MALE ATHLETES, FEMALE AESTHETICS: THE CONTINUED AMBIVALENCE TOWARD FEMALE ATHLETES IN ESPN’s THE BODY ISSUE

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The study conducted by Gregory A. Cranmer, Maria Brann, and Nicholas D. Bowman, was designed to examine athlete portrayal in print media. The authors concluded it reasonable that though previous research had shown a sexualization of female athletes and a de-emphasis of female athleticism, further study was warranted. This study was developed to continue previous work on athlete portrayals in the media and how that relates to sexual differences in an attempt to see trends throughout print media.

Researchers chose to examine ESPN’s The Body Issue for three specific reasons: the magazine claims to not trivialize female athletes, most studies have focused on Sports Illustrated, and printed sports media are considered very popular and influential on the public. Previous research had also focused on newspapers and research has shown that when compared to newspapers, magazines are used primarily for entertainment factors to see the pictures. With this in mind, researchers focused on visual cues in The Body Issue including, posture, facial expressions, framing, and gestures.

The study of The Body Issue from 2009-2012 focused on four key areas: female athleticism, athlete sexualization, athletes in context of sport, and athlete framing. Researchers examined 157 print photos to score for data collection. A composite score of 0 (enhanced athleticism) – 6 (de-enhanced athleticism) was determined from an athlete’s facial expressions, camera angle, and pose. A score of 0 (completely un-sexualized) – 6 (completely sexualized) was determined using self-touch, focus, clothing, and pose. Setting, props, and pose determined a score of 0 (in context) – 4 (not in context).
Researchers determined that though *The Body Issue* claims to show equivalent coverage and respect for female athletes, male athletes were framed more often in more athletic poses than female athletes. Female athletes were also framed more sexually and as the publication progressed had a de-emphasis of female athleticism when compared to male counterparts.

This study was useful in augmenting previous studies on similar topics. Researchers showed that females are still de-emphasized athletically and sexualized compared to male athletes. However, as evidenced by this study, female athletes are portrayed equally to male athletes in regards to individual sports.

This particular study was limited in several ways and left open means for future research. Researchers did not account for race or sexual orientation and admittedly only examined an American based media source when examining frames. These variables may have proven to be relevant to media portrayal.

This study was unique in nature due to the focus on a magazine that has not been previously studied. I believe these results will have implications for future professionals to consider when “framing” athletes for print or other forms of media. Though the progress is small and much more still needs to be achieved as the world of sport continues to change with female athletes, I believe the world of print media will continue to follow suit and recognize females as feminine, muscular, powerful, and athletic.