.6% of television coverage (Cooky et al., 2013, p. 19). Thus, the optimistic prediction and trajectory of women’s sports participation in the past few decades does not coincide with representation in the media.

With the female empowerment movement progressing and women participating in more competitive sports, assuming that the media world would follow this evolution would be logical. However, as women continue to become more active and successful in the world of sports, the scarce coverage female athletes receive continues to oversexualize and underplay their athletic abilities compared to male athletes. Campaigns like Nike’s “Dream Crazier” campaign
“honoring the countless female athletes who have unified the masses, defied gender-based discriminations, and inspired generations of athletes to pursue their dreams” are a step towards appropriate coverage and inspiration (Lifshutz, 2019). Showing victories, action-oriented images, and powerful quotes from female athletes are all examples of steps Nike has taken to do their part in improving the context of women’s sports media. Yet, this single campaign cannot completely salvage all female athletes from inequality and objectification alone.

Sexism still exists in the media, and athletes like surfer Sophie Hellyer are beginning to speak out. Speaking to The Times, former English champion commented on the difference in coverage she got after wearing a wetsuit over a bikini. Hellyer said, “I definitely get a lot less coverage in the media now I’m wearing a 5mm wetsuit all year. Is that linked? Probably. When was the last time you saw a woman in a full wetsuit in a surf mag?” (Ellson, 2018). This is a classic example of the way women being unequally represented and only displayed when they can be deemed in a sexual manner. Other sports, such as rugby, are affected in other ways by this sexualization. “It’s frustrating that there are only two categories for women’s sport: you’re either a sexy sport, or not a sexy sport,” says former England rugby captain Catherine Spencer in an interview by The Guardian (Kessel, 2018). “It’s very black and white. If it’s not a sexy sport you don’t necessarily get the media coverage. And if it is a sexy sport you possibly get the wrong media coverage. You’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t,” she says (Kessel, 2018). Spencer explains the situation perfectly, and no matter how hard women may push for a progressive movement in coverage, the representation and presentation of female athletes ultimately lies in the hands of the media.

Many news organizations may turn exclusively to men’s sports for revenue, assuming it draws in the most consumers compared to women. However, this may be tied directly to the way
it is covered, rather than the gender of the sport. “Women’s coverage wouldn’t be around four percent if we had consistent coverage that wasn’t cyclical,” says the Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sports’ co-director Nicole LaVoi. “If you could follow women’s sport in season and out of season, around the calendar like we do men’s sport, then that would change the landscape” (Springer, 2019). LaVoi is essentially saying that while women may get adequate coverage in sports media from time to time (when a female athlete does something considered exceptionally monumental), the consistency of the exposure is lacking. Story lines such as scoring streaks, injury comebacks, or season records are not produced nearly as much from women’s sports as men. For fanbases in the sports world, it is important for the fan culture to get to know the athletes, statistics, and other day-to-day coverage (Springer, 2019).

Drawing in readers, viewers, and revenue is a predominant goal for many media outlets, and to these companies, the audience is and always will be in favor of more coverage of male sports. Many smaller newspapers and media organizations especially tune in to what type of stories create the most revenue, and they play it safe with their loyal, male-dominant audience. However, for larger organizations like ESPN, financial setbacks should not be as detrimental. In its 2010 media guide published for potential advertisers, ESPN claims that it is the “most viewed ad supported cable channel” and that the 2009 broadcast year was ESPN’s “highest rated ever” (ESPN, 2010, p. 5). If anything, these large-scale corporations have the authority to spark a change in the direction of viewership and content messages. In the same report, ESPN tells advertisers that it is the top cable network for men ages 18-54, so the clear target audience of ESPN is men (ESPN, 2010, p.5). However, researchers argue that the target audience extends to a certain group of men. The ways in which ESPN targets its programming to male viewers is reflective of a larger trend, “wherein TV producers carve out market niches that situate male
viewers in the electronic equivalent of locker rooms characterized by male banter and ironic humor” (Cooky et al., 2013, p. 20). For example, an assumption by media planners is made that its male audience prefers to see men playing sports and women as “sexual objects of desire, or perhaps as mothers, but not as powerful, competent, competitive athletes” (Cooky et al., 2013, p. 21). This is a questionable assumption that reasonably many viewers disagree with on a personal level, yet many large media organizations like ESPN inertly plan and revolve women’s sports publications around this. For example, the “women’s sports history” segments during the month of March on SportsCenter propose assumptions about how to present women’s sports to male viewers who are used to being “fed a steady diet of men’s sports” (Cooky et al., 2013, p. 21). While these special segments were produced in respectful ways, they were clearly meant to be viewed as something different, separate, and apart from the regular programming. Positive feedback from segments like this has potential to elicit large media organizations like ESPN to implement women’s sports in regular coverage with the men, instead of blatantly categorizing female athletes as “special” and reserving them only for certain months out of the year.

An evolution of growth among equal coverage of men’s and women’s sports in the media will not be produced on its own, and this is proven through decades of studies. Understanding the influence of mass media is a step. The world is evolving into a digitally fast-paced world, and the mass media is only growing bigger on technological platforms. With more media outlets being created by advancements in technology, consumption of mass media has also increased. By 2001, “only 3 percent of households were without a TV set” (Compston, 2006, p. 218). An increase in mass media consumption directly leads to an increase in influence of the media in society’s everyday life. Sport consumption is a mediated process. What is covered, how often it is covered, and the manner in which it is covered all impact audience perceptions of value and
quality (Entman, 1993, Gitlin, 1980). As such, decision makers are not merely reflexively reacting to what their audience wants to see, their decisions create (or reduce) audience demand (Cooky et al., 2013, Kane, 2013). The media controls what viewers perceive and how society reacts. Thus, rooting the issues faced against women in sports directly to the source, the media, makes room for gender equality to progress.

Sports organizations can contribute to change by providing the sports media with more and better information about women athletes. One example may be within intercollegiate representation of their athletes. A longitudinal study shows that university sports information departments have vastly improved their presentation of women’s sports in their annual media guides (Kane & Buysse, 2005). Division I media guides are a primary means by which colleges and universities market their athletic teams to advertisers and corporate sponsors, as well as to alumni, donors, and other campus and community members (Kane and Buysse, 2005). For example, in this study analyzing college media guides from the 1990s to 2004, “only 51% of athletic females were portrayed on the court [in the earlier years], but in the 2003–04 season, that percentage jumped to 80%” (Kane and Buysse, 2005, p. 114). The amount of gender representation of females compared to males also became more harmonized as years progressed. Thus, it seems safe to conclude that, over the 15-year time span covered by this investigation, females not only came to be presented as “true athletes,” but they were presented in ways that were nearly identical to male athletes (Kane and Buysse, 2005, p. 115). Examples of these media guides and other promotion-based sports media are large influences on athletes and the community of sports. Ultimately, institutions of higher education, such as Division 1 athletic programs, “can and should provide leadership in ensuring equitable media treatment for athletic
females” (Buysse & Embser-Herbert, 2004, p. 68). Equal media coverage is the first and most essential step in creating an unbiased playing field for all genders.

Loyal audiences and fanbases are essential in sports media, so a step in the right direction may include presenting these audiences with equal presentation of men’s and women’s sports. Sports fans can also be an active part of this loop to promote change: “Audience members can complain directly to the producers of sports programs—to tell them that they do not appreciate sexist treatment of women in sports news and highlights shows and that they want to see more and better coverage of actual women’s sports” (Cooky et al., 2013, p. 24). As with any multi-million-dollar business, like the entertainment and music industry, fans are the main drivers in the market of sports media. Without the views and behaviors of fans and consumers, media planners and advertisers do not have any leverage or incentive. Thus, a mutual agreement to better the representation of gender in sports media must be made between both consumers and producers.

Research Questions

Given the information and research done on sports media and ways in which elite-level athletes are portrayed as it relates to gender, the following Research Questions are proposed to guide the data collection and analysis of this thesis study:

RQ1: How do college athletes make meaning of sports media?

Since the more talented and sought-after athletes are the ones usually promoted the most in sports media, my assumption was that college athletes compare themselves to athletes they see in sports media. Media is a means of showcasing people and their talents, so it is only human nature to aspire to be like and look like the models seen in sports publications and broadcasts. I
hypothesized that college athletes’ perceptions of themselves, and athletes as a whole, are elevated when the media conveys an inspiring or motivational message and diminished when the media is overly objectifying.

**RQ2: What degree of influence does sports media have on collegiate athletes’ body image?**

I anticipated that sports media has a relatively significant impact on collegiate athletes and their lives. For many athletes, college-level sports may be the first time they experience high levels of media coverage in their athletics career first-hand. Television broadcasting and digital media production of college sports continues to rise every year, according to a 2020 report. The National College Athletic Association (NCAA) generates most of its revenue from television and marketing rights fees. In its 2019 financial year, “the NCAA generated more than 800 million U.S. dollars in revenue from television and marketing rights fees” (Gough, 2020). Athletes are both consuming this media and participating in sports and school, which I believe may cause some internal struggles. From my own personal knowledge and experience, college athletes love watching sports, so I hypothesized that sports media is an active influencer in their lives.

**RQ3: How significant of a difference exists between male and female athletes’ body image?**

Based on personal experience and conversations amongst my peers, I anticipated a significant difference between male and female athletes’ body image. Traditionally speaking, women seem to put pressure on themselves to look pretty, even in their sport, whereas men usually do not. I hypothesized that because women are typically sexualized and glamorized in traditional media, this pressure carries over to individual female athletes’ body image and
perception of herself. I also anticipated to see some variation as it pertains to specific sports, as uniforms play a major role in body-image levels for both genders.

**Chapter 3 : Methods**

The study methods used in my research thesis include information from both survey data and focus group analysis. Through this study, I explore the moods, reactions, and perceptions of collegiate athletes as it pertains to sports media and body image. Both female and male athletes are subjects in my study in order to answer the research question of whether or not gender differences exist in body image mentality among athletes. By incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data, my study aims to understand and evaluate real responses to media as it pertains to body image amongst college athletes.

**Survey Methodology**

Survey research, defined as “the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions,” is a primary method of data collection for my study. (Check & Schutt, 2012, p. 160). This type of research allows for a variety of methods to recruit participants, collect data, and utilize various methods of arrangement. The survey research conducted in my study uses quantitative research strategies. Surveys are often “used to describe and explore human behavior” and are therefore frequently used in social and psychological research (Singleton & Straits, 2009, p. 1). Thus, using a large-scale survey is the most efficient method of gathering an adequate amount of quantitative data on the athlete psyche.

The population of interest, collegiate athletes, are more available to participate in this study via survey, compared to other data collection strategies, as the survey involves easy
distribution to various athletes across numerous universities. Participant recruitment strategies involve convenient sampling with widespread email, text message, social media, and word-of-mouth promotion of the survey. It is important that this study includes a wide range of participants in terms of gender, sport, and university, as these qualities are necessary for my research.

**Summary of Participants**

A total of 197 volunteer participants from 30 different colleges across the United States took my survey. Of these 197 participants included athletes from 18 different sports. 67.5% were females and 32.5% were males. Every participant in the survey reported regularly consuming some sort of media, whether that be television, magazine, newspaper, or social media. The majority of participants (98.5%) reported consuming social media on a regular basis.

**Survey Procedure**

Using the survey software Qualtrics, 197 volunteer participants in the study were asked a series of 13 questions, as seen in Appendix A. The online questionnaire began with personal background questions, giving the researcher general knowledge of demographics including age, sport, school, and gender. This data helps determine the difference or lack of deviance in responses as it pertains to gender, sport, etc. The next series of questions deals with participants’ media use. Where the participants consume media, how often they appear in media, and frequency of media encounters were included within these survey questions. The third section of questions within the survey deal with body image. Within these, the participants were asked to rank their body satisfaction, describe their physical body appearance using two Likert scales, and
rank the importance of their physical appearance. Finally, the last section of questions within the survey asked the participants open-ended questions, pertaining to their sport and media image. The goal of these questions is to determine the degree of care that athletes have for physical appearance in sports.

**Survey Measures**

In order to precisely and uniformly analyze the survey data, I used a coding technique. The answers to each question were coded into numerical categories in Microsoft Excel and transferred to SPSS Software to run tests. Participants who filled out the survey were asked what sport they compete in, as shown in Appendix A, and using my own rationalized judgement, I grouped the sports into the following 3 categories: sports with the least amount of body coverage (Group 1), sports with moderate to normal amount of body coverage (Group 2), and sports with an ample amount of body coverage (Group 3). Group 1 sports included: swimming, track and field, gymnastics, and wrestling. Group 2 sports included: field hockey, softball, golf, tennis, lacrosse, volleyball, basketball, soccer, rugby, cheerleading, and baseball. Group 3 sports included: football, ice hockey, and fencing. With the group of sport being the independent variable, I was able to run statistical ANOVA tests and analyze the correlation between skin coverage and body image. Analysis of variance, or ANOVA, is a statistical method that separates observed variance data into different components to use for additional tests. A one-way ANOVA is used for three or more groups of data, to gain information about the relationship between the dependent and independent variables (Kenton, 2021).

The same approach was taken for all of the answers to the survey questions, converting words or phrases into numbers in order to run tests. For example, “female” was coded to the
numerical value of 1, and “male” was coded to the numerical value of 2. This technique was used to code the answers with ranking/level values into numbers 1 through 5. The participants were asked to describe their physical bodies in terms of ranking both their fitness level and appearance separately (Q8 and Q9 in Appendix A). Parametric tests, independent sample $t$ tests, were then able to be conducted. Independent samples $t$ tests compare the means of two independent groups in order to determine whether there is statistical evidence that the associated population means are significantly different. For example, comparing the means between females’ body image satisfaction and males’ body image satisfaction was done using an independent two-sample $t$ test. Statistical significance was determined by the p-value.

**Focus Group Methodology**

The purpose of the focus group approach is to promote a comfortable atmosphere of disclosure in which participants can share their ideas, experiences, and attitudes about the specific topic of interest. As with most qualitative methods, it is the focus group’s ability to access the “knowledge, ideas, story-telling, self-presentation, and linguistic exchanges within a given cultural context” that makes it different from traditional quantitative approaches (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998, p. 5). This qualitative approach allows the researcher to observe, listen, and analyze the group dynamic and attitudes surrounding the topic. The focus group also presents a more organic and accurate social reality of the situation, as the participants are observed in real time. Focus groups “have the potential to generate data that may not surface in individual interviews or survey research” (Katz, 2001, p. 6). Using a combined application of methods, including a focus group, allows for a more detailed understanding of the research topic.
The primary idea behind initiating a focus group in this research is to create a discussion amongst collegiate athletes about their lives and perspectives in the world of sports and sports media. For my particular study, I conducted two separate focus groups— one with just females and one with just males. This way I am able to compare and contrast any similarities or differences between the two groups. As opposed to interviewing individual participants, the focus group allows for the volunteer participants to collaborate and bounce off of each other. This serves as a valuable way to understand from a broader perspective the attitudes of the target group of focus— college athletes. From the focus group, core insights, major themes, reactions, and quotes were analyzed and used to answer the research questions.

Summary of Participants

5 female and 4 male participants from the Pennsylvania State University participated in two separate focus groups for this research through a moderated group video meeting. These participants were carefully considered and selected to ensure diversity as it pertains to sport and age. A general rule, suggests by scholars, is to strive for some homogeneity in order to ensure that the participants will be comfortable speaking with each other (Katz, 2001). The researcher “must aim to ensure that they consider which situation will best ensure an environment in which respondents feel at ease” (p. 7). If participants are familiar with each other outside of the research situation, Katz (2001) explains, this will, in some cases, facilitate more open responses and, in other cases, may close off a dialogue. Thus, it is important to consider the dynamic when conducting conversations amongst the group.

Purposive sampling methods were used from a pool of volunteers to determine participants for the focus group. 5 females and 4 males were selected, and 8 sports were
represented within the focus group, including: men’s and women’s swimming, women’s gymnastics, women’s soccer, men’s lacrosse, men’s volleyball, women’s tennis, and women’s ice hockey. Using primary and secondary contacts, I reached out to collegiate athletes through email and text, asking for volunteers. Furthermore, I utilized my personal network with my social media accounts and posted graphics about my study and need for participants. From those volunteers who contacted me, I then selected the individuals I believed would bring a diverse range of insights.

**Focus Group Procedure**

Each of the focus groups for this study lasted approximately 50 minutes and was conducted over a video conference call software Zoom. An outline of the focus group protocols and prompted questions can be found in Appendix B. Acting as researcher, moderator, and peer, I began with a brief introduction of myself, my topic of research, and an overview of how the focus group will be run. I then had participants also introduce themselves briefly by stating their name, sport, and year. This allows for participants to feel more comfortable talking to one another and myself. The purpose of these introductions is to create a “safe space” atmosphere for everyone involved.

Next, I begun the first section of focus group discussion, which involves the presentation of various images of athletes used in advertisements and other publications. 4 images were presented to the group one at a time. 2 of these involved female athletes and 2 male athletes. Of these images included magazine covers and apparel-branded advertisements. Upon presenting each image, as seen in Appendix B, I asked the focus group the following questions in between
discussion: “What is your initial reaction?” “What message does it convey?” and “How do you personally feel after viewing this?”

The next portion of the focus groups was directed at the participants’ personal opinions and feelings surrounding each of their particular sport, gender, appearance, and body image. As moderator, I initiated questions and conversation surrounding these topics to understand any differences/ similarities amongst the individuals, sports, and genders. This gave insight into the role uniforms and stereotypes play both internally on a team and from the media’s perspective. The purpose of steering towards a similar topic of conversation for both focus groups is to have a comparison between the male and female athletes.

**Focus Group Analysis**

Analysis of both focus groups involved reviewing details and overarching themes of both conversations. Both focus groups were recorded and then transcribed into full text. Next, I analyzed each of the texts and searched for any themes among the conversations that could help answer my three research questions. Quotes from participants were pulled from the transcripts and videos to further prove the findings. These included any conversations about body image, responses to the media, and specific concerns and differences between sports. After deciding on themes for each focus group, I then analyzed if any similarities or differences of themes were found between the two groups. This helped determine what type of conversation and feelings exist among student athletes at a Division 1 school and whether or not a gender difference exists.
Chapter 4: Results

As explained in the methods section, I presented a series of four images to both focus groups in order to receive an honest reaction to different portrayals of athletes in sports media. Two of these images involved one female and one male athlete in a more posed stance, wearing minimal clothes, and the other two images showed male and female athletes in action shots of their particular sport. After the presentation of these images was an open discussion surrounding the participants’ personal experiences in athletics and with sports media. Combined with quantitative data from the survey, the results of the focus groups adequately answered my research question pertaining to sports media and collegiate athletes.

RQ1: How do college athletes make meaning of sports media?

As the data analysis from the survey showed, the majority of collegiate athletes, both male and female, reported consuming social media the most often, followed by television (live, cable, streaming, network, etc.) and then magazines.
As Table 1 shows, when asked how often they consume the specific types of media, 87.5% of participants claimed to consume social media daily, 57.8% reported consuming television occasionally or often, and 71.4% said they never consume media from magazines. This data proves that collegiate athletes consume media regularly, and the majority of sports media that they see comes from these three categories. The survey proved that media is an active
part of collegiate athletes’ daily lives, and the focus groups brought greater insight around how their media consumption may affect them mentally and emotionally.

**Theme 1: Collegiate athletes desire active images versus passive images.**

One major key finding from both focus groups was the fact that both male and female collegiate athletes prefer to see images of these athletes doing their sport in their uniform rather than posing for a photograph.

The first image was a magazine cover of professional skier Lindsey Vonn as seen in Figure 1. This 2010 Daily News issue depicts the athlete in a revealing bikini and winter hat, with the caption “Go for Gold: U.S. skier Vonn looking like a winner already.” The women’s focus group found this cover to be rather unnecessary and comical. The participants agreed with feeling very discouraged by this image and the way the athlete is portrayed. One participant stated, “Lindsey Vonn is a phenomenal athlete, and it is disgusting how they are portraying her, in a bikini for no reason.” She continued her frustration by claiming, “sometimes the only way
you can get people to pay attention to female athletics is if you put them in a bikini.” This led the group into a discussion on the audience that they thought this magazine was aiming towards. One participant stated, “it looks like it’s for the male audience instead of just like athletes,” due to her attire and pose. The participants in this group agreed that a male audience would not have as many problems with this magazine cover as women do. The women’s focus group also discussed body types and the issues that may arise from this magazine cover. They agreed that Vonn’s skinnier physique is being oversexualized, and this may cause some athletes to feel like they need to have this body type to be a great athlete. One participant stated how she knows good athletes come in different shapes and sizes, but images like this “wouldn’t be good for younger athletes who are not more aware of that fact.” Overall, the women’s focus group came to an agreement that the magazine cover shown in Figure 1 is a problematic and unnecessary portrayal of a highly successful female athlete, and this is very disheartening to them.

The men’s focus group had a similar reaction to the image presented in Figure 1 as the women’s focus group. Initial comments were made by the fact that no one was aware of who the woman on the cover was at first glance. “she’s a skier, so she doesn’t compete in a bathing suit, but they chose to put her in a bathing suit, which threw me off,” one participant stated. The majority of this focus group’s conversation around this image involved similar feelings of disappointment that an elite athlete is showcased in a sexual manner rather than doing her sport. Another discussion around this image was with their concern of the particular magazine Daily News. “Magazines like Sports Illustrated have more of a purpose to showcase athletes’ bodies that they worked for and are proud of, while a magazine like this is explicitly sexualizing her for no reason,” one participant stated.
When presented the 2005 magazine cover shown in Figure 2 of college football player Reggie McNeal shirtless and holding a football, both the women’s and men’s focus groups found the sexualization and posing to be unnecessary. Similar to the men’s reaction to the Lindsey Vonn cover, the women’s focus group agreed that they did not even notice that the athlete was a football player at first until they saw the slightly-covered football in the picture. They were first amused by the fact that the athlete was clearly covered in oil to look like sweat even though he was just standing there flexing. One participant in the women’s focus group stated that while she was not personally offended or effected by the image, “young kids who dream of playing college football may feel as though they have his specific body type that he does, which could seem very unattainable to some.” The women’s focus group then discussed the difference between the Figure 2 image from the Figure 1 image by the fact that the athlete at least had some of his athletic uniform on. “At least he has pants on and a football in his hand, compared to the Lindsey Vonn image, where she was stripped of her sport,” one participant stated. This discussion
showed immense frustration with sports media’s sexualization of athletes, especially for female athletes who they believe to suffer greater from it.

The men’s focus group had tremendously similar discussions as the women’s group around the Figure 2 image. They actually found the cover to be humorous because of how “unnecessary” they felt the shirtless aspect of the photo to be. “No one plays football without a shirt on,” one participant said. Another participant in the men’s focus group also brought up a comparison to the Lindsey Vonn cover in Figure 1, saying “This cover of McNeal seems more athletic since you know right away, he is an athlete because he is somewhat in his gear.” Thus, the closer the athlete is to showcasing their sport, the better the image is in the eyes of both male and female college athletes.

Both images shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4 were received and discussed in similar tones between both focus groups. Figure 3 is a Nike advertisement with Olympic gymnast Simone Biles mid-flip on the balance beam with the words “Do things history could only dream of” across the image. Both the women’s and men’s focus groups commented on how strong and athletic she looks. The women claimed to feel empowered and proud after viewing this advertisement and the men claimed to feel inspired and excited. “She looks extremely athletic,
and she’s doing something that a lot of people can’t do,” stated one participant in the men’s focus group. The women’s conversation turned to the aspect of Simone Biles’ muscle definition in the image chosen for this advertisement. One participant said, “I think her muscles look good, and sometimes media hesitates to show women’s muscles, so I am really happy about this image.” This is very different from the last female athlete image shown of Lindsey Vonn, and the reactions were tremendously more positive in both initial thoughts and personal emotion.

Also a Nike advertisement, Figure 4 shows professional basketball player LeBron James in the arena, shooting a basketball with the words “You will notice. You will scream. Because you want it to happen. Will to win.” The reactions in both focus groups were very similar to Figure 3 where the groups felt happy and inspired. The conversations circulated around the aspect of athletes being “in their element” in the media and how much more of an effect this portrayal has on other athletes as opposed to posed images. The men’s focus group was very adamant about this topic, and one participant stated “When I look at this [image], I want to be intense in my sport.” Comparing the picture of LeBron to the previous image seen in Figure 2, he
continued, “And I guess looking at like the other guy, I’m just kinda like, huh, wonder if my body looks like that.” Another participant in the men’s group said that this image made him proud to be an athlete and “I’d rather compare myself that someone who’s doing what they love and in their element as opposed to someone who’s just standing in front of the camera.” Thus, when the media showcases athletes being athletes, this has a very positive effect of other athlete consumers’ psyche and attitude.

RQ2: To what degree of influence does sports media have on collegiate athletes and their body image?

Theme 1: Uniforms have a large degree of influence on college athletes’ body image and self-consciousness.

After running an ANOVA test between sport group and body image satisfaction level (Q1 and Q7 in Appendix A), the data showed no significant difference in the means of the sports’ body satisfaction level. Very little difference in means was found between the two variables, inferred by the p-value of .407. However, when participants were asked to rank how important their physical image is to them in their sport (Q10 in Appendix A), the results indicated that sports that have uniforms with the most amount of body coverage (Group 3) find little to no importance in their physical image, as opposed to sports with little (Group 1) to moderate (Group 2) coverage who placed greater importance on their physical appearance. As shown in Table 2, the mean of body-image importance level was significantly greater for Groups 1 (3.46) and 2 (3.16) than it was for Group 3 (2.33), and the p-value was .000.
Table 2. Comparison of sport and physical image importance among survey participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sport and Body Image Importance</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sum of Squares</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>20.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>160.928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>180.994</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This indicates that uniform and body coverage have a great influence on athletes’ value of physical appearance in their sport.

The second half of both focus groups revolved more around the participants’ personal experience with media and body image within their sports, as shown in Appendix B. These conversations directly correlated with the results of the survey data analysis, indicating that uniforms have a large degree of influence on college athletes’ body image and self-consciousness. Female or male, every sport has its own uniform, whether that involved pads, helmets, or a single piece of skin-tight fabric. With this in mind, uniforms are an aesthetic that blends into the portrayals and stereotypes produced by sports media.

When prompted a question regarding body image as it pertains to specific sports, those who wear less articles of clothing feel more pressured to look “right” for the media. For example, both men and women swimmers discussed the internal conflicts they go through when competing in swimming suits. “Our bodies are out there,” one female focus group participant claimed, as she describes how little coverage suits have on bodies. The same goes for the male swimmers, as these two individuals in the focus group described the effect “speedos” have on the media and personal image concerns. One male focus group participant made the claim: “speedos
are something a lot of people are uncomfortable seeing sometimes, even though we are so used to it, so I feel like in a lot of ways the media avoid showing it.” This belief of making other people uncomfortable by simply earing your sport’s uniform has an impact on mental preparation and performance. The other male swimmer in this group added to this conversation by describing what goes through his head as he stands behind the swimming blocks before his big races. “I flex every muscle I can because you never know how many cameras are going to be on you, and I want to make sure I get a good enough picture and my body looks good for others to see,” he explains. Male swimmers, along with many other athletes, are very physically vulnerable during competition, as the majority of their body and muscles are made visible with their suits. This individual continued by explaining that he eventually learned it is better for his performance to remain relaxed and loose before a race as opposed to the tense state he usually put himself in to look “good” for the cameras. This is an example of a body-image conflict that many athletes endure in their sport, due to a combination of media awareness and uniform.

As opposed to sports like swimming and gymnastics, sports whose uniforms involve more skin coverage like lacrosse, soccer, and hockey feel tremendously less pressure to conform to look a certain way to impress the media. A female ice-hockey player in the women’s focus group said, “we wear a lot of pads and our bodies don’t really show through, so most media showing women’s hockey is not sexualized as much as other sports.” This individual also explained how women’s ice-hockey is pretty much non-existent in the eyes of the media, which could be for this reason. If the media is not given “sexy” uniforms to display, then that is when putting athletes in random bikinis takes place. A male lacrosse player in the men’s focus group stated, “you never can tell what’s under that equipment.” He goes on to explain that the only part of their bodies that really show, their legs, are the main body-conscious concern among lacrosse
players. “We call one kid on our team ‘chicken legs’ just because his legs are noticeably skinnier than the rest of us, so I guess that makes us all conscious of what people watching think of our legs too,” he shared. While it is difficult for the media or public to blatantly pick apart athlete’s bodies who have a lot covered in their sport, some athletes still feel some pressure in maintaining a specific image.

**Theme 2: Stereotype Awareness**

A third key finding within these focus groups is that collegiate athletes are very aware of stereotypes the media has initiated on athletes’ body types. Almost every athlete in both focus groups conversed about how stereotypes play into their life, and how sports media feeds into these groupings. Each sport has its “typical body,” according to both groups. Whether it is the lanky volleyball player, broad-shouldered swimmer, tiny gymnast, or “manly” ice-hockey player, the focus groups came to an agreement that the media’s traditional coverage of stereotypes inaccurately represents the diversity of bodies that they encounter in their sport.

A male volleyball player in the men’s focus group discussed how some of the best players he knows are not what the media portrays to be the “typical” volleyball body type. “If they’re not that tall and maybe a little on the chubby side, outsiders immediately think like, ‘Oh, like that kid can’t be any good,’ and it's definitely not always the case,” he said. The other individuals in the group agreed with this and had similar explanations. One male swimmer added, “Despite what you see in sports magazines, the people who are the fastest aren’t always the most jacked, and that's how it is in a lot of races.” The collegiate athletes in both groups felt very strongly about this, as they described personal experiences with various body types. Talent and body type have little to no correlation, and the individuals in these focus groups agreed that the media still has progress to be made to diversify the athletes they showcase.
For some sports, icons or individuals who are exceptionally good at their sport are often modeled and sought to replicate. For example, Shawn Johnson and Nastia Liukin were both highly successful and talked about gymnasts in the 2008 Olympic Games. Both girls had polar-opposite body types. When Liukin ended up winning the all-around gold-medal title, the gymnastics community turned to her slender body type to aspire to look like, according to one individual in the women’s focus group. “You would hear things about Shawn, about how she could never win because she just doesn’t look the part, and this was really traumatic for those whose bodies looked more like Shawn’s,” she said. She shared her personal journey and battle with eating disorders, claiming that it was normal to always see comments on gymnasts’ bodies growing up in the sport. “Stuff like eating disorders were common and accepted. I don’t think it’s as accepted now,” she said. Often times, sports communities and individual athletes use the stars of the media to look up to in their sport and try to do everything in their power to conform to one specific look.

With the rise of extremely talented and successful gymnast Simone Biles, the media and athletic community has become more accepting of different bodies, according to this individual. Pure talent is something traditional media norms cannot ignore. “Now we see Simone Biles who has the opposite body as Nastia, doing incredible things, and I think the sports media and gymnastics industry sees that now and sees there is not a specific body type to be good,” she claimed. Similar claims came from a women’s tennis player, who described the Williams sisters as great representations of diverse body types in tennis.

Furthermore, athletes are very aware of the gender stereotypes that exists among different sports. “I think people expect us to be like these girly girls because we wear skirts and dresses, but like a lot of us are not,” a female tennis player participant said. This is an example of the
traditional stereotype of “girly” sports and “manly” sports. One female participant who plays collegiate ice-hockey added some insight by saying that although women who play hockey are not sexualized as much by the media, she does run into criticism and stereotypes based on being an athlete in a “traditionally masculine” sport. The individual said, “it’s kind of like a rough sport, and a lot of people aren’t on the same page of what it should be, that like hockey is for everybody.” The group agreed with her that certain women’s sports like hockey and basketball are not sexualized as much because they do not wear traditionally feminine uniforms, but they also agreed that not being sexualized automatically means they are more masculine in the eyes of the media and the public.

The male focus group participants had a considerable number of comments to add on the topic of gendered stereotypes. “If a girl looks so called manly it can be like a bad in an advertiser’s eyes, which is why they put female athletes in bikinis for no reason,” one participant stated. The group came to an agreement that female athletes are often examined and scrutinized more when it comes to media coverage. When it comes to the male and female anatomy, it is not only important but very normal for female athletes to have a lot of muscle, just like the male athletes. However, sometimes performance goals and aesthetic standards bring challenges for female athletes. One male focus group participant stated, “they want men to look big and muscular, but for a girl, if you look big and muscular, like it’s almost a bad thing, even though you should think it’s a good thing because that would mean that they’re caring about their bodies and they want to be successful.” Here, the conflict and pressure to balance athletic performance and physical appeal is discussed. Essentially, the focus group participants feel as if female athletes are presented with a harsher burden to look a certain way for the media, but they do believe progress has been made.
Female athletes are showcased in a different way than male athletes, as discussed in the literature review, and all genders are very aware of this. “They definitely have standards that are way different than ours,” one male participant stated. He described the rhetoric used to talk about female and male athletes for example. “Beast” is used more with male athletes, whereas the words used while talking about female athletes is often referring to her appearance, another participant added. One of the male focus group participants even admitted to experiencing this problematic rhetoric. He stated, “I can almost guarantee you that when I’m sitting with my buddies, in the first five minutes of watching a female sporting event, I’m going to hear something about the way the women look.” Thus, it is an extremely normalized way to watch women’s sports to a number of male viewers, even if they are athletes themselves.

RQ3: How significant of a difference exists between male and female athletes’ body image?

After conducting the two focus groups, I found female athletes to have a higher concern for their body image than male athletes. 4 out of the 5 participants in the female focus group had confirmed their struggles with eating disorders as a result of body image concerns at some point in their athletic career, while none of the male athletes had experienced any. These individual female participants claimed to have felt most pressured mainly by factors within their team or sport, as opposed to strictly deriving from sports media. The male athletes in this study do struggle with body image as well but not to the degree of letting it affect their health or daily lives.

The results and analysis of the survey showed great significance in the differences between male and female athletes when it comes to physical appearance. On a 1-5 scale from
very unfit to very fit, no significant difference in the two genders was found, due to the p-value being very large (.892).

Table 3. Comparison of female and male physical fitness and attractiveness ranking among survey participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>df</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical Fitness</strong> Ranking</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>-1.480*</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical Attractiveness Ranking</strong></td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>-2.960**</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. * = p > 0.05 (insignificant), ** = p ≤ 0.05 (significant)

As shown in Table 3, the mean for women was 4.14 for females and 4.33 for males, meaning the majority of athletes considered themselves to be somewhat fit. The standard deviation for females’ physical fitness ranking was .707 and for males, it was .535. However, when asked to rank their physical appearance, males found themselves to be significantly more attractive than females. Table 3 shows that the mean for males (3.81) was 40% higher than females (3.41). The standard deviation for females’ physical attractiveness ranking was .765, and for males, it was .467. With both means being below 4.0, the majority of both genders considered themselves to be average in terms of physical attractiveness.

When it comes to the importance of their image in their sport (Q10 in Appendix A), both genders placed moderate importance on it, as shown in Table 4. The mean for females was 3.25 with a standard deviation of 1.078, and for males, it was 3.39 with a standard deviation of 1.128.
Table 4. Comparing female and male image importance and appearance alteration tendencies among survey participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Image Importance Ranking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.690*</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tendency to Alter Appearance for the Media</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>3.780**</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. * = \( p > 0.05 \) (insignificant), ** = \( p \leq 0.05 \) (significant)*

No significant variance was found between the two genders here. However, when asked the question “Have you ever altered your appearance in your sport due to awareness that the media would be covering you? (Q11 in Appendix A),” female athletes reported doing this more 94% more often than male athletes, as shown in Table 4. Yet, with the means of both genders being below 3.0, the likelihood of either of them consistently altering their appearance is low. The standard deviation was 1.342 for females and 1.190 for males.

Finally, the survey data analysis proved a major significance between male and female athletes’ body image satisfaction levels.

Table 5. Comparing female and male body-image satisfaction level among survey participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Body Image Satisfaction Level</td>
<td>5.46</td>
<td>7.60</td>
<td>-5.558*</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. * = \( p > 0.05 \) (insignificant), ** = \( p \leq 0.05 \) (significant)*

As shown in Table 5, when asked to rank their body image satisfaction level on a scale of 1-10 (Q7 in Appendix A), male athletes reported 2.05 levels higher than female athletes. With the mean of female athletes’ body satisfaction level being 5.64 with a standard deviation of 2.057, this indicates that female athletes are somewhat content with their bodies but not very satisfied,
as opposed to male athletes who are somewhat satisfied to very satisfied with their bodies, having a mean of 7.60 and standard deviation of 1.470.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In conclusion, women’s athletics has progressed as decades go on and so has the sports media industry. However, gender inequality still remains, and it is apparent to athlete consumers. Sports fans and people of all genders have become more open and vocal about advocating for equality, especially in the media. Within college athletics specifically, female athletes and fans have begun to speak out on the many instances of clear gender discrimination within the NCAA. A widely popular nonprofit organization that advocates for the empowerment of collegiate student-athletes called The Hidden Opponent came out with a call to action towards the NCAA in an Instagram post, in response to the recent disparities uncovered at the 2021 “March Madness” Basketball Tournament. The post reads, “The NCAA claims to be a champion of gender equality, yet has disrespected its own female champions” (The Hidden Opponent, 2021). It continues, “Instead of making excuses for these injustices, please take accountability and move towards actionable change.” These changes include providing the same resources to men and women, promoting and marketing women’s sports equally, holding institutions and individuals accountable, and changing the language of gendered sports that assume “men’s” to be the default. As a female collegiate athlete, I can testify that progress has been made, but it is safe to say that gender discrimination in sports and media still exists at the collegiate level.

As concluded from the focus groups in my study, oversexualization of female athletes that was analyzed in past studies (Murray, 2018) still remains, and this is very obvious in the eyes of collegiate athletes. Significantly similar to the 2010 study on female athletes (Harrison &
Secarea, 2010), when the athlete in the media was depicted in a sexualized manner, participants felt less impressed by her athletic abilities. Collegiate athletes, both female and male, concluded that they prefer to see the athlete actively participating in their sport when photographed for the media. The focus groups’ reactions and discussions around this topic also confirmed the findings in the 2009 study on collegiate athletes’ reactions to depictions of women in sports media (Daniels, 2009). This study found that images of women that focus on their athleticism motivate and encourage women on their physical abilities rather than how their bodies look. Similarly, the female athletes in my focus group confirmed this finding, as they used words such as “empowering” and “inspirational.” Further significance that was found in my study compared to the others was the fact that male collegiate athletes had the same reaction as the female athletes to these images. Thus, both genders feel unmoved by oversexualized images of female and male athletes and highly motivated by action-oriented images. Hence, the “male audience” that was previously discussed in a 2013 study indicating ESPN and other sports media organizations’ marketing tactics for gender representation can be debunked (Cooky et al., 2013). Both college-aged audiences, male and female, prefer to see all genders represented the same and less sexualized than previous media coverage of athletes has been.

Furthermore, despite what past media reporters and workers have said and displayed about specific body types in sports, collegiate athletes all agree that body type does not correlate to athletic talent and abilities at all. For example, the reporter who described Serena Williams as being too large to be mobile enough for tennis (Norman, 2006) is not only extremely discriminatory and immoral, but claims like this are absolutely false in the opinions of the college athletes in my focus groups. Also, traditionally masculine and feminine “sports” stereotypes still remain since the 1986 study (Matteo, 1986), and the focus groups confirmed this
based on their discussions. For example, female ice-hockey players in my focus group feel the reason for lack of coverage in their sport is due to the fact that ice-hockey is deemed as a “man’s” sport. Likewise, the male athlete focus group agreed with this claim, stating that women are wrongly perceived as “too manly” to be good enough for certain sports media outlets. In conclusion, the media has little to no impact on college athletes’ perceptions of other athletes, and they are very aware of the false claims and portrayals of genders in sports media. Based on primary and secondary experiences and claims, athletes come in all different shapes and sizes, and their body type does not determine their talent level or skillset.

One significant difference and finding in my study compared to other studies was the fact that little to no difference in body-image satisfaction was found in collegiate athletes who viewed oversexualized and over glamorized images of other athletes. Many previous studies found that the consumption of oversexualized female athletes in the media led collegiate female athletes to feel less physically adequate about their bodies and left them discouraged and depressed (Thomsen et al., 2004) (Daniels, 2009). However, the female participants in my focus group made it very clear that they did not feel any less adequate about themselves after seeing such images. They felt rather numb to the examples, and claimed that this was because of how “normal” it is for them to see women and female athletes portrayed sexually in the media. The same can be said for the male participants in my focus group, who found the more objectifying images of male athletes to be rather comical. Thus, sports media consumed by Division 1 collegiate athletes today has little to no effect on their body image satisfaction.

It is reasonable to conclude that while sports media does amplify certain psychological attributes of collegiate athletes, the main influencers of self-image come from other factors within the sport, such as uniforms, coaches, and peers. The level of body consciousness and self-
depreciating attitudes depends on the sport and type of uniform worn. For example, the results of my focus group and survey data confirm the results of the 2013 study on female collegiate athletes and body image, concluding that athletes in sports with less body coverage (e.g., gymnastics, swimming, and ballet) at Division I schools were more affected by body image concerns than athletes in fully-clothes and covered sports (Varnes et al., 2013). Both male and female focus groups discussed this, noting that they are very conscious of their bodies when put on a display by the media, particularly for this category of sports. This also correlates directly to the results of my survey, in which the mean of “physical appearance importance level” was significantly greater for the group categorized as having uniforms with less body coverage.

Effects of serious body-image concerns and issues has led athletes to develop harmful eating disorders, and this was expressed in both my secondary and primary research. Research indicated that women who are dancers, models, and athletes are among those possibly at high-risk for developing eating disorders (Borgen and Corbin, 1987). The female gymnast in my focus group confirmed this claim, as she discussed how common eating disorders are among the gymnastics community. “Pretty much from pre-teen years and on throughout college, you have teammates with eating disorders, and it really just gets more severe the more elite you get,” she said. While she did remark her hope for the future, as many coaches and media outlets are getting better at addressing this issue, it is rather alarming how normalized these serious health issues are to certain sports like gymnastics. Especially seen in female athletes, eating disorders are not something to be ignored, and the media has the power to greatly alter the causes of such difficulties. In the past, sports media had not addressed its display of bodies and its effect on athletes’ psyche, but participants in my focus groups testified that it is improving with time.
Finally, my primary research findings have significantly proven that college athletes, especially females, have a relatively low perception of their physical appearance. Older studies that involved collegiate female athletes reported that athletes were more satisfied with their body shape than non-athletes (Robinson & Ferraro, 2004), while more current studies reported that Division I female athletes were significantly more dissatisfied with their body shape than non-athletes (Hoag, 2012). This goes hand-in-hand with the progression of media exposure and growth in the past decade, and my primary research correlates with this inference. The results of my survey showed a significant difference between male and female athletes’ self-image, and the females ranked their “attractiveness” much lower than the males. This shows that female athletes have a much lower view of themselves and their appearance, and this could be due to the discrepancies between male and female athletes in the media. Also significant to conclude is the fact that both male and female athletes as a whole do not have a very strong body satisfaction or appreciation for their physical appearance. This is somewhat surprising, assuming that collegiate athletes are most often in peak shape from their constant training regimen. Athleticism is not necessarily correlated to attractiveness, according to the participants in my survey, as both males and females described themselves as more fit than attractive.

Limitations and Future Research

Various limitations and sources of error were present within my study to determine the results of the entire student-athlete population. First, a large portion of my survey participants came from the same schools. For example, 53% of participants were from the Pennsylvania State University and 20.8% were from the Ohio State University. Thus, equal representation of every school was not adequate. Secondly, while 18 different sports were represented in my survey, the
majority of those participants were swimmers, due to my personal network and means of recruiting. This means that an unequal representation of sports was taken into account as a source of error. Thirdly, with 67.5% survey participants identifying as females and 32.5% as males, gender representation may be skewed. Finally, my focus groups consisted of student-athletes from the same college, the Pennsylvania State University. Due to their familiarity with each other and share of school resources, the participants in both focus groups may have presented discussion topics only relevant to Penn State athletes.

While my study focused on collegiate athletes, future research could be done on a wider scale by studying how these findings effect athletes of all levels. Specifically, further research on younger generations of athletes could be very beneficial in determining how sports media effects athletes early-on in their careers. Technology is rapidly growing amongst younger generations, which makes them equally as susceptible to media consumption as any other age group (Silver, 2020). Thus, further studies to understand the correlation between age, sports media consumption, and psychological effects would be useful. Athletics is not only meant to be enjoyable for athletes, but it should teach many life lessons like the benefits of resilience, dedication, and hard work. Sports media is meant to showcase athletes in a positive light, reinforcing the positive results of playing a sport. The relationship between sports, media, and athletes has the potential to be extremely powerful and mutually beneficial, so it is important that all media professionals are aware of their influence and use it skillfully.

Conclusion

I can confidently say that being a student-athlete has been one of the most enjoyable and rewarding experiences of my life. From the athletic gear I have received to the places I have
gotten to travel to and people I have been lucky to meet, I am by no means downplaying the
gracious benefits that I have gotten from competing for a Division 1 program. My teammates,
friends, and I have all been featured in articles, social media posts, magazines, and television.
However, I have also experienced the negative implications of unequal gender representation
both within athletics and sports media. Putting on a bathing suit for competition is effortless, but
putting on a bathing suit to stand in front of a camera can be terrifying. My research and study
have made me understand the implications for this psychological warfare and why I am not
alone. Athletes in every sport, both male and female, experience body-image concerns at some
degree. Female athletes seem to experience this more often, which is why I feel very strongly
about women’s equality, especially in sports and media representation. As a scholar and future
professional of Advertising and Public Relations, I believe I can do my part to provoke change in
the world of sports media. While some may think of advertising as a business, I think of it as an
inspiration to the public and for the public, advocating for equality, abundance, and
transformation.
Appendix A: Survey

Intro: You are being invited to volunteer to participate in research for an undergraduate thesis project for the Schreyer Honors College at the Pennsylvania State University. The purpose of this study is to analyze and understand the correlation between media coverage, gender, and body image as it pertains to college athletes. I am looking for participants who are 18 years or older and are varsity athletes at the collegiate level.

Your participation is voluntary and you may decide to stop at any time. The confidentiality of your electronic data will be maintained as required by applicable law and to the degree permitted by the technology used. If you have any questions or concerns, you should contact Carly Hart at cch32@psu.edu.

Q1: What collegiate sport do you participate in?
   (free response)

Q2: What is your gender identification?
   • Male
   • Female
   • Different identity (free response)
   • Prefer not to say

Q3: What is the name of the college you attend and represent?
   (free response)

Q4: Please mark how often you consume the following media:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Everyday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV (cable, live,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>streaming, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q5: Have you ever been featured in sports media? If so, please select all media that apply.
   • TV
   • Magazine
   • Social Media
   • Online Article
   • Other (free response)
   • N/A
Q6: How often do you encounter your sport in media?
- Never
- Sometimes
- Occasionally
- Often
- Everyday

Q7: On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very dissatisfied and 10 being very satisfied, how would you rank your body-image satisfaction level?

Q8: How would you describe your physical body?
- Very unfit
- Somewhat unfit
- Average
- Somewhat fit
- Very fit

Q9: How would you describe your physical body appearance?
- Very unattractive
- Somewhat unattractive
- Average
- Somewhat attractive
- Very attractive

Q10: How important is your physical image as it pertains to your sport?
- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Moderately important
- Very important
- Extremely important

Q11: Have you ever altered your appearance in your sport due to awareness that the media would be covering you?
- Definitely not
- Probably not
- Might or might not
- Probably yes
- Definitely yes
Q12: Do you feel your sport is represented accurately in the media you consume?
   • Yes
   • No

Q13: If you have anything else you would like to share about your experience with sports media or your gender in sports media, please share.
   (free response)

Appendix B: Focus Group Outline

1. Introductions

2. Introduce research questions
   a. RQ1: How do college athletes make meaning of sports media?
   b. RQ2: What degree of influence does sports media have on collegiate athletes’ body image?
   c. RQ3: How significant of a difference exists between male and female athletes’ body image?

3. Explanation of focus groups

4. Display of sports media pictures
   a. What is your initial reaction?
   b. What message does it convey?
   c. How do you personally feel after viewing this?
      i. (empowered, proud, self-conscious, discouraged, etc.)

5. Sport discussion prompts
   a. How would you describe the media’s representation of your sport?
   b. Do you feel like you get more or less camera action or coverage?

6. Gender discussion prompts
   a. Do you think females are represented differently in sports media than males, and how so? (vice versa per group)

7. Appearance discussion prompts
   a. Do you think your sport is more or less pressured to have a physical appeal?
      i. Does the media play a role in this?
      ii. Do uniforms play a part in this?

8. Body image discussion prompts
a. Have you or someone you know felt pressured in your sport to maintain a particular image?
   i. Where does this pressure come from?
b. Has the media influenced the way you look and feel about yourself in your sport?

9. Any additional comments

10. Conclusion and thanks


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ACADEMIC VITA

CARLY HART
Student-Athlete

PROFILE
Seeking a post-grad, entry-level position in communications and media. Interests include: copywriting, editing, publicity, social media, marketing, and creative services.

EDUCATION
PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE
2017 - 2021
• Major: Advertising & Public Relations
• Minor: English

VARSITY SWIMMING & DIVING
2017 - present
• CSCAA Scholar All-America Honorable Mention
• Big Ten Distinguished Scholar
• U.S. Olympic Trials Qualifier
• Penn State record holder
• Big Ten top 10 finisher

TECH SKILLS
ADOBE CREATIVE SUITE
MICROSOFT OFFICE
SOCIAL MEDIA
CREATIVE WRITING
EDITING
GRAPHIC DESIGN
PUBLIC RELATIONS
DIGITAL MARKETING
MEDIA PLANNING

SOFTWARE SKILLS
ORGANIZATION
TIME MANAGEMENT
LEADERSHIP
STORYTELLING
SELF-MOTIVATION
COMMUNICATION
OUTGOING
ENTHUSIASTIC
ADAPTABILITY
QUICK-TO-LEARN
SENSE OF HUMOR

EXPERIENCE
SWIMMING WORLD MAGAZINE
Social Media & Marketing Intern | September 2020 - Present
• Create and coordinate new content on social media
• Monitor and manage social media accounts of up-to 136K followers on each 11 platforms

ARIBELLA EVENTS
Social Media & Design Intern | February 2020 - September 2020
• Create and design graphics for WeddingPlanningDIY.com Website
• Create and design graphics for Aribella Events Instagram accounts
• Create monthly media plans for Instagram and Pinterest accounts

STUDENT-ATHLETE ADVISORY BOARD (SAAB)
Secretary | 2018 - Present
• Create, edit, and compose content for monthly newsletter
• Produce agenda for every executive board and committee meeting
• Manage and create graphics for SAAB social media & scoreboards

• Analyze media trends user interaction with the magazine
• Contact and grow brand relationships with national swimming employees and professional athletes

• Write and plan captions for blog posts and social media
• Web design for WeddingPlanningDIY.com
• Create and design graphics for Aribella Events clients

• Oversee and organize the Communications Committee
• Communicate with PA community about PSU Athletics
• Plan and organize events with over 800 student-athletes and staff