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Jessica Shaller

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A content analysis of *Sports Illustrated* covers determined there is an under representation of female athletes in print media. Also, because of the sexualized manner in which female athletes are portrayed, they suffer from inadequate depiction. Women in sports suffer from insufficient media coverage, not only in regards to their lack of presence in major sports publications but also in their stereotypical depiction in print journalism.

Introduction
Media practitioners have the ability to shape the beliefs of their audience members. By determining the way viewers see certain issues, stories and newsworthy individuals, journalists affect the way their audience thinks. Framing is a way for professionals to skew ideas so the public interprets one idea as being more important or more acceptable than another (Palmeri 2001).

One aspect of journalism where media framing is a prominent process is print media. It is in print media that there is a lack of portrayal of female athletes. Moreover, when a woman is depicted in a sports publication, more often than not, she is in a non-active or socially acceptable image (Knight & Giuliano 2001).

Despite the ever-growing number of female athletes’ opportunities and presence in today’s society, the mass media has yet to catch up with the times. For the last 30 years, there has been a rapid increase in the participation levels of young girls and women in sports. This has not been successfully portrayed in journalism. Because women have sprung into the mainstream sports world at a high rate in the last decade, one would assume they would receive an increased amount of media coverage. The media chooses to depict female athletes in a differing manner than their male counterparts; therefore women suffer the consequences of being forced into socially acceptable traditions.

Theories
Media Framing - The concept of media framing exhibits a reporter and editor’s choice as to what aspects of a story in the news are emphasized the most, what characteristics of individuals are highlighted. It should not be thought of as a way for reporters and editors to be subjective in their sharing of news, but rather a means for them to stress certain aspects over others — ones they believe are either more important to the desired audience, or more appealing (Palmeri 2001).

For a journalist to frame an issue or individual, it means he or she puts that issue or individual into a certain light and designs the presentation so the reader interprets it the way the practitioner feels it needs to be read. Some see the effects of framing as journalists manipulating the ideas of the audiences. Framing results in a doctored view of an issue, but these individuals in the journalism field are trained to develop ideas in a manner which they should have a positive effect. This is not always the case, but it is the goal of media professionals (Palmeri 2001). In regard to sports, journalists tend to emphasize masculinity over femininity, and, because of this, framing is used to explain why so few women are depicted in the media.

Critical Studies - Critical studies is another appropriate theory to relate to the issue at hand. Communication-based critical theory is concerned with how media and messages are connected to power relations in society. In regards to the portrayal of women in the media, one must examine the idea of male hegemony – the process of domination by the males in society. Mass media tend to reflect dominant ideologies, such as the dominance of males in the world of sport. Other ideas are considered only from that perspective and as a result become marginalized. These ideas are a reflection of the feminine studies segment of critical theory – that social structure mirrors male hegemonic beliefs (Littlejohn 1999).

Literature Review
Because the public depends on the media as a primary news source, opinions are easily skewed. The way the media portrays female athletes is therefore the way society views these women. According to results from one study, “Sports journalism in the print media has been slow to react to social changes” (Salwen & Wood 1994). These social changes include the increase in
popularity of as well as participation in women’s sports.

Since the passing of Title IX in 1972, which “requires all federally funded programs, including athletics, to provide equal treatment and opportunity for participation for men and women” (Knight & Giuliano 2001), much has changed in the world of female athletics. With increased numbers in activity, one would assume an increase in media coverage, but women are nowhere near as equally portrayed in the media as their male counterparts. Although women’s participation in professional, Olympic, intercollegiate and interscholastic sport has reached unprecedented highs, the media still lag behind in the representation of the female athlete (Knight & Giuliano 2001). Mary Jo Kane reports in her article “The Post Title IX Female Athlete in the Media: Things Are Changing, But How Much?” that “female sporting events and female athletes are grossly underreported and thus underrepresented throughout all mass media” (Kane 1989). This creates an impression that females are primarily absent from the sporting scene, which is a false implication (Kane 1989).

In regards to quality, the portrayal of female athletes is much different than that of males. According to sports researcher Dorothy Harris, as quoted in Kane’s article, “today’s woman athlete has become so trendy, she has now become sexy.” This perception of the female athlete tends to give media practitioners as well the general public a “firm and comfortable” feeling that female athletics has shed the negative images of the past (Kane 1989). But because one is more apt to find a female athlete in a sexualized pose on the front of a sports magazine rather than in action, the idea of a “sexy” female athlete is developed. Traditionally stereotypical views of women exert the ideals of femininity instead of athleticism and strength. Kane writes, “Stereotypic presentation ultimately serves to trivialize or downgrade the seriousness and importance of women’s sports” (1989). In contrast to the tough portrayal of men, female athletes are seen as overly feminine rather than as being heroic or physically powerful.

As a result of the fear of presenting women in a masculine light, many editors will print magazines with females depicted in traditional non-contact sports, such as golf, tennis and ice skating (Salwen & Wood 1994). Similarly, in accordance with Knight and Giuliano’s research, “men are readily portrayed by the media as athletes first because being an athlete is consistent with the traditional male role. For women, being an athlete contradicts the conventional female role, and thus media coverage emphasizes other aspects of their ‘femaleness’” (Knight & Giuliano 2001, 219). The social constructions of Western society reflect the belief that to male audiences, female appearance matters. Men desire to view a woman with emphasized feminine qualities, who is better looking and not portrayed as powerful (Media Report to Women 2002). Since men are the target audience of most sports publications, media practitioners must provide what is wanted.

The ideas of cultural studies are present in this research, particularly feminist studies. This theory states that social structure reflects male hegemony. When related to the discussed theories, it is suggested the media is a reflection of the predominant male influence in society (Littlejohn 1999). Media publications are a likeness to cultural beliefs. Therefore the dominance of men in sports is presented to the public through the media. Despite increased numbers of women participating in athletics, males still dominate the sports world.

Media professionals argue they are simply providing what the public wants (Knight & Giuliano 2001). If men would rather see a female athlete wearing less clothing and posing like a model rather than a sports figure, that is what the media will produce. Resulting from this is the appearance that women’s sport is unimportant compared to the “real” sport world of men. The majority of fans who read sports publications do not have a problem with safe, socially “acceptable” sports such as golf and tennis, so female athletes participating in these sports are more apt to be covered and presented to the mostly male audience (Kane 1989). Despite the idea of providing the public with what it desires, this “symbolic annihilation” as it is labeled by Knight and Giuliano, inaccurately conveys the idea that women’s sports is inferior and not as noteworthy as men’s (2001). Because of the way media professionals frame the portrayal of females, the public is led to believe women do not deserve as much coverage as their male counterparts.

In a way it could be possible the media is not aware of how much damage it causes. Knight and
Giuliano suggest “the media need to be cognizant of the effects of their trivializing and marginalizing coverage. Hopefully with a diligent commitment from the media, sport will be viewed as an unconditionally acceptable and beneficial activity for women” (2001). If female athletes continue to be discouraged in the media, a contrast from the social progress they have made in the last 30 years, there will be a digression rather than an improvement. The positive numbers in female participation since the passing of Title IX are not properly displayed in the media when female athletes are portrayed in a sexualized manner rather than an athletic one.

Not only does this inadequate portrayal affect the media but also society as a whole. For years, female athletes have been searching for social acceptance. According to an article found in the Media Report to Women, “Studies regarding the coverage and depiction of female athletes suggest that the media have not advanced the image and concomitant societal acceptance of female athletes” (2002). Since women began participating in athletics hundreds of years ago, there has been a stigma surrounding them. This stigma is known as “the image problem” (Knight & Giuliano 2003). This image is that all female athletes are lesbian.

As a result, “the sport media often employs a feminine apologetic in which they heterosexualize female athletes” (Knight & Giuliano 2003). For this reason, editors and journalists find it necessary to exaggerate female characteristics — this being reflected in the way women are portrayed in sports publications.

The exaggerated female characteristics found in these publications focus on physical attractiveness. For example, although beach volleyball player Gabrielle Reese, figure skater Katrina Witt, and golfer Jan Stephenson are exceptionally talented athletes, the media often focuses on their attractiveness. This is a problem that is much less common for male athletes (Knight & Giuliano 2001). Looks are the main attribute media spotlights, but traditional gender roles are also emphasized. Because media professionals believe viewers subconsciously fear the idea of strong, athletic women, it is common for heterosexual qualities to be stressed over athletic accomplishments. For instance, a female athlete’s relationship with a man — even better, her husband — is accentuated more than her athletic triumphs (Kane 1989).

Studies have been done to prove these ideas true. One study, found in Knight and Giuliano’s article, “He’s a Laker; She’s a Looker: The Consequences of Gender-stereotypical Portrayals of Male and Female Athletes,” demonstrates how attractive female athletes are perceived in the media. Knight and Giuliano presented participants of a survey with an image of a physically attractive female athlete and a list of her accomplishments. They were given a second image of another female athlete, not so attractive, but with similar athletic accomplishments. The students were also given the same two types of images for male athletes. They were asked to rate the athlete on various characteristics based on his or her appearance (Knight & Giuliano 2001).

The results were parallel with the authors’ ideas. The female athlete depicted in terms of her attractiveness was seen as more attractive than the one depicted in terms of her athleticism only. The male athletes had no difference in their perception of being attractive. Also, those athletes whose coverage focused on their attractiveness were seen as less aggressive, less talented and less heroic (Knight & Giuliano 2001).

Not only are individual images being subjected to ridicule but also major sports publications. Because of its prominence in sports journalism, Sports Illustrated’s coverage of female athletes faces criticisms (Salwen & Wood 1994). According to Janet S. Fink’s article, “Female Athletes and the Media,” more coverage has been given to women in the post-Title IX era, but this coverage has been in “sex appropriate” sports, as previously mentioned (1998). If a female athlete is not being portrayed as participating in golf or tennis, she is usually depicted in a sexualized pose, or more commonly, not found on the front of the magazine at all.

Several studies have proven the theory that female under representation on the covers of Sports Illustrated is a pressing issue. L.N. Reid and L.C. Soley conducted one of the first studies noted in 1979. They examined the covers of Sports Illustrated from 1956-1976. During this time period they found there was only a range of 3.2 percent to 6.8 percent coverage of females on the covers (Reid & Soley 1979). Four years later, M. Boutilier and L. SanGiovanni conducted a similar survey. In studying Sports Illustrated covers from
1954-1978, they found women received less than five percent of sports coverage (Boutilier & SanGiovanni 1983).

Also in 1983, Boutilier and SanGiovanni examined *Sports Illustrated’s* 1979 “Silver Anniversary Issue,” a collection of photographs highlighting important sports moments in the past 25 years. They found these images to portray female athletes in passive or non-athletic poses at a rate of 60 percent, whereas their male counterparts were only pictured this way 44 percent of the time (Kane 1989). Not only were females lacking in quantity of coverage, but also in quality. Despite their athletic accomplishments, women were still being portrayed in a traditionally stereotypical manner. More recently, a study by L.T. Ryan found in 1994 that out of 52 issues, only six featured a woman on the cover (Fink 1998). Two years later, this number decreased to four women found on 53 issues’ covers (Knight & Giuliano 2001).

Despite societal changes – increased participation and opportunities among female athletes – coverage and portrayal is still lacking in quantity as well as quality. Even though there has been a slight increase in female presence on *Sports Illustrated* covers since the pre-Title IX era, there is still a major issue.

**Methodology**

The covers of 281 issues of *Sports Illustrated* from January 2000 through November 2005 were examined. *Sports Illustrated* is a popular sports publication with known prominence and respectability. There were a total of 299 covers throughout the five-year period, but 18 of them did not feature athletes. These covers featured fans or artistic images. Every available issue’s cover found on Sports Illustrated Online was included in the sample.

Despite the fact that this study has been done in the past, there has not been a study of this nature completed in the past ten years. Because women have sprung into the mainstream sports world at a high rate in the past decade, one would assume they would receive an increased amount of media coverage. The results of this study did not find this assumption to be true.

These covers were examined under a variety of constructs. The first was whether or not the individual pictured on the cover was an athlete. If the image was not of an athlete, it was not included in the sample. Next, each image was labeled male or female. Furthermore, these images were analyzed and divided into three categories: action (A), pose (P), or model (M). If the athlete was active in his or her photograph, he or she was labeled action. Athletes posing in their uniforms and/or in any other athletic clothing were considered to be posing. Finally, if the athlete was modeling, this meant he or she was wearing some type of garment other than a uniform and was made to appear physically attractive.

Because it was less common to find a female on the cover, each issue with a female was specifically noted. This means the athlete’s name, sport, and exact appearance were monitored. For example, softball player Jennie Finch modeled on the cover of the July 11, 2005 publication. It was noted she was wearing a mini-skirt and tank top, and her hair was down and appeared to be blowing in the wind. These specifics were recorded because they are demonstrative of the way in which media professionals frame female athletes to appear in a certain way.

**Findings**

The analysis showed that 266 out of the 281 issues’ covers featured a male athlete. The remaining 15 featured women. Ninety-five percent of *Sports Illustrated* publications from January 2000 to November 2005 portrayed a man on the front of the magazine. Seventy percent of males pictured on the covers were depicted as actively participating in their respective sports. Only 40 percent of females were seen in action.

Of the women portrayed in action, two were participating in socially acceptable sports. In the March 4, 2002 issue, Sarah Hughes is pictured figure skating. Serena Williams is seen on the cover of the May 26, 2003 issue playing tennis. Photographed for the June 16, 2003 issue is a male and female couple famous for deep-sea diving. The presence of the male partner is a way for heterosexuality to be demonstrated.

Female athletes were also found to be posing in their uniforms on several covers. The 2004 gold medallist USA softball team is pictured on the cover of the August 30, 2004 issue. For the July 2, 2001 *Sports Illustrated* cover, the original Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders from the 1972 season are pictured as they look now. They are wearing their...
cheerleading uniforms with their make-up done and pom-poms raised.

Women from Stanford University and Texas are featured on the cover of the October 7, 2002 issue. They are alongside male athletes from their schools. They are pictured in their uniforms challenging the opposite school. Another issue that covers college athletics is the November 24, 2004 issue. The cover story for this issue is men and women’s Division I basketball previews. The University of Connecticut’s star female player is photographed alongside the male star player. They are both in their uniforms holding a basketball in their hands.

Only six out of the 15 issues depicting female athletes were found to show these women in action. During the Sydney Summer Olympics in 2000, female swimmer Megan Quann and track and field superstar Marion Jones were featured on back to back covers of Sports Illustrated. On each cover, the women were actively participating in their respective sport. Mia Hamm, one of the most famous female athletes in the world, was on the cover of the September 22, 2003 issue. She was photographed running in her team USA uniform.

Finally, there are the remaining featured women who are not pictured in an active manner. Anna Kournikova graces the front of the June 5, 2000 issue. She is a known model who is not ranked high in the professional tennis rankings. She is pictured wearing an off the shoulder top, blonde hair flowing, hugging a pillow. She is staring seductively at the reader. Maria Sharpova, another “tennis beauty,” is featured on the front of Sports Illustrated’s July 12, 2004 issue. She was photographed wearing her uniform, but she has a powerful smile on her face and she is holding the tennis ball so it forces her skirt to rise up high on her upper thigh. On the cover of the June 6, 2005 issue is Danica Patrick. She is a champion NASCAR driver, the most famous woman to participate in her sport at the present time. She is pictured in her driving suit, but her hair is down and her helmet is at her side. She is obviously groomed for the picture. Softball sensation Jennie Finch is on the front of the July 11, 2005 Sports Illustrated. She is pictured with her thumb in the belt loop of a jean mini-skirt, pulling down strategically as to show her waistline below a red tank top. She leans forward so the shape of her body is visible, and her hair is down, giving the impression of being blown in the wind.

Discussion
The results of the content analysis provide support for the hypothesis that print media has a lack of portrayal of female athletes, and when a woman is depicted, she is more likely to be in a socially acceptable or non-active situation. Since 2000, only five percent of Sports Illustrated covers have featured women on them. Merely 40 percent of these women featured were seen in action.

The media framing theory is present in the results of this study. It is demonstrated that the media find it more appealing to its audience to publish magazines with males on the front rather than females. This reflects the concept of framing because media practitioners choose to emphasize the importance of men’s sports over that of women’s by printing magazines with drastically more males on their covers than females. Journalists and editors provide the public with a skewed view of the world of athletics. They provide the audience with the idea that more individuals want to know about men’s sports than about female. Because 95 percent of the magazines studied have a male athlete on the cover, readers are persuaded to believe there is a lack of female participation in sports. This goes against the fact that a growing number of young girls and women are becoming involved in athletics.

Because only one sports publication was studied in this research, there is a certain limitation. But since Sports Illustrated is the most prominent sports magazine available, it is a quality reflection of how the media portrays ideas to the publics.

Conclusion
Female athletes have continually received less coverage than males despite major societal alterations, specifically the passing of Title IX which led to increased numbers of women’s sport opportunities and participants nationwide. Print journalism has been slow to adapt to the ever-growing number of female athletes and has lagged in the quantity and quality of female depiction in the media.

Framing of the media has led to journalists deciding what the public will be able to obtain from certain media outlets. Because reporters and
editors control what and how athletes are depicted on magazine covers, they heavily influence the minds of readers. The inadequate portrayal of female athletes on the fronts of magazines needs to be further evaluated in order for more progress to be made for women in sports.

Works Cited