

GENDER, BODY NORMS, AND SPORTS APPAREL ADVERTISEMENTS

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Weber E. and Van Mullem H. The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which sports apparel advertisements reinforce and challenge body standards of masculinity and femininity. A content analysis of photos appearing on the ecommerce websites of Nike and Under Armour was performed to analyze body type and sexualization of male and female models featured in “Tops” and “Bottoms” sections. Men’s Tops (M=1.2779), Women’s Tops (M=3.5834), and Women’s Bottoms (M= 2.6597) were considered “non-sexualized” while Men’s Bottoms (M=5.6051) were considered “sexualized”. Both male and female models were consistently reflective of ectomorph (e.g., thin/emaciated) or ecto-mesomorph (e.g., thin but shapely) body types. While some male models were considered to have a mesomorph body type (e.g., muscular/athletic), no female models did. No female or male models used in these advertisements had either endo-mesomorph (e.g., somewhat overweight) or endomorph (e.g., obese) body types. These findings are consistent with societal expectations for women to have a thin body type (Pompper et al., 2007; Law & Labre, 2002). Interestingly, more male models were portrayed with the thin ideal in comparison to a muscular ideal, which challenges previous research (Pompper et al., 2007; Law & Labre, 2002). Findings may suggest need for more accurate depiction of the average human body type to challenge traditional gender norms which are linked with psychological detriments for both males and females (Pompper et al., 2007; Law & Labre, 2002).

Key Words: athleisure, gender, media

INTRODUCTION

Traditional gender ideology is defined as “...interrelated ideas and beliefs that are widely used to define masculinity and femininity, identify people as male or female, evaluate forms of sexual expression, and organize social relationships” (Coakley, 2015, p. 180). Gender ideology assumes specific roles and expected behaviors for males and females. These expectations are often most pronounced in areas of society considered to be very gendered, including, but not limited to, athletics and physical activity. Such ideological constructs are limiting and often constraining. For example, physical and behavioral traits often associated with success as an athlete are considered masculine. Traditional

gender ideology asserts boys and men possess masculine characteristics whereas girls and women do not. This disconnect impacts societal expectations regarding physical activity and athletic competition for both males and females (Coakley, 2015).

Differing thoughts exist in terms of the state of gender roles in society. Interestingly, “three in four people in the US believe that traditional gender roles have changed” (“Consumers”, 2018, para. 1). “Moreover, most people no longer identify as being completely masculine or completely feminine...” (“Consumers”, 2018, para. 3). With growing numbers of women participating in fitness related activities, it has become more culturally acceptable for females to have more masculine characteristics such as

muscular, toned physiques, rather than the thin and slim physiques which are regarded as more feminine (Dworkin & Messner, 2002; Law & Labre, 2002; Pompper et al., 2007). Females who possess a more muscular ideal may be perceived as holding more power and agency, which challenges patriarchal norms (Dworkin & Messner, 2002). On the other hand, other research suggests "...advertising is lagging in its gender portrayals" ("Consumers", 2018, para. 4). The rise in women participating in fitness-related activities has stimulated growth of the sports apparel industry. In fact, sales of women's athletic apparel have outperformed that of men's since 1991 (Lynn et al., 2004). Despite increases in participation among females in the sports apparel industry, portrayal of females in traditional media, such as magazines and newspapers, have continued to reinforce gender differences (Lynn et al., 2004). Research of gender ideologies in print advertisements, which began in the early 1970s, has demonstrated consistent portrayal of women that reinforces feminine stereotypes. Women are often portrayed as "weak, childish, dependent, domestic, and subordinate" (Lynn et al., 2004, p. 338). On the other hand, males are often portrayed as "aggressive", work-oriented, "active", and "dominant" (Giaccardi et al., 2016, p. 152). Likewise, female athletes are marginalized in sports media. For example, socially constructed ideals portray female athletes as "less competitive", "passive" and "emotional" (Lynn et al., 2004, p. 338).

Media forms have considerable impact on culture, due to their ability to shape perceptions held by members of society. The more frequently constructs, such as gender ideologies, appear in media forms, the greater the likelihood that individuals will accept these ideas (Giaccardi et al., 2016). Well-known media forms, such as the magazine, *Rolling Stone*, have consistently depicted female cover models in more sexual manners when compared with male cover models. For instance, Hatton and Trautner (2011) conducted a content analysis of magazine covers from 1960s and 2000s, which revealed that only 10.5% of male cover models in the 1960s and 14.6% of male cover models in the 2000s were "sexualized". In contrast, 33% and 22% of female cover models were considered "sexualized" in editions from the 1960s and 2000s editions,

respectively. Data from the 1990s editions suggest recent declines in "sexualization" for both male and female cover models. During this era, 13.3% and 42% of male and female cover models were considered "sexualized". While it was found that degree of "sexualization" of cover models decreased from the 1990s to 2000s, findings also suggested sharp increases in degree of "hypersexualization" for females in particular. While only 11% of female cover models in the 1960s were "hypersexualized", 66% of female cover models in the 2000s were considered "hypersexualized". Modest percentages of male cover models were considered "hypersexualized", with 1% and 2% of cover models meeting criteria in the 1960s and 2000s, respectively (Hatton & Trautner, 2011).

The rise in popularity of "athleisure" has prompted increased consumer spending on athletic clothing (Euromonitor International, 2019). "Athleisure" clothing is defined by garments that are worn for participating in exercise and other daily living activities (Bielefeldt et al., 2016). Rise in purchasing of "athleisure" or casual clothing is reflected by the increasing nature of individuals to seek clothing that is more comfortable ("The Secret", 2019). As sales of "Athleisure" rise (Euromonitor International, 2019) in a market where consumers are increasingly challenging traditional gender ideology ("Consumers", 2018), have marketing strategies changed to appeal to consumers expressed preferences of less gendered images?

While limited research exists in the realm of sports apparel advertisements, there is some evidence to suggest that female sports models are portrayed in more sexual manners, when compared with men (Daniels, 2009). However, recently, researchers found that a provocative nature of models in fashion apparel is less appealing to consumers and may deter them from purchasing products based on such objectification (Bae et al., 2015). The goal of the present study is to investigate the gender roles in sports apparel advertisements, by examining dimensions of masculinity and femininity through degree of sexualization and body type.

METHODS

The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which advertisements reinforce and

challenge body standards of masculinity and femininity. More specifically, clothing advertisements of Nike and Under Armour, the first and third top leading sports apparel and footwear brands in the United States, were examined via both of the companies' ecommerce websites (Euromonitor International, 2019). Nike and Under Armour's advertisements were selected based on widespread brand popularity and present market growth (Euromonitor International, 2019; James & Whitney, 2018; Manning, 2019). Although Adidas ranks as the number two top leading sports apparel and footwear brand in the United States, the company was not selected for analysis due to lack of a match in web design infrastructure (Euromonitor International, 2019; Manning, 2019).

Nike and Under Armour models depicted in "athleisure" garments were viewed on respective company ecommerce websites. Screen shots for the top eight images were taken for each clothing section (i.e. tops, t-shirts, bottoms, tights, etc.). Photos were captured on the same day and within a one-hour period. Apparel image advertisements for men and women's clothing were investigated to compare portrayals of female and male models in terms of body type (White et al., 1999) and degree of sexualization (Hatton & Trautner, 2011). Body type was categorized using definitions provided by White et al. (1999), noting, "Generally, ectomorphs are very thin/emaciated, ecto-mesomorphs are thin but shapely, mesomorphs are muscular/athletic appearing, endo-mesomorphs are somewhat overweight, and endomorphs are obese" (p. 388). Researchers lacked access to digital technology to delineate body type based on images. As an alternative, the previous definitions were used to subjectively categorize body types. Sexualization was based on evaluation of aspects of model's body appearance by using Hatton and Trautner's (2011) coding framework which demonstrated high inter-coder reliability using Cohen's Kappa. Three variables (i.e. "genitals", "sexual role play", and "sexual act" demonstrated perfect intercoder reliability (1.00, $p < .001$), while remaining variables demonstrated substantial intercoder reliability, with scores ranging from .707 to .891. Originally, their coding scheme was used to analyze magazine covers of the *Rolling Stone*

and was separated into categories including Clothing/Nudity, Touch, Pose, Mouth, Breasts, Genitals, Buttocks, Text, Head v. Body Shot, Sex Acts, and Sexual Role Play (Hatton & Trautner, 2011). For the present study, categories including Sex Acts (e.g., kissing, lying naked in a bed, masturbation, etc.), and Sexual Role Play (e.g., wearing child-like clothing, bondage, etc.) were excluded due to their lack of relevance for sports apparel models (Hatton & Trautner, 2011). Likewise, Text was not included since the purpose of the study was to evaluate appearance of models rather than language used to describe them. In total, sexualization was coded on a 15-point scale, with each category contributing to the score. Based on Hatton and Trautner's (2011) previous model, degree of sexualization Although the point system for the present study was on a lower scale than the previous model, ranges of points remained the same for each degree category (i.e. nonsexualized, sexualized, and hypersexualized) simply because scores would not change with the usage of a 15-point or 23-point scale. Thus, in the present study, non-sexualized was scored on a scale from 0-4 points, sexualized was scored on a scale from 5-9 points, and hypersexualized was scored of 10 points and above. As was mentioned previously, the 15-point scale was used due to omission of categories that would receive scores of "0", therefore not contributing to the overall score. Two investigators separately analyzed images using the coding framework by Hatton and Trautner (2011) and White et al. (1999). After images were coded independently, researchers discussed findings. If coding inconsistencies were present, researchers discussed findings to reach consensus.

RESULTS

Descriptive analysis of athleisure models clothing indicated mixed results (see Table 1). The mean difference in sexualization score for the Top's category was 2.3055, with Men's Tops ($M=1.2779$) receiving a mean score lesser than that of Women's Tops ($M=3.5834$). On the other hand, the mean difference in sexualization score for Bottoms was 2.9454, with Men's Bottoms ($M=5.6051$) receiving a greater mean score than that of Women's Bottoms ($M=2.6597$). When taking into account degree of

Table 1. Mean “sexualization” scores of men’s and women’s athletic apparel photos.

	Clothing/ Nudity	Breast/ Chest	Buttocks	Genitals	Mouth	Head v. Body	Pose	Touch	Total
Men's Tops (n=18)	0.1667	0.0556	0	0	0.0556	1.0000	0	0	1.2779
Men's Bottoms (n=17)	3.4286	1.0000	0	0.1765	0	1.0000	0	0	5.6051
Women's Tops (n=16)	1.6667	0.0556	0.1111	0	0.3125	1.0000	0	0.4375	3.5834
Women's Bottoms (n=18)	1.1875	0.0625	0.0625	0	0	1.0000	0.1250	0.2222	2.6597

Although number (“n”) for Men’s and Women’s Tops and Bottoms were different, number of photos used for examination were the same. “n” pertains to the total number of models appearing in all photos. Some photos had two models, while a majority contained one model.

sexualization, Men’s Tops and Women’s Tops were considered “non-sexualized” (0-4 points). On the other hand, Men’s Bottoms were considered “sexualized” (5-9 points) while Women’s Bottoms were considered “non-sexualized”.

When examining specific categories, no differences were found between Men’s and Women’s Tops in terms of sexualization scores for “Breast and Chest” (M = .0556), “Genitals” (M = 0), “Head v. Body”, “Pose” (M = 0), and “Touch” (M = 0), and “Pose” (M = 0). Women’s Tops received higher scores in the categories of “Clothing/Nudity” (M = 1.6667), “Buttocks” (M = 0.1111), “Mouth” (M = 0.3125), and “Touch” (M = 0.4375) when compared with Men’s

Tops scores for “Clothing/Nudity” (M = 1.6667) “Buttocks” (M = 0), “Mouth” (M = 0.0556), and “Touch” (M = 0). However, when examining specific categories for Bottoms, Men’s scores were higher for “Clothing/Nudity” (M = 3.4286), “Breast/Chest” (M = 1.0000), and “Genitals” (M = 0.1765) when compared with Women’s scores for “Clothing/Nudity” (M = 1.1875), “Breast/Chest” (M = 0.0625), and “Genitals” (M = 0). Women’s Bottoms received higher scores for “Buttocks” (M = 0.0625), “Pose” (M = 0.1250), and “Touch” (M = 0.4375) when compared with Men’s Bottoms for “Buttocks” (M = 0), “Pose” (M = 0), and “Touch” (M = 0). No differences were found between Men’s and Women’s Bottoms for “Mouth” (M = 0).

Table 2. Frequencies and percentages of body type for men’s and women’s athletic apparel photos.

	Ectomorph	Ecto-mesomorph	Mesomorph	Endo-mesomorph	Endomorph
Men's Tops (n=18)	7 (38.88%)	7 (38.88%)	4 (22.22%)	0	0
Men's Bottoms (n=17)	2 (11.76%)	6 (35.29%)	9 (52.94%)	0	0
Women's Tops (n=16)	5 (31.23%)	11 (68.75%)	0	0	0
Women's Bottoms (n=18)	13 (72.22%)	5 (27.77%)	0	0	0

Although number (“n”) for Men’s and Women’s Tops and Bottoms were different, number of photos used for examination were the same. “n” pertains to the total number of models appearing in all photos. Some

Descriptive analysis of athleisure model body types (Table 2) revealed that female models (n=13) were more likely to have an ectomorph (e.g., thin/emaciated) body type in advertisements for

bottoms compared to males (n=2), but males (n=7) were more likely to have an ectomorph body type in advertisements for tops compared to females (n=5). Females (n=11) advertising tops were more likely to

have an ecto-mesomorph (e.g., thin but shapely) body type compared to men (n=7). In comparison, male models (n=6) used to advertise bottoms more frequently had an ecto-mesomorph body type than female models (n=5). Only male models had a mesomorph (e.g., muscular/athletic) body type. No female models used in the advertisements used were coded as muscular or athletic. Finally, no models, male or female, had either endo-mesomorph (e.g., somewhat overweight) or endomorph (e.g., obese) body types.

DISCUSSION

Mean sexualization scores indicated mixed results, some of which were supported by literature and others which were not. Models featured in the Women's Tops category were not more sexualized than models featured in the Men's Tops category. Both of these categories were considered "non-sexualized". However, models featured in the Men's Bottoms category were more sexualized than models featured in the Women's Bottoms category. Men's Bottoms were considered "sexualized" while Women's Bottoms were considered "non-sexualized". As was mentioned previously, female athletes are typically represented in manners that tout their sexual attractiveness, rather than athletic ability (Daniels, 2009). In the present study, however, this research was not supported. In fact, photos of Men's Bottoms categories were more sexualized than Women's Bottoms. This finding may suggest that gender roles are changing.

While it may be difficult to assess how gender roles are changing, these findings may suggest that sexualization plays less of a role in advertisement using athlete representations. It could be that photos depicting male models were more sexualized for males due to greater emphasis on genitalia. For example, three Under Armour male models were depicted in tight boxer briefs, which accentuated their genital region. Presence of these photos could explain more sexualization when compared with photos in the Women's Bottoms category.

Athleisure models, both male and female, were most consistently reflective of ectomorph (e.g., thin/emaciated) or ecto-mesomorph (e.g., thin but shapely) body types. Interestingly, while some male models used to advertise both tops and bottoms had

a mesomorph body type (e.g., muscular/athletic), no female models did. No female or male models in these advertisements had either endo-mesomorph (e.g., somewhat overweight) or endomorph (e.g., obese) body types. These findings are consistent with societal expectations for women to have a thin body type (Pompper et al., 2007; Law & Labre, 2002). Interestingly, more male athletes were portrayed with the thin ideal in comparison to a muscular ideal. This appears to challenge previous research (Pompper et al., 2007; Law & Labre, 2002).

It can be noted that only a small portion of male and female model photos were viewed on the website. As a result, it is possible that the selected photos may not have been representative of the entire population of male and female model photos on the website. In addition, evaluations of degree of sexualization and model body type were based on subjective observations. In the future, a more in-depth analysis of male and female models on athletic apparel websites should be investigated to glean more information on body types that are portrayed to consumers. With that said, a larger sample size of models should be examined in order to conduct inferential statistical analyses. Lastly, coding of photos in terms of "sexualization" may have been skewed due to inherent differences between models on apparel websites versus in popular culture magazines. Hatton and Trautner (2011) based their coding schema on previous coding schemas that evaluated popular culture magazine in which "hypersexualization" or "pornification" of models are rampant. It could be that the intention behind most sports apparel company is not to "hypersexualize" models but rather utilize a certain degree of "sexualization" to attract the attention of consumers. In that way, a different coding schema that is more applicable to sports apparel websites could be more appropriately created based on common themes in such websites.

CONCLUSION

In general, male and female models featured in advertisements for clothing on Nike's and Under Armour's ecommerce websites mostly upheld notions regarding femininity and masculinity in terms of body norms and concepts related to the body. Most of the female athletes depicted the "thin" ideal

while many of the male athletes depicted the “lean muscular” ideal, body norms that are accepted and valued in society (Andersen et al., 1993; Leit et al., 2002). As was mentioned previously, females and males are susceptible to acquiring eating disorders and body image concerns due to pressure to achieve societal body standards (Law & Labre, 2002; Roberts & Muta, 2017). Likewise, prior research on Social Comparison Theory (SCT) demonstrates that individuals are likely to engage in behaviors to alter their body, based on their perception of others’ bodies (Pompper et al., 2007; Law & Labre, 2002). Thus, it is important for notions regarding traditional body norms to be challenged in order to mitigate harmful psychological impacts. Using models which more accurately reflect the average human body type could assist in challenging traditional notions which have been found to be harmful.

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