



## Introduction

- Media portrayals of sportswomen emphasize femininity/heterosexuality versus athletic athleticism.
- There is a gap in the knowledge base on how these portrayals are interpreted by female athletes.
- This study explored how elite female athletes respond to ways they are represented, and how those responses influence their attitudes toward their dual identities of athlete and traditional female.

## Examples of Media Images

Table 1. Categories of representation, definitions of categories, and exemplar images for individual (tennis) and team sport (basketball).

Categories	Definition	Exemplar Image for Individual Sport (Tennis)	Exemplar Image for Team Sport (Basketball)
Athletic Competence	On court, in action image with emphasis on athleticism		
Mixed Message	Off court, posed image with athletic marker but emphasis on femininity vs. athleticism		
Classy Lady	Off court, posed image with no athletic marker, in fashionable attire		
Soft Pornography	Off court, posed image that emphasizes sexual objectification (e.g., semi-nude/nude)		

\*A complete list of all images and their sources is available at <http://jx.umn.edu/16f2013>

## Research Questions

- Which images—ranging from on-court athleticism to off-court soft pornography—will female athletes choose to best represent themselves?
- Which images will female athletes choose to best represent/ increase respect for their sport?
- Will female athletes' indicate a belief that a "sex sells" strategy promotes interest in women's sports?

## Methods

### Study Participants and Data Collection Procedures

- A convenience sample consisting of 36 females in intercollegiate athletics at two universities (N = 18 per school).
- Participants competed in six sports: individual = swimming, tennis, track & field; and team = basketball, hockey, and softball.
- Face-to-face interviews examined participants' feelings and beliefs about their dual identities, and images which best represented themselves and their sport.

## Key Findings

Though each participant was asked to choose just one image, several picked two. Findings are presented as single-response participants (chose one image) vs. multiple-response participants (chose two images).

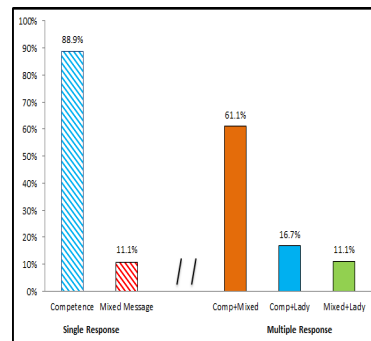


Fig 1. Which image best represents yourself?

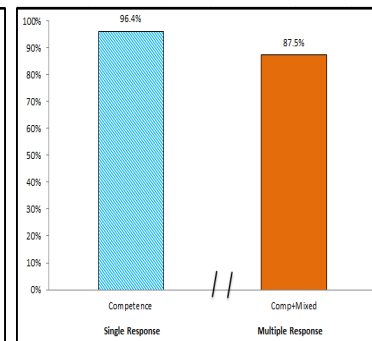


Fig 2. Which image best represents your sport?

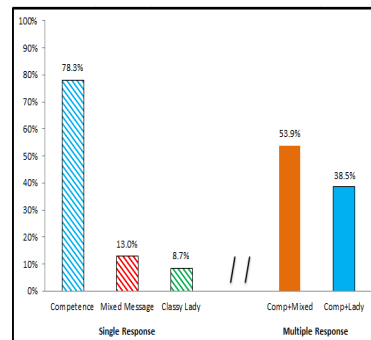


Fig 3. Which image best increases respect?

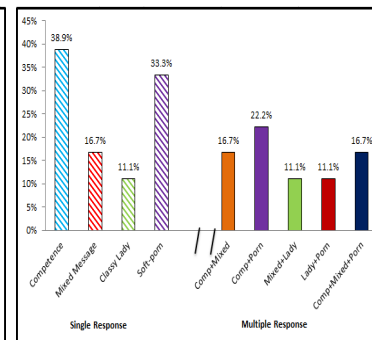


Figure 4. Which image best increases interest?

## Discussion

### Competence Matters

Images of athleticism were the overwhelming choice:

- The vast majority of sportswomen chose athletic competence as the image that best: 1) represented themselves; 2) represented their sport; and 3) increased respect for their sport.
- This pattern was consistent across both team and individual sports.

### Dual Identity

- Female athletes who picked two images chose a combination of athleticism and traditional femininity, indicating a response pattern of a dual identity:

**"I want to be portrayed as a fierce competitor, but I also like to dress up and look cute."**  
 —Donna, basketball player

### Selling Sex as a Marketing Strategy

- 47% chose the soft-porn image as best way to increase interest in their sport. Their target market was males:

**"[Sexually provocative images] are the only way we can draw [guys] attention."**  
 —Carrie, track athlete

- But the majority disagreed with this approach:

**"The idea that [soft-porn images] sell sex is not true. We are good athletes, but if we go around selling [sex], people will think we're a joke."**  
 —Betty, hockey player

## Implications

- This study supports a growing body of evidence indicating athletes/fans prefer images of athleticism over "sex sells."
- Sexualized images lead to negative social and psychological consequences for young girls.
- Sport media should challenge images based on gender stereotypes and reflect the *reality* of women's sports.