

## How Do I Look? Gender Presentation in Intercollegiate Athletics

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### **Aim**

Societal norms dictate that women should appear feminine. Because athletic performance often requires the display of masculine characteristics, female athletes frequently find themselves in a contradictory situation. The female athlete paradox is a concept that explains the juxtaposition faced by women athletes as they navigate sport participation. As societal norms have evolved and become more accepting of athletic women, muscularity and physicality have also become more prevalent. This research aims to add to the body of knowledge on the women athletes' preference to appear while on and off the arena of competition (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Ross & Shinew, 2008). Specifically, we address three research questions:

- How do Division I sportswomen want to be perceived while competing
- Are there differences in appearance preferences of those in masculine-identified and feminine-identified sports?
- What are the effects of gendered sport type, athlete's gender, sexuality, race, experience on the team, and how much they care about how they look while competing on how they would like to be perceived?

### **Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

Sport has been a site for the cultivation of masculine characteristics since its inception. Women were virtually excluded from mass sport participation until the twentieth century. Medical experts believed that engaging in physical activity was harmful to the female reproductive system, and in direct contradiction with prescribed gender norms. Modern women athletes are faced with the challenge of conforming to societal norms and displaying their femininity (Vianden & Gregg, 2018). Investigated by numerous scholars (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), the female athlete paradox addresses the challenges some athletic women face when competing in historically masculine sports.

### **Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis**

This research employed survey methodology. 145 women competing for Division I athletic teams from across the United States were surveyed. To interrogate whether differences between historically masculine and feminine sports exists (Metheny, 1965), athletes that compete on both types of teams were included. Athletes surveyed participated on a team that had either recently earned a national championship or that were a member of a dominant conference in a particular sport. Ten universities from four major NCAA conferences were included. Athletes were asked a series of questions related to how they preferred to appear while competing. For the descriptive analysis and sport comparisons, individual items were examined. For the regressions, two additive scales including the aspects of athleticism and femininity were constructed. Our "Athletic Expectations Preference Scale" consists of the "athletic," "tough," and "strong" variables ( $\alpha=.78$ , Range: 7-15, Mean=13.06, SD=1.87), reflecting hegemonic understandings of sport. Our "Feminine Expectations Preference Scale" consists of "pretty," "sexy," "attractive," and "feminine" ( $\alpha=.75$ , Range: 11-20, Mean=16.58, SD=2.48). This reflects prevailing expectations related to femininity. The individual

“masculine” quality in the regression analysis was also examined because of the cultural association between masculinity and athletics. The regression analyses included variables for gender, sexuality, race, experience on the team, and concern for appearance while competing.

## Results

Our findings indicated that during a competition, women prefer to look both feminine and athletic; reflecting both sides of the female paradox. Women that competed in sports that are considered too masculine reported a greater desire to appear athletic than those participating in sports that are considered more feminine (Adams, Schmitke, & Franklin, 2005; Krane, Choi, Baird, & Kauer, 2004). Data indicated that women who participate in more feminine sports which often require uniforms that are traditionally ladylike sometimes compensate in different ways, such as wearing makeup during competition. Women who compete in historically masculine uniforms reported compensating in different ways, often off the field. Wearing more feminine attire off the field and emphasizing qualities associated with traditional gender norms were one-way women reported behaving. There were also differences in how women preferred to look. For example, golfers have less desire to appear tough than basketball, softball, and volleyball players. Conversely, basketball players had a greater preference to look big compared to all other sports. This point is logical that height is an advantage in basketball.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Findings in the current study indicated a consistent behavioral pattern amongst the female participants to attempt to balance feminine presentation off the field with an athletic appearance while competing. While our data indicated that some progress regarding the acceptability of women being athletic, society still must evolve to become truly accepting of competitive, athletic women. Data indicated that women prefer to appear pretty, attractive, and feminine overall. Our findings contribute to the body of knowledge dedicated to the understanding of women self-present in athletic settings. Our findings shed light on some problematic and positive aspects of uniforms currently worn by Division I athletes. Further, our findings should inform the NCAA, coaches, and others how to better understand how uniforms can be altered to allow for greater satisfaction for participants.

## References

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