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Female Athletes in a Dual-World: How they Manage, Negotiate, and Tread the Waters of  
Conflicting Notions of Body Types

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## Abstract

### Female Athletes in a Dual-World: How they Manage, Negotiate, and Tread the Waters Conflicting Notions of Body Types

By Ariella Tali Faitelson

Although women and girls are participating in athletics at record numbers as a result of the Title IX ban on sex discrimination, female athletes experience daily struggles both on and off the court (Cahn 1994; Dworkin and Messner 1999). The institution of sports is dominated by hegemonic masculinity, which is the ideal type of dominant and powerful masculinity (Connell 1987; Messner 1992). In the context of female sports, female athletes must manage a type of hegemonic femininity. Hegemonic femininity is necessitated by societal definitions of femininity, rather than by the strength and aggressiveness required for sport performance (Lenskyj 1994; Krane 1999; Choi 2000). Female athletes live in a paradoxical world where femininity is embraced, but where muscularity is required (Krane et al. 2004). In navigating this paradox, female athletes must utilize different strategies to manage their own femininity in accordance with their muscularity. This research study focuses on female athletes at an NCAA Division III university in the South. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews, I explore female athletes' experiences with negotiating their femininity with respect to their muscularity. I ask how female athletes manage and negotiate their femininity and muscularity and how the lesbian stereotype affects their daily lives. The research builds on existing literature in sociology of sport, as well as feminist perspectives of the institution of sport. Findings from this study illustrate that the issue of contradictory body types for female athletes results in two general types of negotiation. First, female athletes must deal with consequences of having a musculature athletic body in light of the societal expectations for femininity. Athletes have different experiences with their muscularity and engage in several strategies to manage the paradoxical nature of their bodies. Although all athletes must deal with this body type paradox, those who play gender-inappropriate sports (i.e. softball, basketball) are prone to labels and stereotypes of lesbianism. Thus, they have a second set of negotiation strategies in which they must engage.

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## **Introduction**

Brittany Griner, during her last year of playing for the Baylor University Women's Basketball Team, was recognized as one of the all-time top women's player. At 6-foot-8, Griner is unstoppable with her 88-inch wingspan, all-time highest blocks, and dunking capabilities. Although she is established as one of the best women's player in the history of the game, her demeanor and appearance leads fans and critics to deem her as masculine and butch. In 2010, Griner punched an opponent and was ejected from the game. Critics immediately targeted her as being a "social outlier, someone to be feared" (Fagan 2013).

In an ESPNW article, Kate Fagan argues that fans' and critics' beliefs about Brittney Griner are representative of society's general sentiment towards women's sports

Even though we're viewing these athletes in a space we've all agreed is designated for competition (in this case, the basketball court), we still expect them [female athletes] to represent traditional gender roles. And we are less forgiving when they cross the line (Fagan 2013).

This attitude towards women's sports impacts both the image of women's athletics as well impacts the individual female athletes. They must manage their identities as women while also managing their identities as athletes. Throughout this paper, I will illustrate how these two identities, roles, and appearances are contradictory and how female athletes as a Division III Southern University experience and negotiate their everyday lives through this paradox.

Although women and girls are participating in athletics at record numbers as a result of the Title IX ban on sex discrimination, female athletes experience daily struggles both on and off the court (Cahn 1994; Dworkin and Messner 1999). The institution of sports is dominated by hegemonic masculinity, which is the ideal type of dominant and powerful masculinity<sup>1</sup> (Connell 1987; Messner 1992). In the context of female sports, female athletes must manage a type of

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<sup>1</sup> This concept will be further explored in the empirical background as a foundational concept.



hegemonic femininity.<sup>2</sup> Hegemonic femininity is necessitated by societal definitions of femininity, rather than by the strength and aggressiveness required for sport performance (Lenskyj 1994; Krane 1999; Choi 2000). Female athletes live in a paradoxical world where femininity<sup>3</sup> is embraced, but where muscularity is required (Krane et al. 2004). In navigating this paradox, female athletes must utilize different strategies to manage their own femininity in accordance with their muscularity.

This research study focuses on female athletes at an NCAA Division III university in the South. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews, I explore female athletes' experiences with negotiating their femininity with respect to their muscularity. I ask how female athletes manage and negotiate their femininity and muscularity and how the lesbian stereotype affects their daily lives. The research builds on existing literature in sociology of sport, as well as feminist perspectives of the institution of sport.

Findings from this study illustrate that the issue of contradictory body types for female athletes results in two general types of negotiation. First, female athletes must deal with consequences of having a musculature athletic body in light of the societal expectations for femininity. Athletes have different experiences with their muscularity and engage in several strategies to manage the paradoxical nature of their bodies. Although all athletes must deal with this body type paradox, those who play gender-inappropriate sports (i.e. softball, basketball) are prone to labels and stereotypes of lesbianism. Thus, they have a second set of negotiation strategies in which they must engage.

I begin this study by explicating theoretical frameworks for my research questions, specifically: social role theory, feminist cultural studies, deviance theory, and social identity

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of hegemonic femininity will be further explored in the empirical background as a foundational concept.

<sup>3</sup> Femininity is used to denote the dominant societal definition of femininity.

perspective. I then summarize previous empirical research about female athletes and their management of femininity, muscularity, masculinity, and lesbian stereotypes. From these theories and empirical findings, I identify major concepts that I use to analyze the data I collected; these include: hegemonic femininity, negotiation strategies, stereotyping and lesbianism, and gender-appropriate sports. After detailing my empirical methods and then presenting the results from the in-depth interviews, I then synthesize my results with previous literature on the topic.

### **Theoretical Background**

Several theories are relevant for exploring notions and experiences of femininity for female athletes. The overall framework of my study is focused on the social construction of gender, in which hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity are positioned as ideal. By examining social role theory and grounding my research in feminist cultural studies, I hope to provide a foundation to explain the paradoxical world and daily lived experience in which female athletes engage between femininity and athleticism. This will encompass the first part of the literature review and following results. The second part of the literature review and results focuses on an understanding of lesbian stereotypes commonly attached to female athletes. This is expounded upon from Howard Becker's theory of the "falsely accused deviant," as well as grounded in social identity perspective, which assists in the understanding of the development of stereotypes for individuals with multi-dimensional identities. The following theory informs my research questions, expected results, and findings of my study.

#### *Hegemonic Femininity*

Society values traditional notions of femininity, which as social role theory<sup>4</sup> explains, is derived from the gendered division of labor. While men are supposed to take part in activities that require strength and skill, women are supposed to take part in care-giving activities. Thus, in a traditional sense, femininity embodies sensitivity, calmness, and gentleness. Another term used for this is hegemonic femininity, which is captured by sport scholars Lenskyj and Krane and is parallel to RW Connell's conception of hegemonic masculinity (1994; 1999; Choi 2000).

Hegemonic masculinity is the ideal masculinity. It is constructed as public, white, and heterosexual and defines its supremacy based on other subordinate masculinities (ex. homosexual) and women (Connell 1987). Connell defines the term hegemony to mean "social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes" (1987:184). Thus, hegemonic notions may seep into social interactions between individuals. Connell explicates a similar idea of "emphasized femininity;" he does not use "hegemonic" because he believes femininity always stands in a subordinated relational position to masculinity (1987).

Sport scholars Lesnkyj and Krane coined "hegemonic femininity" in the context of female sports because it represents the hierarchy of body types for female athletes (1994; 1999; Choi 2000). Female athletes who maintain a "traditional" feminine image are at the top of the totem pole, and those who maintain a more masculine image are criticized, teased, and stereotyped (Choi 2000). Hegemonic femininity in this sense is embodied by whiteness, heterosexuality, and sexual prowess (Lesnkyj 1994). Similarly to how male athletes attempt an image of the "macho" hyper-masculine male via their dress, verbal behavior, and nonverbal behavior, women attempt to achieve hyper-femininity (Lenskyj1994:359). In order to do so,

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<sup>4</sup> Social role theory is explicated in the next section.

female athletes attempt to over-emphasize their femininity with makeup, overdone hair, jewelry, and clothing style and fit (Lenskyj 1994). Although this hyper-femininity and hegemonic femininity is embraced and idealized, it subordinates those women who instead embrace their athletic muscularity. Thus, female athletes are caught in a dual-world that at once celebrates traditional femininity and necessitates athletic muscularity.

Numerous scholars argue that the new feminine ideal body is toned and fit (George 2005; Dworkin 2001; Bordo 1993). Although this appears progressive at first, for female exercisers and athletes, it creates a “culturally produced glass ceiling - or upper limit - on their muscular strength” (Dworkin 2001:334; Dworkin and Messner 1999). This “glass ceiling” is a concept borrowed from gender analysis of the workplace (ex. women attempting to rise to top positions in companies), but is also helpful when analyzing women in physical activity (Dworkin 2001:337). Dworkin explains:

Women in fitness – particularly those who seek muscular strength – may find their bodily agency and empowerment not by biology but by ideologies of emphasized femininity (Connell 1987) that structure the upper limit on women’s bodily strength and musculature (2001:337).

This concept of a glass ceiling is helpful in understanding how female athletes must manage and negotiate their muscularity in regards to traditional, or ideal, notions of femininity. In the case of female athletes, they require strength and muscularity for athletic performance, but must carefully manage their body image in light of socially acceptable bodily practices for women.

### *Social Role Theory*

Social role theory holds that as a result of the gendered division of labor, sex roles developed which aligned parallel with gendered physical characteristics. Men spent time away from the home as “breadwinners” bringing home money to sustain the family. Their tasks

included heavy physical labor that required the use of strength, skill, and speed. Women, on the other hand, concentrated their work in the home and on the family ensuring that all the children were taken care of (Harrison and Lynch 2005; Eagly, Wood, and Diekmann 2000). These tasks were characterized as masculine and feminine and each respective sex (male and female) was expected to carry out the gendered duty (Harrison and Lynch 2005; Wood and Eagly 2002). Thus formed the basis of gendered norms based on sex.

Stepping outside the boundaries of traditional gender norms usually results in some sort of social disapproval or awkward interaction (Harrison and Lynch 2005). Two different types of norms, descriptive and injunctive, work together to ensure that individuals behave in accordance with traditional gender norms (Harrison and Lynch 2005). Descriptive norms assist individuals in learning information about the proper behavior in specific situations (Harrison and Lynch 2005; Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno 1991). People typically observe behaviors of others of the same sex in order to learn these norms. Deviation from descriptive norms many times results in surprise and may place a halt in a social interaction (Harrison and Lynch 2005). Injunctive norms, however, result in direct social disapproval as they provide “expectations about how people are supposed to behave” (Harrison and Lynch 2005; Cialdini et al. 1991). Social theory foresees that individuals will adhere to traditional norms as a product of the potential consequence of social disapproval (Harrison and Lynch 2005; Cialdini et al. 1991).

In modern society, traditional gender roles are constantly disrupted as women participate in masculine roles (ex. leadership positions in the workplace) and as men participate in feminine roles (ex. caretaking at home). Just as social theory describes, individuals are represented by the gendered role and behavior they participate in, rather than their sex. Thus women may be perceived as masculine and men may be perceived as feminine. Social role theory predicts that

individuals who step outside the boundaries of traditional roles may experience social disapproval (Harrison and Lynch 2005; Cialdini et al. 1991). This theory corresponds with the experiences of female athletes whose participation in the traditionally masculine arena of sports result in a complex negotiation of femininity, muscularity, and masculinity.

### *Feminist Cultural Studies*

A feminist cultural studies perspective provides a foundation with which to understand the paradoxical bodily experiences of female athletes. This perspective is a combination of culture studies and feminist understandings (Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, and Stiles-Shipley 2001). Key founding theorists of culture studies are Richard Hoggart, E.P. Thompson, and Raymond Williams (Cole 1993:82). They are recognized for shifting the focus of culture studies from an analysis of privileged, high class to an analysis of working class, as well as from explaining culture as that of Marx's understanding of capitalism to an understanding of "the specificity and active role of cultural practices in the reproduction of social relations" (Cole 1993:82). Thus, modern cultural studies focuses on exploring every aspect of society – including beliefs, ideologies, behaviors, activities, habits, etc. (Krane et al. 2001). It holds that individual behaviors are influenced by the greater social interactions and behaviors (Krane et al. 2001). Adding "feminist" to the cultural studies allows for a more in depth exploration and understanding of gender within culture (Krane et al. 2001). Specifically, it provides an analysis of "how gender is produced within society, and how culture influences our beliefs about gender" (Krane et al. 2001:1). This perspective challenges gendered assumptions of masculinity and femininity as directly attached to the sexed bodies of males and females (Krane et al. 2001).

Cheryl Cole (1993) and Ann Hall (1996) promote the use of feminist cultural studies in analyzing the experiences of physically active women (Krane et al. 2001; Hall 1996). Hall states that this perspective is especially useful when exploring

the importance of more historically grounded studies; a sensitivity to difference, especially difference among women; the relationship of feminist theory to the study of men, sport, and masculinity; the significance of the body; and feminist cultural politics and sport (Hall 1963:37).

Thus, this perspective allows for a comprehensive interrogation of the experiences of female athletes of negotiating and managing their femininity with their muscularity and perceived masculinity. Cole emphasizes the use of feminist cultural studies in order to examine the paradoxical bodies of female athletes (Krane et al. 2001; Cole 1993). She recognizes that although sport serves as a site for empowerment by women, it is also the site of repression for many women (Krane et al. 2001; Cole 1993). The feminist cultural studies perspective allows theorists like Krane et al., Cole, and Hall to explore the experiences of physically active women in achieving an ideal feminine body in a world that embraces muscularity. Thus, this paper is grounded in feminist cultural studies in order to better understanding how female athletes manage and negotiate their femininity with their athleticism, muscularity, and perceived masculinity.

### *Falsely Accused Deviant*

Howard Becker presented his theory of deviance in 1963 and it has since become a prominent field of exploration in sociology. Deviance refers to an individual who breaks the rules of a group and then becomes an outsider (Becker 1963). Rules may be formal (law) or informal (age, tradition), but both hold power in groups and society (Becker 1963). As a result of different social groups, what is deviant to one group may not be deviant to another (Becker

1963). Becker states, “*social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance*, and by applying those rules to a particular people and labeling them as outsiders” (1963:9). Deviance is constructed in society based on interactions of behaviors and the responses they inhibit (Becker 1963). The deviance theory states that there are four types of deviance: the extremes are “conforming” and “pure deviant” and the two other possibilities in the middle are “secret deviant” and “falsely accused” (Becker 1963:20). The “falsely accused deviant” refers to a person who “is seen by others as having committed an improper action, although in fact he has not done so” (Becker 1963:20). This theory of deviance, and more specifically this type of deviance, provides a foundational understanding for the labeling of female athletes as lesbian.

While Becker lacked research on this specific type of behavior, Klemke and Tiedeman built on this theory to further understand why female athletes are falsely labeled as lesbians (Blinde and Taube 1992). They identified four types of errors that underscore the false labeling: pure, intentional, legitimized, and victim-based (Blinde and Taub 1992; Klemke and Tiedeman 1990). Blinde and Taube theorize that female athletes are more susceptible to lesbian labeling because of a “perceived threat to male sports,” “women athletes’ lack of power and outsider status,” and “stereotype adoption” (1992:526). Becker’s theory of deviance and the preceding error types provide a foundation for understanding the process of labeling female athletes as lesbian.

### *Social Identity Perspective*

Although Becker’s theory of “falsely accused deviants” explains the process by which female athletes may be tagged as lesbians, a social identity (SI) perspective provides a



groundwork understanding of female athletes' experiences with lesbian stereotypes. SI perspective provides an in-depth and holistic analysis to the complexities of identities, particularly those that are marginalized or subordinated (Kauer and Krane 2006). It is specifically used "to understand individual and social behavior through perceptions of group membership" (Krane and Barber 2003:330). I utilize SI perspective in order to understand the development of stereotypes and the ways in which the stereotypes affect the lives of female athletes (Kauer and Krane 2006).

One characteristic of SI perspective focuses on "psychological processes of social categorization and social comparison" (Krane and Barber 2003:331). Categorization involves placing individuals in socially constructed groups with similar characteristics (Krane and Barber 2005). Individuals then obtain social identities which are "consistent with the accepted norms and values of the social group(s) to which they belong" (Kauer and Krane 2006:43). Following this process of self-identification is the process of social comparison, which entails evaluations and judgments relative to other social groups (Kauer and Krane 2006; Krane and Barber 2003). SI perspective posits that "social comparison is motivated by the need for positive social identity, self-esteem, collective esteem, and group status" (Krane and Barber 2003:331). One result of social comparison is stereotypes. Deschamps and Devos define stereotypes as "the attribution of features shared by different members of a group without taking into account the interindividual difference" (1998:4; Kauer and Krane 2006). The creation of stereotypes then defines the rules and norms of social groups and characterizes anything outside of that as deviant and subordinated. In the sports world, lesbian stereotypes for female athletes are so prominent that concern about the label "keeps heterosexual women in their place and lesbian women closeted" (Wright and Clark 1999:239; Kauer and Krane 2006). Thus, the experiences of female athletes

with lesbian stereotypes will be grounded in the SI perspective in order to analyze and fully understand the complexity of the label and the way in which female athletes are placed in a subordinated and marginalized position.

### **Empirical Background**

I use several important concepts culled from this theoretical literature, which are further explored in empirical studies. First, I examine the idea of hegemonic femininity in order to understand the foundation for the struggle that female athletes deal with because of the contradiction between the ideal body type for women in everyday society and the muscular athletic body needed in the sports world. Second, I will discuss previous findings about the ways female athletes face their musculature face to face on a daily basis both on and off the court/field. Third, I will explore the threads between muscularity, masculinity, and lesbianism in order to understand why female athletes are commonly labeled and stereotyped as lesbians. Fourth, I will discuss notions of gender-appropriate and gender-inappropriate sports in order to understand the differing experiences of female athletes based on the sport they play. The theoretical literature, important concepts, and previous research are foundational to my study and help to inform my expected findings.

#### *Experiences with Hegemonic Femininity*

There is a vast amount of previous research about these contradictory notions of the female body, but most focuses on female weightlifters. Dworkin observed female fitness members at several Los Angeles gyms and found that all women, regardless of their rate of lifting (non, moderate, and heavy), “shared explicit fear of and repulsion to female bodybuilder’s

bodies, a fear of becoming too big or bulky themselves, and narratives that focused on how to structure fitness practices so as to ensure (new definitions of) emphasized femininity” (2001:337). Another study by Krane, Waldron, Michalenok, and Stile-Shipley conducted focus groups with female exercisers and competitive athletes and found that they maintained body image issues (2001). Although the athletes were proud of their strong and toned muscular bodies, they were simultaneously dissatisfied with their bodies, especially in social contexts, as they did not meet the culturally feminine body image (Krane et al. 2001). The findings of Dworkin (2001) and Krane et al. (2001) illuminate the presence of the contradiction for female athletes as a result of cultural understandings of femininity and the need for a muscular strong body for athletic performance.

### *Negotiating Muscularity*

Previous research illuminates the reality of contradictory bodily expectations for female athletes. Building on this understanding, further research focuses on how the female athletes manage and negotiate that paradox. Grounding their research in feminist cultural studies, Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, and Kauer sought to explore how female athletes negotiate their muscularity with societal notions of femininity (2004). They conducted focus groups with 21 Division I college athletes and observed three main themes: “*the influence of hegemonic femininity, athlete as other, and physicality*” (Krane et al. 2004:319). Within these themes, they identified key strategies that female athletes utilized in order to manage their femininity with their muscularity, and perceived masculinity (Krane et al. 2004). While some athletes chose to emphasize their femininity on the court by wearing a ribbon in their hair, others chose to focus only on their athletic performance (Krane et al. 2004). The differences in negotiation reveal the difficulty of

the paradox in which female athletes live. Ultimately, Krane et al. furthered our understanding of how “women can actively choose how the paradox of dueling identities is lived through different gender and femininity performances” (2004:327).

Ross and Shinenew conducted a similar study with Division O softball players and gymnasts in order to explore the paradoxical expectations of female athletes’ bodies, as well as how female athletes negotiate that paradox (2008). They found that although the athletes recognized the dual world, they also took liberties when constructing their own identities as women athletes (Ross and Shinenew 2008:53). Results explicated that the female athletes “appreciate their physical power and all but one seemed to enjoy portraying a feminine appearance on occasions that they chose” (Ross and Shinenew 2008:54). Negotiation strategies were determined based on the level of femininity the female athlete wanted to portray (Ross and Shinenew 2008).

These two studies illuminate how female athletes deal with and negotiate their bodies in relation to the paradoxical notions of societal femininity and athletic muscularity. These findings inform both my research questions and expected findings in terms of negotiation of muscularity.

### *The Link Between Muscularity and Lesbianism*

While the paradoxical world for female athletes commonly manifests in a complex negotiation of femininity, there is another aspect of this paradox that exists. Hegemonic femininity in sports embraces those female athletes who embody more feminine characteristics and denounces those female athletes who embody more masculine characteristics. It is important to identify the link between muscularity and masculinity in order to understand first, why female

athletes struggle with their musculature in light of their femininity specifically and second, why many female athletes are labeled as lesbians and thus fear that stereotype.

Michael Messner argues that sport is a societal institution that assists in the development of the socially constructed ideals of masculinity (1992). Young boys establish their masculinity through this institution by playing sports such as wrestling, boxing, and football (Messner 1992). The aggressive and competitive nature of these sports teach young boys that their masculinity is defined by their ability to out-strong other boys and beat their opponents (Messner 1992). Although these characteristics (strength, aggressiveness, competitiveness) are foundational to notions of masculinity, they are in no way descriptive of femininity. Thus, when female athletes partake in sports - which all encompass an element of strength, aggressiveness, and competitiveness - they are identified as masculine (Krane 2001). These characteristics clash with hegemonic femininity (Krane 2001; Hall 1996). Thus, female athletes who partake in these activities are automatically identified as masculine.

While some female athletes only deal with negotiating their muscularity and femininity, other athletes must manage these femininity/muscularity negotiations with an additional lesbian label. This perception of lesbianism draws on an understanding of the social construction of gender in relation to the sexual construction of sexual orientation (Krane 2001; Hargreaves 1994; Bartky 1990). Adrienne Rich argues that society is predicated on notions of “compulsory heterosexuality” (1980). This term identifies the predominant belief system that all individuals are or should be heterosexual (Krane 2001; Rich 1980). This concept of heterosexuality is a key characteristic of hegemonic femininity (Lenskyj 1994; Krane 1999; Choi 2000). Operating under this ideology sets up those female athletes who identify as lesbians to experience discrimination, but also sets up those female athletes who are perceived to be lesbians as a result of their

muscularity and masculinity to experience discrimination (Krane et al. 2004; Krane 1997; Griffin 1998; Blinde and Taub 1992).

Female athletes who are perceived as more masculine, as a result of their muscularity or lack of femininity, are labeled as social deviants (Blinde and Taub 1992). This concept of deviance stems from the previously discussed theory of the “falsely accused deviant” (Blinde and Taub 1992; Becker 1963). Blinde and Taub conducted interviews with 24 Division I college athletes in order to explore the athletes’ experiences with the lesbian label (1992). Their findings supported Becker’s concept of the “falsely accused deviant” and Goffman’s understanding of “stigma management” (Blinde and Taub 1992). This study sets a foundation for exploring female athletes’ experiences with the lesbian label and stereotype.

Several sports scholars describe the social atmosphere of female athletics as centering on heterosexism and homonegativism (Kauer and Krane 2006; Griffin 1998; Krane and Barber 2005; Wellman and Blinde 1997). Previous qualitative research with college female athletes supports this claim. Vikki Krane conducted interviews with 12 athletes in order to identify potential homonegativism in sports (1997). She found that the athletes described a hostile and unsupportive environment towards out-lesbians and perceived lesbians (Krane 1997). In a similar study, Kerrie Kauer and Vikki Krane explored the stereotypes that female athletes experience and the ways in which they react to and manage the stereotypes (2006). Findings from interviews with 15 Division I female athletes showed that they identified with the lesbian stereotyping, kept their sexual orientation personal and secret, negotiated their identities attempting to mirror societal gender roles and expectations, and moved towards progressive change as a result of a “collective esteem” (Kauer and Krane 2006:53). These two studies illustrate how the lesbian

label is prominent in the female sports world and how it directly affects female athletes in a negative manner.

Perceptions of lesbianism, unfair stereotyping, and discriminatory experiences as a result of “masculine” muscularity and sport participation all assist in the manifestation of a fear of the lesbian label. This label not only directly affects the experiences of female athletes but also indirectly represents “the imbalance of opportunity and power” and is thus used by those who seek to maintain that imbalance (Griffin 1998:20). More specifically, it is used to reproduce societal gender inequalities that are mirrored by the institution of sports (Griffin 1998).

Acknowledging that there are several images that fall outside of the stereotypical female athlete embodying hegemonic femininity (ex. female athletes of color), Griffin classifies “the lesbian boogeywoman” as an identity that falls completely outside the permitted boundaries (1998:54). The lesbian boogeywoman is the key reason that female athletes fear their muscularity and perceived masculinity to such a high extent – in fact, it “is cast as a threat not only to ‘normal’ women in sport, but to the image and acceptance of women’s sport altogether” (Griffin 1998:54). This fear of the lesbian label manifests itself not only in the minds of female athletes, but also in the minds of parents, coaches, and fans (Griffin 1998). Thus, in order to contradict this label, many female athletes seek to alter their appearance in a more feminine manner (Choi 2000; Krane et al. 2004; Desertrain and Weiss 1988; Ross and Shiner 2008).

### *Gender Appropriate and Inappropriate Sports*

Although it is clear that the institution of sports is masculine-centered and that female athletes are thus generally not accepted, there exists a gender order among female sports participation. Both outsiders and athletes themselves perceive different sports as more masculine

or more feminine. These notions of gender appropriateness and inappropriateness provide a foundation to understanding different experiences of female athletes based on the sport they play.

Eleanor Metheny was the first scholar to describe what features dictate a sport as masculine or feminine (1965). She identified characteristics of sports activities that deem levels of appropriateness for women (Metheny 1965). These features are socially constructed and are founded on ideals of traditional gender roles (which social role theory explicates) (Metheny 1965). It is not appropriate for women to engage in activities that require bodily contact with an opponent or heavy object or in which the body is thrown through the air for long periods of time or extended distances (Metheny 1965). Some (lower-class) women, however, may engage in activities that require bodily contact with a moderate weight object or in which the body is thrown through the air in moderate distances or short times (Metheny 1965). It is fully appropriate, though, for women to engage in activities that require bodily contact with light-weight objects, throwing the body into the air in “aesthetically pleasing patterns,” use some sort of device, or utilize some barrier to prevent bodily contact with opponents (Metheny 1965:52). The characteristics of activities that are not appropriate for women are deemed masculine and those that are appropriate are deemed feminine (Metheny 1965). These elements of gender-appropriateness were characterized by examining the international Olympic sports rules and arguably encompass one of four sets of deciding factors for gender-appropriateness (Postow 1980; Koivula 2001).

B.C. Postow added another three sets (in addition to Metheny’s) of determining factors for gender-appropriate sports (1980). The second set describes important attitudes, such as “aggressiveness, competitive spirit, stamina, and discipline” (Duquin 1968:97-98; Postow 1980). Although according to these characteristics, all sports would be deemed masculine, what



makes these attitudes specifically masculine is when they are relegated as acceptable and necessary for sport performance (Postow 1980). The third factor posits that a sport is masculine when it is specifically used as a tool to separate men as distinct from women. For example, football and baseball would be deemed masculine because women are not allowed to play them, whereas swimming and volleyball would not be considered masculine because women are allowed to participate (Postow 1980). A key difference here between masculine and feminine sports is that a feminine sport would “socialize both men and women in accordance with the masculine attitudinal mode,” where as a masculine sport would “socialize men as a distinct group from women” (Postow 1980:53). The final set of features that characterize an activity as masculine requires strength and speed, wherein Postow argues, biological factors play a large role (1980). Based on these four sets of features, sports that are deemed masculine include: football, baseball, basketball, boxing, weightlifting, etc (Metheny 1965; Postow 1980; Klomsten, Marsh, and Skaalvik 2005; Koivula 2001). Feminine sports, on the other hand, rest on ideals of beauty and gracefulness. They are not supposed to require competitiveness, aggressiveness, or physicality and are meant to emphasize traditional notions of feminine beauty. Thus, sports such as volleyball, swimming, gymnastics, and dance are deemed as feminine sports (Metheny 1965; Postow 1980; Klomsten et al. 2005; Koivula 2001).

These socially constructed gender stereotypes, although established over 40 years ago, still remain valid. A study conducted by Kane and Snyder with 145 college students revealed that sports (gymnastics and basketball in this study) follow Metheny’s characteristics and are gender-typed based on their appropriateness (1989). Another study, which asked psychology students to describe and then rank characteristics of sports as masculine or feminine, supported Metheny’s gender-appropriate notions of sport (Koivula 2001). While feminine sports necessitated

aesthetics and beauty, masculine sports embodied a certain attitude, a distinction from women, and a requirement of strength and speed (Koivula 2001). Klomsten et al. also confirmed these gendered elements in a study conducted with middle school students (2005). They found that girls and boys participated in different gendered sports and characterized sports as masculine, feminine, or neutral based on different features (Klomsten et al. 2005).

The categorization of sports into masculine and feminine furthers the reproduction of gender appropriateness for females. This understanding of gender-typed sports serves as a foundation for understanding female athletes' differing experiences with the lesbian label and stereotype because of the sport they play.

### **Research Questions**

#### *Research Question 1:*

How do female athletes perceive their femininity relative to their musculature and athleticism?

How do they negotiate societal definitions of femininity in conjunction with their muscularity?

#### *Research Question 2:*

Do female athletes experience any lesbian labeling/stereotypes? What are their perceptions of these stereotypes and how do they deal with them?

#### *Research Question 2a:*

Are there different experiences of these stereotypes for female athletes in different sports?

#### *Research Question 3:*

Are there other aspects of sports that contribute to notions of a different kind of femininity or that provide alternative definitions of femininity?

These research questions stem from previous research and literature on the topic of sports and gender. RQ1 is grounded in social role theory and feminist cultural studies. It seeks to understand the ways in which female athletes negotiate their femininity directly in response to their muscularity. I expect to find that female athletes over-emphasize their femininity as they are caught in a dual world that embraces athleticism and muscularity and prizes those who embody traditional notions of femininity. RQ2 is grounded in deviance theory and social identity perspective. It seeks to understand the experiences of those female athletes who have directly been labeled and stereotyped as lesbians. This stems from knowledge of hostile environments for lesbians and the prevalence of masculine and lesbian stereotypes for female athletes. I expect to find that female athletes experience direct labeling and stereotyping as a result of their muscularity and perceived masculinity. RQ2a stems from an understanding of gender-appropriate sports. I expect to find that female athletes who play more masculine-perceived sports are subject to higher rates of lesbian labeling and stereotyping. RQ3 speaks to the positive aspects of female athletics despite any discrimination and subordination experiences. Overall, I hope to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Division III female athletes with regards to their femininity, muscularity, and perceived masculinity.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

I conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with female athletes from the Emory University undergraduate student population. I engaged in qualitative research in order to both describe and explain the individuals' experiences as female athletes. Qualitative research seeks in-depth, localized understanding of "lived experiences" in a world full of social interactions,

processes, and meanings (Miles and Huberman 1994:10; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland 2006; Weiss 1994). Typically, this type of research engages with a small number of participants in order to study each individual more in depth (Miles and Huberman 1994; Lofland et al. 2006; Weiss 1994). Thus, in order to both present the experiences of female athletes, as well as explain the *why* behind their experiences, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews.

### *Site and Sample*

I selected Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia as my research site for two main reasons. The first is on account of out of accessibility, geographic proximity, and convenience. I knew that because of personal relationships I would be able to complete a sufficient number of interviews to extract adequate results. Secondly, and more importantly, I wanted to explore the experiences of my fellow students who are female athletes. As a former student-athlete, I felt that the area of exploration is under-thought, under-communicated, and under-expressed, especially at my university. Thus in addition to my own personal quest for understanding, I wanted to give female athletes at my school an opportunity to think about and express their experiences.

The participants in my project consisted of 20 National Collegiate Athletic Association Division III female athletes who were current members of varsity teams at Emory University in Atlanta, GA. The parameters of my sample included current female athletes who are at least 18 years old and are Emory undergraduate students. This age requirement bypasses any potential ethical issues with researching minors. I interviewed 20 female athletes: five softball players, four basketball players, four volleyball players, four soccer players, and three swimmers. Although all participants were at least 18 years old, three were freshman, three were

sophomores, seven were juniors, and seven were seniors. All participants self-identified as heterosexual.<sup>5</sup>

### *Data Collection*

In order to recruit participants, I first emailed the Emory University Athletic Director to obtain permission to contact the female athletes. After receiving this permission, I gathered the names of female athletes from the Emory University Athletics website ([www.emoryathletics.com](http://www.emoryathletics.com)) where the rosters for every sport are available. I contacted the female athletes who are on the roster for participating in basketball, softball, volleyball, soccer, swimming and diving, and tennis via the Emory University email system (see Appendix 1). The initial email requested that if interested in participating in an interview with me, the athlete should contact me via email or phone. I received over 20 responses with interest to participate. I sent a subsequent email in order to set up interview dates, times, and locations. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary (no compensation provided) and dependent upon interest only. I attribute the recruitment success to personal relationships that I have with female athletes, as well as that I found many participants feeling that the topic was interesting to them.

Interviews took place in small, quiet, and confidential rooms in an academic building on campus. I did this in order to ensure that participants were comfortable speaking to me about potentially sensitive issues. Before conducting interviews, I obtained informed consent from each participant, which also included permission to record the interview (see Appendix 2). The interview began with a short demographics survey (see Appendix 3), and was then followed by in-depth, semi-structured, and open-ended questions. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45

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<sup>5</sup> Race is not considered in my research study because I wanted to focus specifically on experiences of gender negotiation. However, race definitely plays an impact in individuals' identities and thus would serve as a future site for identity and intersection analysis.

minutes. Question topics included: history of sports, positive and negative connotations of female athletes, knowledge and experiences of lesbian stereotypes, identity as a female athlete, experiences with negotiating femininity and muscularity, and ideas for future change regarding the image of female athletes. (See Appendix 4). I developed the interview guide from previous similar research articles (Blinde and Taub 1992; George 2005) and constructed the questions in a semi-structured format in order to delve into exploration and understanding of specific topics of interest. I used the guide as a platform for my interviews, but many of my interviews led me to ask other questions not on the guide.

### *Analysis*

After digitally transcribing all twenty of the recorded interviews, I inputted the transcriptions into a MAXQDA file in order to efficiently organize, analyze, and draw conclusions from the collected data. My data analysis followed a system of deductive and inductive coding as presented by Miles and Huberman (1994). Using my research questions and interview guide as a starting point, I developed a deductive coding system which included overarching thematic codes with specific sub-codes. I used my research questions, primary concepts, and interview guide to establish my initial set of codes. These overarching codes included: images about female athletes, lesbian stereotypes, negotiating femininity, and reasons for different experiences. I primarily used the sub-codes within each overarching code in order to comb through the interviews and extract pertinent information and quotes to use in my results section. After looking for patterns among the interviews and developing a more structured presentation of analysis, I developed other inductive codes that focused on the new patterns, themes, ideas, and concepts that arose as a result of my reading through the interviews several

times. The use of the deductive-inductive system prepared me to look at my data through several lenses in order to present the experiences of female athletes. After coding all twenty interviews, I pulled the coded sections from each sub-code in order to organize them in a more efficient manner to present in my paper.

## **Results**

Analysis of the twenty interviews with female athletes yielded several sets of response patterns regarding my research questions. I explored the experiences of each female athlete as an individual within their role as an athlete, as well as more specifically within the sport that each individual plays. This allowed me to analyze the experiences of female athletes with negotiating femininity and muscularity overall, as well as draw conclusions about sport-specific experiences with lesbian stereotypes. The four primary themes of analysis are: negotiating muscularity, the lesbian label and stereotype, why some sports and not others?, and transgressing the paradox: empowerment.

### **Negotiating Muscularity**

Female athletes had various attitudes towards muscular bodies and negotiating perceptions of muscularity. A majority of women had positive views towards their body, but there were complexities in this attitudes as well. A multitude of patterns emerged about female athletes' experiences with negotiating femininity and muscularity; these include: embracing musculature, muscle for performance, don't care/brush it off/whatever, on the court is business, embarrassed off the court/field, over-emphasis in everyday life, and over-emphasis on the court/field Table 1 shows which athletes identified with which attitudes.

Table 1: Negotiation of Muscularity by Participants

<b>Embracing Musculature</b>	<b>Muscle for Performance</b>	<b>Don't Care/ Brush it Off/Whatever</b>	<b>On the Court is Business</b>	<b>Embarrassed (Off Court/Field)</b>	<b>Over-Emphasis Everyday</b>	<b>Over-Emphasis On Court/Field</b>
		Swimmer 1				Swimmer 1
Swimmer 2		Swimmer 2				
Swimmer 3		Swimmer 3			Swimmer 3	
Softball Player 1		Softball Player 1	Softball Player 1	Softball Player 1		
Softball Player 2					Softball Player 2	Softball Player 2
Softball Player 3				Softball Player 3		Softball Player 3
					Softball Player 4	Softball Player 4
Softball Player 5					Softball Player 5	Softball Player 5
Volleyball Player 1		Volleyball Player 1	Volleyball Player 1	Volleyball Player 1		
Volleyball Player 2				Volleyball Player 2	Volleyball Player 2	
Volleyball Player 3	Volleyball Player 3	Volleyball Player 3				
Volleyball Player 4	Volleyball Player 4			Volleyball Player 4		
Basketball Player 1		Basketball Player 1		Basketball Player 1	Basketball Player 1	Basketball Player 1
Basketball Player 2		Basketball Player 2				Basketball Player 2
	Basketball Player 3			Basketball Player 3	Basketball Player 3	Basketball Player 3
		Basketball Player 4				
				Soccer Player 1		
Soccer Player 2		Soccer Player 2				
Soccer Player 3				Soccer Player 3		
		Soccer Player 4	Soccer Player 4		Soccer Player 4	



### *Embracing Musculature*

A number of patterns emerged when participants were asked directly whether or not they embrace their muscularity. A majority (n=13) of the twenty female athletes discussed some level of embracing their muscularity. It is interesting to note that all four volleyball players identified with some level of embracement. Within this theme, there are sub-themes within which female athletes discussed their embracing of muscularity; these include: embracing for the most part/or to a point, embracing it to feel fit, and loving the muscularity.

A few of the athletes were hesitant to admit that they embraced their muscularity, but acknowledged the reality of their muscularity. However, they recognized that they embrace it “for the most part” and “to a point.” As Swimmer 3 states: “It’s not like we’re body builders or anything where we’re huge – not that there’s anything wrong with that – I feel like it doesn’t look out of the norm.” Softball Player 3 echoes a similar sentiment of the reality of their muscularity: “...like I’m not afraid to wear tank tops, but I don’t know I wouldn’t go out and try to get super bigger and then wear less clothes that show it off.” Using humor to make fun of non-athletes, Swimmer 2 states: “For me it’s kind of something I play around with, it’s kind of fun, because I can go up to at least 50 percent of the guys on this campus and flex my arm and my arm will be bigger, um, I just think that’s kind of funny.” This attitude of recognizing the reality of muscularity represents an attitude of embracing because the athletes do not have a problem with their muscularity and do not take any specific steps to hide it.

Some athletes embrace their muscularity because it makes them feel good about themselves. Volleyball Player 2 states: “I personally like it because it makes me feel more fit and more toned...I value that muscle.” Similarly, Volleyball Player 3 shares that she “would rather be playing a sport and looking muscular than looking good in clothes” and Volleyball Player 1

states that she “would rather be this way than be frailly and fleshy.” These similar attitudes show a pattern of positive regard for the participants’ own body and musculature.

Some athletes embrace their muscularity by genuinely loving their muscle. Basketball Player 2 states: “I love lifting, I love doing that kind of stuff, hanging out with [strength trainer], that kind of stuff. Working on my guns.” Basketball Player 1 enjoys that image that it portrays to outsiders which is embodied when she states: “as an athlete I feel like I naturally embrace it, like yeah I could kick your ass.” Some of the athletes enjoy “milking it for all it’s worth,” especially when they go out and wear heels, which “makes our calves look awesome” [Softball Player 1]. Soccer Player 3 embraces her muscularity more specifically on the field: “When I’m on the field I like to show off my muscles, like that’s part of the feel where I’m like ‘Yeah! Check out how strong I am what up’ and I’m proud and I like that I’m strong on the field.” The athletes who love their muscle share responses that illuminate experiences of embracing their muscularity.

It is important to recognize that the athletes obtain various meanings and understandings of “embrace,” which is a reason for the multitude of experiences described under this theme. Nevertheless, the ideas presented here illuminate how the majority (n = 14) of the female athlete participants identify with some level of embracing their muscularity.

### *Muscle for Performance*

A further theme that arose from asking about muscularity was that of its positive consequences. Some female athletes may not necessarily *embrace* their muscularity, but they do revel in its performance productivity and effectiveness. Basketball Player 3 expresses this: “I think sophomore year I was more like I don’t want to get big, but this year I saw lacking in my game because of lack of strength, so I decided to prioritize.” The athletes identified a specific

“mindset” and “feeling” with regards to their muscularity. Volleyball Player 3 embodies this:

“Like when I feel in shape, I feel more fine with being muscular.” Echoing a similar sentiment,

Volleyball Player 2 states: “I personally like having that extra muscle, because it just makes me feel more successful I guess.” Specifically contrasting two “types” of muscularity and the

difference in her mental feeling and athletic performance, Volleyball Player 4 states:

[previous strength trainer] literally made me huge. Literally a body of just muscle that wasn't doing anything productive, so I didn't feel good about myself. I just felt sick and gross. Because I wasn't performing well, and my body didn't feel good, because it wasn't the right kind of working out. So with [current strength trainer], even though I'm like very muscular, my legs are very big, and very toned, it doesn't bother me because I feel good when I'm on the court and when I'm playing. So yes, I felt less feminine and more muscular and gross, but it was because my body wasn't performing. So this year when we worked out with [current strength trainer] and I still looked more muscular, but I felt good, so I was never concerned about it.

This quote identifies the importance of muscularity for performance and how that can affect individuals' mindset and feelings about their muscularity, regardless of how non-feminine it may appear.

### *Don't Care/Brush it Off/Whatever*

Half (n=10) of the participants identified with an attitude of not caring about their muscularity, whether in regards to their own feelings about it or in response to any comments made about their body image. It is interesting to note that all of the swimmers identified with some element of this overall sentiment.

These female athletes expressed that they were not offended by comments about their muscularity. Some of them would just move on from the comment and others would engage in conversation to an extent. Soccer Player 4 shares her variety of reactions to comments: “Well when people say something about my height, I'll say something sarcastic back like ‘I didn't

know I was six feet tall, I didn't know that, interesting thought.' But most of the time I'll just laugh it off, brush it off, and don't care any more, you know?" Echoing the general sentiment of this theme, Volleyball Player 1 states: "it doesn't bother me, I'm just like whatever." Both Swimmer 3 and Basketball Player 1 also used the "it's like whatever" statement with regards to comments they receive about their muscularity.

With respect to appearance off of the court, Basketball Player 2 states: "I'm one of those people that kind of does whatever, I don't really care. So, I don't really care if people think that I'm not very feminine because personally I don't really want to be that feminine." Echoing a similar attitude, Swimmer 1 states: "I figure that if people...disliked my opinion, then that's their problem and they can go away (laughter)." The athletes stand strong in their own images and appearance. Swimmer 2 embodies this: "I'm of the opinion that other people can think what they want of me. I know what I am and I know what I'm not, and if I want to go to class in the same sweatpants for three days, I will go to class in the same sweatpants." These athletes do not care what people think of their appearance and carry this attitude with them both on and off the court/field.

The feelings of the female athletes who don't care about what others think about them embody this attitude both with their responses to any comments they may receive about their muscularity, as well as with what they wear to class (i.e. deciding whether or not to change before or after practice).

### *On the Court is Business*

Three of the athletes shared responses about their appearances on the court/field and recognized that while playing, all they care about is their sport – not their appearance. These

athletes separate their identities as a female and as an athlete and are thus able to = focus only on performing while on the court/field. Softball Player 1 embodies this when she states:

I don't really care and like my thought is like if I'm on the field, I'm a softball player, like that is my responsibility, that is my role at that point in time, so I'm not going to like put a bow in my hair or like put hairspray in my hair so that it stays, like I will re-do my hair in between innings, I really don't care what I look like.

Similarly, Volleyball Player 3 expresses: "Well on the court, I don't really care what I look like at all. Its' kind of a last priority thing." Showing that she can be athletic and feminine in two separate environments, Soccer Player 4 states: "I tend to not really mind, and I also know that once the game is over I'll shower and put on a more feminine look once I'm done with the game." The responses of these female athletes show a clear distinction between the identities of feminine women and muscular athletes. These female athletes focus only on their athletic performance when they are on the court/field and do not do anything to enhance their femininity while playing.

### *Embarrassed in the Real World*

Some of the women mentioned feeling embarrassed about their musculature in the real world, or off the court/field. None of the athletes identified with embarrassment while on the court/field, which speaks to their pride, confidence, and empowerment as athletes in the sports world. It is interesting to note that none of the swimmers identified with being embarrassed about their muscularity. Athletes who did feel embarrassed about their muscularity embodied this feeling about their bodily appearance either in their own minds or when responding to comments made about their body image.

Athletes expressed that being muscular makes them appear "bulky," "huge," "big," and "like a dude." These athletes did not enjoy weightlifting and are embarrassed about the way they

appear as a result of the mandatory weightlifting for all varsity athletes. They shared that it interfered the fit of their clothes. For some, it meant that it made them more masculine. Softball Player 3 states: “the ideal female is not bulky and big in society’s eyes.” This quote captures the essence of the paradox in which female athletes live.

A sense of embarrassment was also apparent when athletes shared their responses to comments about their muscularity. Volleyball Player 3 states: “I just like deny it I guess. Like ‘no they’re not.’ People are always like ‘Oh my gosh your arms are so strong’ and I’ll be like ‘No’ – like that kind of thing I guess.” Softball Player 1 shared that she is sometimes apologetic: “I guess sometimes I apologize for it – which is weird, I don’t really know why I do it – like ‘sorry I’m an athlete.’” These responses illuminate a feeling of embarrassment about their muscularity when they are in the real world off the court/field.

Although a few athletes did not share any specific ways in which they hide their muscularity, they did express that they wish they did more effectively. Basketball Player 1 states: “outside of basketball, I’m kind of like maybe I should hide that you know, maybe I would fit in, maybe I would have a boyfriend if I was a little more feminine (laughter).” This attitude illuminates an ideal that these female athletes wish they could achieve (hiding muscularity) in order to not feel embarrassed about their body images.

### *Over-Emphasis in the Real World*

Over-emphasis refers to steps taken by female athletes to over-emphasize their femininity. There were 8 athletes who responded that they over-emphasize their femininity when in the real world, or off the court/field. Of the 8 athletes, all but one athlete expressed that an over-emphasis of femininity was *consciously* done in order to counteract their muscularity.

Basketball Player 3, however, states: “I think that’s just who I am, that I like to dress up and look nice sometimes. Sometimes, definitely sometimes.” None of the athletes felt as though it was a “conscious daily struggle” to combat their femininity and muscularity. The athletes noticed that when they do get dressed up, they over-emphasize their appearance. Softball Player 2 expresses: “When I do get dressed up, I go all the way so if I’m going out, I’ll straighten my hair, I’ll definitely go all out to be more feminine.” Soccer Player 4 distinguishes her appearance based on whether or not they are in season: “...like during season I’ll go to class dressed in my sports outfits and stuff, and then once season’s over I’ll make a conscious effort to look cuter in class.” For other athletes like Volleyball Player 2, she notices that she over-emphasizes her femininity specifically when she is in season: “Or like if we would ever go out during season I want to look nice just to counteract like ‘no I don’t always look this gross always like after practice!’”

The multitude of feelings regarding over-emphasis off the court/field illuminates the complexity of the paradoxical world in which female athletes live. Basketball Player 1 captured the essence of this struggle for female athletes: “I also feel like there is definitely pressure to be sure that we do maintain femininity in some aspect. Because otherwise we would just be labeled back to where it was before, ‘oh she’s just super masculine, she must be a lesbian.’”

### *Over-Emphasis on the Court/Field*

Some athlete use strategies to over-emphasize their femininity while on the court/field. It is important to note that four out of the five softball players and three out of the four basketball players mentioned some element of over-emphasis. Likewise, the only other athlete that mentioned over-emphasis on the court/field is a swimmer – no volleyball players or soccer players participate in over-emphasis strategies. Thus, presentation of this theme will be

organized based on sport, because there are sport-specific patterns within over-emphasizing femininity.

Swimmer 1 shares that she puts waterproof eyeliner and mascara on before swim meets. She expresses that it is not specifically for femininity, but rather for her overall appearance as a senior and captain on the team – especially when she knows she will be photographed: “I think it is more of an appearance of looking put together. Because do I want to look feminine and put together when I’m on the website? Yes. But it’s mostly like, I just don’t want to look like an exhausted person.” It is important to note here that there is not much room for over-emphasis by swimmers merely because of the nature of the sport and the swimsuits and head-caps worn.

Important elements of appearance for softball players include the fit of their uniform, makeup, and hair. Softball Player 2 expresses the importance of how their uniform looks:

We just chose our uniforms and getting a size that fits and isn’t like really baggy is important, but then also we had jerseys that we were way too tight and I didn’t like that either – so finding the right size is important. And it’s also important because when you see someone on the other team with really baggy clothes, you have those connotations – they look sloppy, they look more masculine, they don’t look feminine.

By recognizing the stereotypes that are present among the softball community, Softball Player 4 shares her ideas about makeup:

So when I wear mascara, so I don’t look bad, just personally, and so I can almost distinguish myself from that, like not that there’s anything wrong with that, but personally I know I make that assumption right off the bat, so I’m going to assume that most people do that too, so I’m going to maybe not be categorized into that, so that’s why.

Softball Player 3 also wears makeup, but doesn’t do it necessarily as a conscious combative strategy. In terms of hair appearance, Softball Player 5 states: “Well I know our team is really into ribbons this year, so we all have big sparkly bows and everything.” Similarly, Softball Player 2 shares:



Depending on wear your hair is it looks more feminine or more like you didn't really care. So I usually wear it higher or I have a colored headband on...I put effort into my hair before the games because it's the only thing that differentiates me from everybody else on the field.

Strategies utilized by softball players to over-emphasize their femininity on the field include wearing a uniform that fits properly, putting makeup on, doing their hair, and wearing ribbons and bows. Most of the strategies are used in order to counteract negative connotations of softball players; basketball players share many of the same beliefs and strategies.

Basketball Player 1 admits that most of her teammates focus on how their hair looks for a conscious purpose:

I don't know I guess I do kind of make like a decent effort, I know we all do, to make sure our hair looks okay because it's like we already don't look feminine in our uniforms, we're running around hitting people, and we're sweating like we already look pretty masculine so I think we do kind of try and like have our hair look cute or something like.

Ensuring that their hair looks good is common among the basketball team, but Basketball Player 2 states: "I mean my teammates make fun of me for this but I straighten my hair before every game." Basketball Player 3 wears make up and also straightens her hair for every game because "it is a performance and people are watching." This idea of the importance of a performance is also expressed by Basketball Player 1: "we know that we all do care how we appear to people who come to our games – those are going to be your friends – I don't think that anyone wants to be labeled completely masculine, I think we want to retain some femininity." These steps taken by basketball players to ensure that they look good while playing their sport are explicit strategies used to counteract the muscularity and perceived masculinity that athletes experience.

## **The Lesbian Label and Stereotype**

All athletes were asked about lesbian stereotypes, but some had more knowledge and more experience of them than others. The only athletes that were directly labeled as lesbians were basketball and softball players. The athletes of the other sports (soccer, volleyball, swimming) were knowledgeable about the lesbian stereotype but all recognized that lesbian stereotypes were contingent on the sport - which they identified as basketball and softball.

### *The Unfair Stereotyping Culture*

Attitudes about the lesbian stereotype from both those personally victimized and those who are just aware of the stereotype imply that there is no reason for a direct connection with athleticism and that even if an athlete is a lesbian, it should not matter. As Basketball Player 1 states: "Well a stereotype for female athletes is that there are always lesbians on the team, like always, and for basketball too. And I feel like that's stupid because it shouldn't matter, like I don't know why it matters." Similarly, Volleyball Player 4 states: "And it's part of the culture, like the stereotyping culture. I think that it's really hard for them. I don't think it's fair." These feelings about the lesbian label by all athletes give a glimpse into the world that athletes have to negotiate on a daily basis as a result of the activity to which they devote so much time and energy.

### *Personal Experiences*

Knowledge of lesbian stereotypes from non-basketball and softball players falls in line with the personal experiences of basketball and softball players, as they were the only female athletes who admitted to being personally labeled as lesbian. Four of the five softball participants and three of the four basketball participants are victims of the lesbian stereotype.

The labeled female athletes discussed an important factor of location in terms of where they are labeled and the type of people who are falsely identifying them as lesbians. The labeling primarily occurs at locations off campus in social settings around individuals who make rash judgments based on the type of sport the individual plays. As Softball Player 3 states: “Because when you go out and say ‘Oh I play softball,’ their first question could be, ‘Oh are you a lesbian?’” Similarly, Softball Player 4 explains the importance of location:

Not at [school name], no. Because everyone knows who everyone is, so it’s not a big deal. But I know at other schools, like if I tell people I play softball in college, they give me a look. Like, ‘Ohhhh...’ Cause you see them on TV, it’s not a secret that it’s not the most feminine sport around, so I don’t think at [school name] it’s like that at all because I think everyone knows pretty much who’s on the softball team, so it’s not a big deal. But other people at times I think think that.

The female athlete notices that whether or not they experience direct labeling and stereotyping depends on their location and the people around them. Whereas people at their school know who they are, people outside of the school setting, people generalize their sexual orientation based on the sport they play.

### *Responses*

The athletes who are directly questioned or stereotyped as lesbian elicit different responses, which include questioning the accuser, laughing at the accuser, and arguing and debating with the accuser. There is no clear pattern among type of sports for the type of response elicited. Those who question the accuser, like Softball Player 4, state something along the lines of: “‘Do I look like it? Like would you ever guess I played softball? Just based off of what people normally think softball players’—that’s what I normally say. Like ‘would you guess that I’m lesbian or whatever?’” Others, like Softball Player 3, “laugh it off...because I’m not gonna go fight someone about it.” The last type of response is more aggressive and directly engages the

accuser in a conversation, like Basketball Player 1: “Um I usually get into heated arguments with people being like basically what I was saying, it’s like why does it matter? Especially, I get really defensive if someone says something about my teammates, its like who fucking cares, yeah so what.” This usually comes from athletes who feel like they have been personally attacked, such as Basketball Player 2: “I think it’s really rude...like it’s just dumb. Like so what? Stupid.” There are no clear patterns with regards to the different responses of female athletes labeled as lesbian, but all the athletes engage in different responses to some extent.

### *Strategies to Combat*

Athletes who are directly stereotyped deal with the victimization in different ways (note that these strategies are different from the aforementioned negotiation strategies used to manage muscularity and femininity). Only three athletes mentioned any sort of negotiation in order to directly combat stereotyping; the others did not state any specific appearance negotiations in relation to stereotyping. Softball Player 3 states: “some girls on our team won’t say they play softball, they’ll say, ‘I play volleyball’ or something, to avoid the stigma that goes with it.” This quote captures the intensity of the stereotyping culture and the lengths to which some athletes will go in order to avoid the labeling. Many of the softball players also shared that they do not like wearing their softball gear off the field because of their ugliness and because they do not want to be stereotyped as lesbian. A series of questions with Basketball Player 3 illuminated how the stereotype affects her appearance while on the court:

*Basketball Player 3:* I always wear makeup in my games. I don’t clog it on, but it’s something I’ve always done...But like I do my hair for games, I straighten it, make sure it looks nice, just cause it is a performance, and people are watching. Plus if you look good, you feel good, you play good.

*Interviewer:* So you feel like you’re consciously doing those things?

*Basketball Player 3:* Yeah, I definitely, I want my hair to look good, I want my makeup to look good, I definitely care about my appearance.

*Interviewer:* And do you feel like that's probably because you're worrying about your muscularity, or you don't want to be stereotyped, or something like that?

*Basketball Player 3:* It probably originated with that, like I guess I wouldn't want to be stereotyped like that, and that's how it started, like look nice for games. I don't want to be perceived as a butchy basketball player...

The experiences of female athletes who were directly labeled as lesbians (basketball and softball players) mirror the opinions of those athletes who are aware of the stereotype culture but not necessarily immersed in it. The athletes utilize different strategies to combat the lesbian stereotype, which range from apologizing to ignoring to engaging in conversation.

### **Why Some Sports and Not Others?**

There was a clear difference in the experiences of female athletes with lesbian stereotypes. Although I can theorize (from previous literature and research) why basketball and softball players were the only athletes directly labeled as lesbians, I thought discussing this significant difference with the female athletes would illuminate a more in-depth understanding of the issue. The primary themes that athletes discussed in terms of why some sports were labeled more than others included: whether or not there is a parallel male sport, the required uniforms, and the body type needed. The last two themes are connected to the experiences of female athletes while negotiating femininity and muscularity, as some athletes' necessary body type and uniform are perceived as more masculine than feminine.

#### *Parallel Male Sport*

One difference that the athletes recognized was whether or not their sport has a parallel male sport. Of the type of sports played by the participants, there are three possible scenarios:

males have the same sport (soccer, swimming, basketball), males have a similar sport with different rules (softball), and males have the sport but it is not very popular/played at this school (volleyball). Basketball Player 3 states: “because it’s the same sport it’s [women’s basketball] so compared to it [men’s basketball], which gives it a masculine side as well.” Whereas Volleyball Player 3 notices the opposite: “because we don’t have a men’s team we are not being directly compared.” Softball Player 4 shares a similar understanding of masculinity in softball as a result of baseball being an older male sport and softball developing out of that:

Like softball is a relatively new sport, like Emory’s only had it for like 15 years...So it’s like not around a lot, so when it first started coming on TV, maybe like 8 years ago, not even, like all the girls, they were all very lesbian-looking...But when it first came on TV, that’s what everyone, that’s just what all the girls were. And especially then because it wasn’t as big, so in my mind it would be like if I’d started playing softball then I’d have played baseball. Honestly, realistically, they probably first played baseball. And I don’t know how bad this is gonna sound, but what girly girl, like what girl who would go choose to play volleyball, would that same girl go and choose to play baseball first? Cause most of them played baseball cause there wasn’t softball. So I just think that that’s how softball got—cause the girls who first started playing were, I don’t know, just more confident in themselves, definitely more tomboyish cause they’d go play baseball first. And then when they’re on TV, just the way they look, and that was just the way it got started.

The athletes here believe that the presence or lack of a parallel male sport directly impacts how female athletes are viewed. For some, they are seen as masculine when directly compared and for others, they have no comparison and thus no premature idea of the image of the athletes.

### *Body Type Needed*

Although there are no prescribed parameters for what an athlete needs to look like in order to play a specific sport, athletes of different sports appear differently based on the type of physical movements and necessity of strength and muscle in varying areas of the body. Athletes shared that this was one reason stereotypes existed for some sports and not others. For example,

Soccer Player 3 states: “soccer players are notorious for having weak upper bodies and then really huge thighs.” Soccer Player 1 observes: “I think a range of body types that you can see that soccer players have versus other sports...but its kind of always like ‘oh you have soccer legs.’” Volleyball Player 2 echoes a similar understanding of necessary body types based on sport: “But girls basketball and soccer, they’re usually bigger girls and tougher and those are the more physical sports. Volleyball isn’t really a contact sport, so you can be smaller, like less built, and still be a successful athlete.” Softball Player 1 captures the essence of the different body types when she describes what is necessary for a good softball player:

I mean that just is what a good softball player is going to be bigger and stronger. Um, so people are like oh she looks like a mean, she’s built like a man. And that, they make conclusions about that, and that doesn’t necessarily mean anything – it’s just that they are built like a softball player – that’s the kind of build that you...you know we’re not supposed to be like the most athletic, like we don’t run a lot. Like, we just, the best players are going to have the most power as opposed to like a tennis player or a soccer player who is going to be very fit because they are running around a lot – they don’t need to have a lot of sheer power and strength, so I guess like the build of people’s body that people see a lot and associate with that sport.

Although all athletes are generally more muscular than non-athletes, certain types of muscularity are considered more feminine and more ideal by beauty standards than others. This is why some musculature is acceptable for some athletes (volleyball, soccer) and not for other athletes (softball, basketball). It is also the cause of different experiences, based on sport, with lesbian stereotypes.

### *Uniforms*

In addition to different body types based on sport, each sport requires a different uniform – which many of the athletes discussed as having an impact in how they are viewed when they are on the court/field. Most athletes talked about the uniforms of volleyball players as

influencing their appearance as “girlier” and “oversexualized.” Volleyball Player 2 states: “Because volleyball is more of a girly sport. Even how our uniforms are – we wear spandex, we don’t wear baggy shorts or stuff like that.” Softball Player 4 compares their uniforms to those of volleyball players: “...but it’s not like we’re the volleyball team. Like we don’t wear tight clothes like that.” Echoing a similar response is Softball Player 1: “thinking in terms of volleyball where like they wear spandex and like softball players wear pants and big jerseys, you know, they’re not like, it’s a different...the femininity is just not there.” The two sports that were tagged with more masculine uniforms were basketball and softball. Softball Player 2 states: “if I had to choose one sport that was most masculine I would say it was basketball...like what they wear, honestly. We went to their game the other day and their shorts go down to here [points to just below her knee]...and I think more so than even softball.” Basketball Player 1 shares the same sentiment: “softball uniforms are a lot more feminine than basketball uniforms.” It is clear that appearance on the court/field has a large impact on the ways the athletes are viewed in terms of femininity and masculinity. Uniforms are very influential and cannot be altered by the athletes, which is why many of them engage in strategies to deflect masculine images (discussed in the first section of Results).

### **Transgressing the Paradox: Empowerment (Stepping Over the Boundaries)**

Despite the discrimination that female athletes incur as a result of the contradictory world that female athletes live in, sports still serves as a source of empowerment for many of the women. None of the athletes felt embarrassed about their muscularity while on the court/field playing their sport. This is important because it illuminates the strength, confidence, and pride that the athletes embody specifically while playing their sport.



This source of empowerment would not be possible without the opportunities provided to women by Title IX. A few athletes recognized the beauty of participating in sports as a female in the post-Title IX era: “Well I think it’s really cool, you know Title IX really wasn’t that long ago and I think it’s awesome that we get to be a part of, you know, being a female athlete just in general...and representing female athletes everywhere” (Softball Player 5). The athletes also recognized the individual and collective benefits that they reap as a result of participating on a sports team, which include: strength, confidence, determination, leadership, and cooperation. Softball Player 5 states: “they kind of outweigh any negative awkward connotations we may have.” Volleyball Player 2 captures the beauty of sports for women: “I just think that being an athlete is kind of a source of empowerment. Being successful and being competitive is really healthy mentally and physically, it just makes girls especially feel better about themselves.”

### *Strength and Confidence*

The athletes discussed that female athletes are “strong, both mentally and physically” (Swimmer 3). Swimmer 3 also recognized that “going out and putting yourself on the line for your sport or whatever it may be, that takes a lot of confidence to do.” This comment was said in light of Title IX and the acknowledgement that female athletes do not follow society’s prescribed norms for women. Soccer Player 3 discussed the immense impact that sports had in her life: “it helps empower me and make me more confident in myself. Like it’s helped me grow as a person I’d say.”

### *Working Hard to Achieve Goals*

The athletes take pride in working hard to achieve their goals both on and off the court/field, but like Basketball Player 3 acknowledge “a lot of the things that drive me as an athlete also drive me as a female and as a person.” Specifically noting success and motivation on the court/field, Basketball Player 2 states:

Definitely a lot of people realize that we are working hard and we’ve overcome a lot of obstacles, especially in the past years, to be, like we’re currently 7-0 and people are like “Wow you’ve been working so hard.” So they definitely understand that. And that’s a positive, like when people recognize the work we put into it, it really feels good.

Softball Player 5 expresses a similar attitude: “I love being an athlete and everything that goes into it, working hard and achieving your goals and the camaraderie of the team.” The athletes embrace the determination and motivation that sports provide them; and they use those skills both on and off the court/field.

### *Leadership and Team Skills*

The athletes embrace their team and the supportive community that automatically forms around them. Basketball Player 3 states:

I like being part of a team. I think that you have an immediate community that is always there to support you, you always can have lunch with someone, you always will hang out with, so I love that part of it. And I think that’s a really important aspect of sports, especially for females.

Volleyball Player 2 expresses a similar attitude:

...especially with team sports, I think that’s very very integral in female sports especially, because we’re so social. I guess there are female sports, like tennis or track or stuff like that, that aren’t quite – but there’s still a team feel to it and that is huge. And I think that the relationships that you form are almost as important as the actual product of your work.

Additionally, they recognized that being part of a team requires an “understanding of being in a leadership role,” which as Softball Player 1 states usually means that “you have to be loud, you have to be kind of like assertive, and like you can’t be, you don’t really meet a shy athlete usually, um, so having a strong personality too.” The recognition of the positive benefits of sports for female athletes, regardless of the discrimination and difficulties they experience as a result of their muscular bodies, is very important because it shows the beauty of the institution of sports and the impact it has on so many individuals.

## **Discussion**

The findings of my study illustrate how female athletes experience their bodies in a paradoxical world. The female athletes demonstrate varying attitudes and strategies used in regards to negotiating their muscularity. The multitude of experiences shows that the paradoxical world of femininity and muscularity creates a contradiction for female athletes. Although the athletes did not feel as though their negotiations constituted a daily struggle per se, their responses indicated that they manage their bodies and appearance specifically in relation to their identities as women and athletes.

Using social role theory and feminist cultural studies, the findings of my study illuminate how female athletes experience and negotiate their femininity in contrast to their muscularity. Social role theory analyzes the process of stepping outside of gender role boundaries and thus provides a foundational explanation for the experiences of female athletes. Feminist cultural studies provides a deeper understanding of the female athletes’ paradoxical notions of body types. Thus, the two theories combined lay the framework for understanding the experiences of female athletes when negotiating their femininity and muscularity.

The female athletes described a multitude of attitudes regarding negotiation of their muscularity. Although there are no clear patterns for this theme based on sport, there are some categorizations that all of the athletes in one particular sport embody. These are highlighted. My study does not explain these specific correlations, but provides the groundwork for future research in this area.

Some athletes embraced their muscularity. All volleyball players (n=4) discussed feelings of comfortableness and embracement with their muscularity. Embracing muscularity resulted in attitudes of embracing it to a point, embracing it to feel fit, and loving it. Others solely recognized the necessity of their muscularity for athletic performance. These athletes focused primarily on their roles as athletes and thus realized how the muscle improves their performance. Some athletes simply did not care about their muscularity and brushed off any negative comments that they received. All swimmers (n=3) embodied this feeling.

With regards to femininity, some athletes maintained that when they are playing their sport, all they are concerned with is their athletic performance and thus do not worry about a feminine appearance. These athletes tended to embrace two separate identities, woman and athlete, which were more prominent in the “appropriate” sphere. Contrarily, some athletes were concerned about their appearance on the court/field and engaged in strategies to appear more feminine. Previous research identifies this over-emphasis of femininity as a sign of a female “apologetic” who uses a feminine appearance to apologize for participating in the non-feminine domain of sport (Felshin 1974; Desertrain and Weiss 1988). Female athlete apologetics engage in strategies while playing their sport such as wearing make up, having straight hair, and/or using bows and ribbons (Desertrain and Weiss 1988). These strategies correlate with the personal experiences of basketball (n=3 of 4) and softball (n=4 of 5) players with lesbian stereotypes.

Almost half of the participants (but none of the swimmers) identified with a feeling of embarrassment about their muscularity when off the court/field. They described the root of this embarrassment as the disagreement of their muscularity with their femininity. When in social settings and not in the sport atmosphere, their muscularity stands out and is not accepted. Thus, some of the athletes identified with over-emphasizing their femininity specifically while not playing their sport. This was done to combat their muscular build. This strategy mirrors West and Zimmerman's process of "doing gender," which is the process of organizing one's behaviors and activities to express a specific gender (1987). It may also be explained by social role theory, which describes that individual attempt to adhere to traditional roles in fear of any social disapproval (Harrison and Lynch 2005; Cialdini et al. 1991).

Although no clear patterns of negotiations emerged among specific sports, the varying attitudes and experiences of negotiating of femininity illuminate how paradoxical, controversial, and complex the management of femininity and muscularity is for female athletes. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Krane et al. 2004; Ross and Shiner 2008).

The second theme of analysis focused on stereotyping and labeling experiences by female athletes. Howard Becker's theory of the "falsely accused deviant" and a social identity perspective provide a groundwork understanding to the stereotyping processes. Female athletes are identified as "deviants" because they break the traditional societal boundaries of femininity. The combination of stepping outside boundaries plus their muscular appearance leads them to be "falsely accused" as lesbians (Becker 1963). This label manifests in a common stereotype for female athletes, which as social identity perspective theorizes, is a process of social categorization, identification, and rule creation (Krane and Barber 2003; Krane and Barber 2005; Kauer and Krane 2006).

While all participants were aware of the lesbian label commonly attached to female athletes, only basketball (n=3 of 4) and softball (n=4 of 5) players experienced a direct lesbian label. Thus, although there was a general awareness of the stereotype, the female athletes who play basketball and softball are the only athletes who are further scrutinized and subordinated, and thus maintain further strategies to combat the stereotype. Athletes who were not directly labeled (soccer, volleyball, swimming) recognized that basketball and softball were the primary sport to experience the lesbian label. This reinforces the prominence of the stereotype and the type of athletes to which it is attached.

According to the characteristics outline by Metheny and Postow, masculine sports are those that require more strength, speed, bodily competitiveness, and aggressiveness and feminine sports are those that maintain physical beauty and less of the aforementioned features. For the sports analyzed in my study, these characteristics describe volleyball and swimming as feminine sports, basketball as a masculine sport, and soccer and softball as falling in the middle. Lesbianism is commonly attached to individuals that appear more masculine (Griffin 1998). It would seem plausible that because all female athletes maintain a level of masculinity (from their muscularity), they would all experience a somewhat equal amount of labeling and stereotyping. However, every sport is different and the athletes for each sport appear differently. Within the culture of sports in general, there is a culture of each specific sport – what your body looks like, what to wear on the court/field, what to wear off the court/field, how to talk about your sport, how much time you spend training for your sport, etc. These other aspects of sport culture, in addition to the physical characteristics of each sport, play a role in determining which sports are more masculine or feminine, thus receive more or less labeling and stereotyping.

Findings from my study illustrate that compared to soccer, volleyball, and swimming, basketball and softball are perceived as more masculine and thus those athletes experience more labeling and stereotyping. The participants identified the following key determining factors of gender-appropriateness: body type needed, uniforms worn, and whether or not there is a parallel male sport. Each of these characteristics is in accordance with Metheny and Postow's notions of gender appropriate sports, as well as previous supporting studies (Kane and Snyder 1989; Koivula 2001; Klomsten et al. 2005). Thus, the findings show that female athletes who play masculine-perceived sports are more susceptible to the lesbian label than those female athletes who play a feminine-perceived sport.

Despite the struggles that female athletes experience as a result of the paradoxical body expectations and the lesbian label, sport serves as a key site of empowerment for these women. This was evident from the participants' discussions of strength, confidence, pride, achievement, and leadership. Additionally, none of the athletes identified with a sense of embarrassment about their muscularity while playing their sport. This illustrates a manifestation on the court/field of their attitudes regarding the empowerment that sport provides. Although I was not expecting to find this amount of overwhelming pride and confidence from the female athletes, these findings did coincide with previous studies (Krane et al. 2004; Krane et al. 2001).

In recognizing that qualitative research provides a limited amount of analysis in explaining patterns, I infer other explanations from theories. Specifically, underlying the female athletes' experiences of negotiations with gender is the concept of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity exposes how heterosexuality is the ideal and expected sexual orientation for all individuals (Rich 1983). Queer theorists deconstruct this idea and in doing so provide characteristics that explain how heterosexuality stands as a societal institution by "normalizing

tendencies of hegemonic sexuality rooted in ideas of static, stable sexual identities and behaviors” (Cohen 2001:541; Warner 1999). Understanding how heterosexuality acts as an institution provides an additional explanation to the experiences of female athletes in negotiating their femininity because it explains how their gender appearances are all subject to the “requirement” of heterosexuality.

Although the findings of this study confirm those of previous research, it explores the identities and experience of female athletes who participate in athletics at the Division III level. Previous studies cited in this paper utilized female athletes participating at the most elite level possible, Division I.<sup>6</sup> This is possibly because researchers view Division I as the prime crop of female athletes for participants and may not believe that female athletes in lower divisions experience the same negotiations. However, the findings in this study illuminate that the experiences of Division III female athletes mirror those of Division I female athletes. Further research may explore this difference in more depth to analyze whether or not level of participation (Division I vs. Division II [or] III) plays a fundamental role in the experiences of female athletes with their femininity and muscularity.

Another area for further research is to specifically explore and analyze different negotiation attitudes and strategies within sports. The findings of my study showed that for some categories all of the participants in one sport maintain a certain feeling (ex. all volleyball players embrace their muscularity). The scope of my research does not explain any specific correlations between negotiations and sports, thus further research would be able to fill this gap.

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<sup>6</sup> The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) governs athletics for member universities at the Division I, II, and III levels. Of the 1,066 total member schools, 340 are Division I and 436 are Division III (“About” 2012). The NCAA’s academic philosophy for Division I schools states that the “ultimate goal is for student-athletes to graduate” (“Division I” 2012). The NCAA’s academic philosophy for Division III schools states: “academics are the primary focus for...student-athletes” (“Division III” 2012).



My research study has some limitations. First, my study may not be representative of all female athletes. This is a major limitation for any qualitative research study. Although my data helps to illuminate theory and social processes, it does not represent the experiences of all female athletes. To do so would require a large, representative sample. Second, the decision to collect data via interviews rather than surveys may favor the gathering of certain types of information, potentially with inherent bias of the interviewer. Especially because the nature of the study relies on sensitive topics (sexuality, gender, stereotypes), I may have been able to gain a better understanding of how the participants specifically viewed themselves in terms of femininity (i.e. super feminine or tomboy?), as compared to a formatted survey structure. Third, several of the concepts I sought to analyze were not at the forefront of the participants' consciousness. Thus, I found it difficult to sometimes acquire answers that promote a more thorough understanding of their experiences. Fourth, the participants all have different understandings and definitions of words such as "embrace" and "over-emphasize." Thus, responses from participants required discretion on my part as the researcher in order to infer what the participants were describing in certain circumstances. Aside from that, however, the participants may also have different understandings of the questions as a result of their academic and/or class standing.

Overall, results from this study indicate how female athletes manage gendered expectations by adopting a superficiality of their appearance that dissembles completely from the essence of athletes. Although female athletes experience discrimination as a result of their muscularity and perceived masculinity, they perform a gender revolution every time they play the sport. Male athletes do not have to do so because of hegemonic masculinity. Female athletes, whether or not they identify as such, are living a feminist revolution by virtue of being an athlete. Unfortunately, it is a struggle on a daily basis in a myriad of ways. Nevertheless, sports offer

radical opportunities for transformation. The reasons and ways in which female athletes negotiate their femininity and muscularity tells us a lot about other spheres that have less space for transformation (ex. the workplace). The results of this study broadly illustrate how sports can serve as radical revolutionary spaces despite the impact that gender stereotypes has on identities.

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## Appendix 1

### Recruitment Email

Dear Female Athlete,

Hi, my name is Ariella Faitelson, and I am an undergraduate sociology major. I am currently working on a senior honors thesis about female athletes and how they manage and negotiate their athletic body types with traditional notions of femininity. *I am looking for undergraduate female athlete volunteers who are willing to participate in one interview with me which will last no more than one hour.* All information will be kept confidential and we will do whatever we can to protect your privacy. Your participation will be completely voluntary and you may choose to end your participation at any time. It will in no way affect your class standing, course grade, graduation status, or standing with any faculty or staff at Emory.

The interview will be conducted in a quiet private room either in a smaller seminar room in Tarbutton or in a study room in the Library. I am unable to provide compensation for your time, but your participation is essential for my study and will be greatly appreciated.

You must be at least 18, female, undergraduate, and member of (any) varsity sports team at Emory. *If you are interested and willing to spend an hour of your time being interviewed, or if you have any questions, please contact me by replying to this email.* You may also contact me at (520) 907-8347. If you are unsure of whether you wish to participate and would like to ask me any questions before deciding, please contact me and I will be happy to answer any questions or address any concerns.

Thank you for your consideration.

Best,

Ariella Faitelson  
Department of Sociology  
Emory University  
Tarbutton 225  
Atlanta, GA  
afaitel@emory.edu

## Appendix 2

### Emory University Undergraduate College Consent To Be A Research Subject

**Title:** *Undergraduate Honors Thesis: Femininity and Female Athletes*

**Principal Investigator:** Tracy L. Scott, Ph.D.

**Co-Investigator:** Ariella Faitelson

#### **Introduction**

You are being asked to be in a research study. This form is designed to tell you everything you need to think about before you decide to consent (agree) to be in the study or not to be in the study. It is entirely your choice. If you decide to take part, you can change your mind later on and withdraw from the research study. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

You were chosen to participate in this study because you are a female undergraduate varsity athlete at Emory University in Atlanta, GA. Participation in this study would last between 45 minutes and 1 hours. This study is being conducted as part of my Senior Honors Thesis under the direction of Dr. Tracy L. Scott.

Before making your decision:

- Please carefully read this form or have it read to you
- Please ask questions about anything that is not clear

You can take a copy of this consent form, to keep. Feel free to take your time thinking about whether you would like to participate. By signing this form you will not give up any legal rights.

#### **Study Overview**

The purpose of this study is to examine the way in which female athletes negotiate and manage traditional notions of femininity as an athlete.

#### **Procedures**

You will be participating in an in-depth interview in which you will be asked about your experiences and thoughts about managing and negotiating your femininity as a female athlete. Before beginning the interview, you will be asked to fill out a short demographics survey. The interview will last between 45 minutes and 1 hour. With your permission, the interview will be taped using an audio recorder. The recording will not be shared with anyone other than the Principle and Co-Investigator of this study. Ariella Faitelson will be conducting the interview. The interview will take place at a location on campus that is easy for you.

#### **Risks and Discomforts**

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this study.

#### **Benefits**



This study is not designed to benefit you directly. This study is designed to learn more about female athletes and their negotiation and management of femininity. The study results may be used to help others in the future.

### **Compensation**

You will not be offered payment for being in this study.

### **Confidentiality**

Certain offices and people other than the researchers may look at study records. Government agencies and Emory employees overseeing proper study conduct may look at your study records. These offices include the Office for Human Research Protections, the Emory Institutional Review Board, and the Emory Office of Research Compliance. Emory will keep any research records we create private to the extent that we are required to do so by law. A study number rather than your name will be used on study records wherever possible. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results.

### **Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal from the Study**

You have the right to leave a study at any time without penalty. You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. This decision will not affect your class standing, course grade, graduation status, or standing with any faculty or staff at Emory.

### **Contact Information**

Contact Ariella Faitelson at [ariella.faitelson@emory.edu](mailto:ariella.faitelson@emory.edu) or (520) 907-8347 or Dr. Tracy L. Scott at [tscott@emory.edu](mailto:tscott@emory.edu) or (404)727-7515 if you have any questions about this study or your part in it or if you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research.

Contact the Emory Institutional Review Board at (404) 712-0720 or Toll-Free at (877) 503-9797 or [irb@emory.edu](mailto:irb@emory.edu) if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or if you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research. You may also let the IRB know about your experience as a research participant through our Research Participant Survey at <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/6ZDMW75>.

### **Consent**

Please, print your name and sign below if you agree to be in this study. By signing this consent form, you will not give up any of your legal rights. We will give you a copy of the signed consent, to keep.

---

Name of Subject

---

Signature of Subject

---

Date

---

Time

---

Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion

---

Date

---

Time

### Appendix 3

#### Demographics Survey

Please fill out the demographics information below. You do not have to answer any of the questions below if you do not feel comfortable doing so. The information on this sheet will be kept strictly confidential. Thank you for your time!

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Sexuality \_\_\_\_\_

School Year \_\_\_\_\_

Sport \_\_\_\_\_

Years playing the sport \_\_\_\_\_

Major (s) and Minor \_\_\_\_\_

Hometown \_\_\_\_\_

Other sports played \_\_\_\_\_

Religion \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 4

### Interview Guide

#### History/Story

- Can you tell me a little bit about your history with sports?
  - What sport (or sports) do you play?
  - When did you start playing?
  - Why did you start playing? Are the reasons you play a sport today the same as why you began playing a sport?
- How did you get to where you are today in your athletic career? How did you get to Emory?
- What has it been like playing a sport at Emory? Have you had an overall positive or negative experience?
- What is the culture of athletics like at Emory? (As opposed to some of your friends at larger schools. Does playing a sport take up all of your extracurricular time or do you have time for other activities as well? Are sports valued on campus as much as they may be, at say, a division 3 school like UGA?)

#### Connotations/Stereotypes/Labels

- What is your least and most favorite thing about being a female athlete?
- What are some positive connotations that you have experienced or heard of about female athletes?
  - Can you think of a time when you've specifically encountered these connotations? (What was your response? How did it make you feel? Did you do anything about it?)
- What are some negative connotations that you have heard of about female athletes?
  - Can you think of a time when you've specifically encountered these connotations? (What was your response? How did it make you feel? Did you do anything about it?)
- Are you aware of any stereotypes about female athletes?
  - Do these stereotypes stem from within the athletic community, outside of the athletic community, or both?
    - How do stereotypes from the outside community infiltrate into the athletic community?
    - Can you tell me about an experience you had with these stereotypes from the outside community? (How did you respond? What was your reaction? Did you do anything about it?)
  - How do these stereotypes affect you?
    - Can you give me a specific example of a time when you were affected?
  - Have you experienced the effect of these stereotypes throughout your entire career or just more recently?

- How does this occur within the athletic community? Where do they come from originally? How are they perpetuated? Are they regarded to as true and realistic and or just made-up and fake?
- Would your teammates say the same thing?
- Have you heard of female athletes being labeled lesbian?
  - Why do you think this is?
  - Have you experienced this directly? Or have any of your teammates?
    - What was your/her response to it?
  - Do you feel as though this is something you have to combat frequently as an athlete?
- Which athletes or teams do you think are most likely to be labeled as lesbian?
  - Why do you think this is?
- Who are the people applying this lesbian label, outsiders or teammates?
  - How does it affect your experiences and identity as a woman on the court and then off the court?
  - How does it affect your experiences and identity as an athlete on the court and off the court?
- Do male athletes experience these same labels? How so?
- Do you feel like these labels and stereotypes are something that you frequently have to combat?
- How often do you and your teammates (or other athlete friends) discuss these topics and issues?
  - Is it discussed openly or in quiet/secretly?

### **Identities: Female Athlete**

- What does traditional femininity look like to you?
  - Do you feel pressure to adhere to these notions?
  - Do you feel more susceptible to these notions as a female athlete?
- Do you characterize yourself as feminine?
- Are your identities as a woman and as an athlete distinct and separate from each other or are they more combined?
  - Does one identity pop up in different spheres in different times?
  - How do you negotiate the lines of being a “feminine” woman and an athlete?
  - Is it difficult to balance these lines? What are some specific experiences/examples when it is more difficult to balance these identities?
- Do you feel you have to over-emphasize your femininity because of the typically muscular athletic build?

- What does this over-emphasis look like? [look for concrete examples]
- When did you start doing [things like this]? What led you to them?
- How does femininity influence your appearance on the field? And off the field?
- How, if at all, does your athletic body type and build affect your appearance on the court? And off the court?
  - Do you make conscious choices when it comes to deciding what to wear on the court? And off the court – on campus or going out? What do these choices look like?
- Do you embrace your athletic muscularity or try to hide it? Why?
  - How do you go about either embracing or hiding it?
  - Do people make comments about it?
  - Are your experiences with this similar to those of your teammates?
- Several years ago, athletic clothing companies began producing gear specifically aimed at women with the color of pink. Did you notice this? What were your thoughts about it? Did you/do you use this pink-colored gear? Was there a specific reason that you chose to do this?

**Wrap-up**

- What is one thing that you would change (if you could) about the identity of female athletes?
- What are you hoping to do in the future with sports, if anything?
- Is there anything else that you'd like to add that you think is important?
- Do you have any questions for me?