Challenge and Conformity on "Contested Terrain": Images of Women in Four Women's Sport/Fitness Magazines

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Women's sport magazines were launched during the mid-to-late 1990s as a response to the growing women's sport movement in the United States. These magazines, including *Real Sports*, *Sports Illustrated for Women*, and *Women's Sports & Fitness*, were marketed as more active and sport-focused than established titles such as *Shape*, a popular magazine launched during the early 1980s for fitness-oriented women. *Shape* has been criticized by scholars for reinforcing male hegemony in US culture through its emphasis on sexual difference. In the present research, we analyzed photo images presented in *Sports Illustrated for Women*, *Women's Sports & Fitness*, and *Real Sports* to assess the reinforcement or rejection of sexual difference in these magazines as gauged against the presentation of sexual difference in *Shape*. The results show that the newer magazines do, to varying degrees, contest male hegemony more than *Shape* does. The impact of these magazines is discussed, and we speculate on the reasons that, although *Shape* continues to thrive, these magazines have ceased publication.

KEY WORDS: women; sports; media; sexual difference; magazines; photos; hegemony.

When high-school track coach Ruth Conniff decided to decorate the bulletin board in the girls' locker room, she sought strong images of female athletes to pin along its edges. But as she flipped through a stack of magazines—*Shape, Sports Illustrated*, and the like—she noticed that photos of sporting women fell into two categories.

> [T]he pictures of women I want to find—strong, beautiful, serious athletes—are not so easy to come by . . . There are the heroic portraits I've been tearing out. Then there are the more common pictures—sports cuties. I am fascinated by the gap between these two types of images. (Conniff, 1999, p. 53)

What Conniff observed has been empirically verified by numerous researchers: Images of "heroic" sporting women have historically been usurped by "sports cuties" (sexualized images) in mainstream media (Bishop, 2003; Griffin, 1998; Hargreaves, 1994; Schell, 1999; Walsdorf, 2000). Perhaps if Conniff, whose search through magazines took place in 1993, had sought the images a few years later, she might have found them. Niche magazines, marketed on a mass scale during the mid-to-late 1990s to athletically inclined women and girls, promised to offer an alternative to mainstream sport publications focused on men (such as *Sports Illustrated*) and the standard beauty-and-fitness fare in women's magazines (such as *Self and Shape*). Magazines including *Sports Illustrated Women*, *Women's Sports & Fitness*, and *Real Sports* promised the "strong, beautiful, serious" images Conniff (p. 53) sought for her bulletin board (Atkin, 1998; Wollenberg, 2000). This genre of magazine, which rode the surge of popularity in women's sports, brought about by the success of US women in the 1996 Olympics and the 1999 World Cup soccer championships, was relatively new to the magazine world

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(Granatstein, 2000). Although they were not the first such magazines—tennis great Billie Jean King started the low-profile *Women's Sports & Fitness* (the magazine's name and circulation was later purchased by Conde Nast) in 1974, just after Title IX became law—these titles were the first effort to mass market women's sport in magazine form. Conde Nast, for instance, spent $40 million publicizing the launch of its magazine in 1997–1998 (Ramirez, 1999).

Traditional women's magazines, including those with an athletic veneer (such as *Shape*) have traditionally fallen short of providing empowering images of women (Hargreaves, 1994; Schell, 1999; Thomsen, Bower, & Barnes, 2001). Instead, they have reinforced "sexual difference" (Duncan, 1994; Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990). Sexual difference, that is, culturally constructed differences between men and women framed as "natural," is a media construction that supports a hegemonic hierarchy in which (White) men are placed at the top of the social order in the United States. Female athletes are more often presented as passive, emotionally demonstrative, vulnerable, and as less competitive than men (Duncan, 1994; Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990; Hardin, Dodd, Chance, & Hardin, 2002). These traits have been framed as weak in light of the "rugged individualism" embedded in US capitalist hegemony (Trujillo & Vande Berg, 1989).

Female athletes, framed as sexually different, become "sports cuties"; their sexuality is emphasized more than their athleticism, which diminishes their sporting status and reinforces the idea that sport is a "males-only" realm. That assertion has broader social implications, scholars (Betancourt, 2003; Curry, Arriagada, & Cornwell, 2002; Griffin, 1998; Hargreaves, 1994; Miller, 2001) have argued, as sport is a microcosm of power relations in the wider culture.

The women's sport magazines that emerged in the mid-to-late 1990s may be understood as part of what some scholars believe is an ever-more-visible struggle on the terrain of sports media; we are in a "new era" of sports coverage, according to Messner (2002). However, without systematic analysis of these magazines, it is impossible to assess whether they have really helped to usher in the "new era" or whether they have insidiously (in packages that promise otherwise) reinforced male hegemony.

Part of the answer may lie in the fact that three of the four magazines analyzed in this study (*Sports Illustrated Women, Women's Sports & Fitness*, and *Real Sports*) are no longer published regularly; two have ceased publication altogether since we began this research. However, their fates tell us little about the status of depictions of female athletics without careful assessment of the images these magazines provided.

This research provides such assessment, through the analysis of editorial images presented in *SI Women, Women's Sports & Fitness*, and *Real Sports*. We assessed the framing of sexual difference in these magazines to determine how much (if at all) they contested traditional sport media terrain. The images in these magazines were gauged against those in *Shape*, a popular fitness magazine launched in the early 1980s that represents traditional athletic images offered to women before launch of the new titles.

Media, Sport, and Hegemony

Hegemony is the idea that a capitalist culture's most powerful economic groups obtain consent for their leadership through the use of ideological and political "norms" (Altheide, 1984; Condit, 1994; Croteau & Hoynes, 2000; Holtzman, 2000). Social structures and relationships that help the powerful and disadvantage others are presented as "natural" (Hall, 2001). Social relations and political policy are framed within a worldview that serves the powerful. Hegemony is more than an abstract term; it is a "commonsense" understanding of the world, confirmed through the "set of meanings and values, which as they are experienced as practices, appear as reciprocally confirming" (Williams, 2001, p. 157).

Mass media are key to the function of cultural hegemony in the United States (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Holtzman, 2000). The media inculcate individuals with values essential to institutional structures by adopting dominant assumptions and framing content within them. Hegemonic ideas are presented as universally valid, and alternative views are appropriated into the dominant frame (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000).

Hegemony is not total; it is challenged by alternative or oppositional forces (Condit, 1994; Lewis, 1992; Williams, 2001). Mass media provide "contested terrain" for hegemony (Condit, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994; Kellner, 1990). The application of the concept of hegemony to media studies allows us to understand the media not as monolithic, but as sites where struggles for power take place.

Hegemony and Sport

Like mass media, sport has been viewed by scholars as a powerful hegemonic institution, used mostly to preserve the status of (White) men at the top of the US socioeconomic hierarchy (Curry et al., 2002; Griffin, 1998; Hargreaves, 1994). Through sports, individuals are socialized to learn "gender-appropriate" behavior (Hargreaves, 1994). Boys learn about teamwork and achievement-oriented behaviors through team sports; girls learn about the cultural rules for femininity, which would encourage them to opt for individual, noncontact sports if they play at all (Betancourt, 2003; Griffin, 1998; Spencer & McClung, 2001).

However, as hegemony in media is never total, hegemony in sports is never total. "Dominant ideas are not the only ones—there is always the potential for oppositional ideas to subvert dominant ones and lead to cultural change" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 22). Women's increasing participation in sport has been considered an increasing challenge to male hegemony and traditional (mutually exclusive) gender roles; traditional athletic ideologies of masculinity have been destabilized (Betancourt, 2003; Griffin 1998; Miller, 2001). Betancourt (2003, p. xiii) pointed to the increasing participation by girls and women in team sports as the "single most important development" in helping them achieve social equality and power.

Hegemony, Media, and Female Athletes

As the institution of sport faces challenges from the emergence of female athletes, so does its partner, sports media (Messner, 2002). Although Messner (2002) conceded that the challenges do not amount to a "feminist revolution," he wrote:

> The proliferation of images of women athletes is (increasingly, I think) making sports media a contested terrain, where meanings of sexuality, gender, and race are being contested and reconstructed. (p. 93)

Scholars have found little evidence of a contested terrain; they have charged all types of media with reinforcing the notion that sport is a rite of passage for boys and men (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998; Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990; Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf, & Hardin, 2002; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Miner, 1993; Salwen & Wood, 1994). For instance, several studies of the influential publication *Sports Illustrated (SI)* showed that men dominate from cover to cover, in photos and in feature articles (Bishop, 2003; Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983; Kane, 1988; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Messner, 2002; Salwen & Wood, 1994). Bishop (2003) found that *SI* has not increased its coverage of women since the 1970s but has actually decreased some elements of its coverage.

The trend in *SI* is representative of that in other sports media outlets, including CNN, *ESPN, USA Today*, and *The New York Times* (Eastman & Billings, 2000; Shugart, 2003; Walsdorf, 2000). Female athletes have historically been underrepresented and misrepresented in overall coverage, despite increases in their opportunities and participation. The marginalization of women in sports media is one way to reinforce the notion that women are "naturally" less interested in and suited for sport than men are (Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990). Griffin (1998) pointed to several categories of media-created images that perpetuate sexual difference: the hetero-sexy beauty queen, the wholesome girl next door, the cute pixie, and the wife and mom.

Male Hegemony and Sexual Difference

Media presentations of female athletes as sexually different have received considerable attention in the past decade (Hall, 1996). Sexual difference is the term used to describe the presentation of women as naturally, biologically, less suited for sport than men are, which preserves male hegemony in sport. Sexual difference connotes the framing of socially constructed differences between men and women as being as natural as their physical differences (Duncan, 1990). For instance, the presentation of women as more prone to emotional outbursts than are men is presented as the "natural" equivalent to their also having larger breasts than men.

Sexual difference in sport can be conveyed through presentation of sport type. For instance, women who participate in sports considered "outside the norm" for women are often excluded or presented as masculine (Kane, 1988; Koivula, 1995; Silver, 2002; Tuggle & Owen, 1999). A favorite frame is to provide more coverage of sports that emphasize aesthetics, such as figure skating and gymnastics (Daddario, 1994; Duncan, 1990; Kane, 1988; Rintala & Birrell, 1984; Wilner, 2002). In addition, individual sports are considered more appropriate for women; thus, female athletes tend to be highlighted more often in sports such as tennis and golf than in

team sports, which are considered more appropriate for men (Bishop, 2003; Daddario, 1994; Rintala & Birrell, 1984). Women are also presented as naturally less active than men by being depicted more often as motionless or passive (Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990; Hardin, Lynn et al., 2002). The media also emphasize women's physical appearance more often than men's (Fink, 1998; Kane & Greendorfer, 1994; Kinnick, 1998; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Salwen & Wood, 1994; Vertinsky, 1994). Kinnick (1998) found that newspaper coverage of the 1996 Olympic Games more often mentioned the marital status, attractiveness, and emotionality of female athletes than of male athletes.

Some scholars have argued that emphasis on sexual difference in sports media may be diminishing with the rise of female athletics and subsequent coverage (Hargreaves, 1994; Messner, 2002). However, as Shugart (2003) noted, the reinforcement of sexual difference is simply more subtle and sophisticated than in previous years. Shugart's analysis of media coverage of the 1999 World's Cup women's soccer team showed that women's strength was reappropriated as men's pleasure. Shugart argued that the presentation of players, partially clothed, in magazines such as *Gear* and *Maxim* trivialized their athleticism and emphasized sexual difference, thus catering to the (heterosexual) "male gaze" in visual depictions of women. The "male gaze" is said to control popular media narratives; "Men act, women are acted upon. This is patriarchy" (Gamman & Marshment, 1989, p. 1).

Several other studies point to the framing of women as sexually different through sports photographs (Baker, 2000; Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998; Curry et al., 2002; Duncan, 1990; Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990; Ryan, 1994; Woodcock, 1995). Duncan (1990) found that female Olympians were presented as lesser competitors (sexually different) through use of camera angles that forced viewers to gaze down on them. Duncan and Sayaovong (1990) examined 459 editorial photographs in six issues of *Sports Illustrated for Kids* in 1989 and found an emphasis on sexual difference in photographic depictions of athletes. Women and girls were depicted in individual, aesthetic sports such as gymnastics or figure skating. They were also far more often presented as motionless, with the focus of the photograph on body aesthetics. Women depicted in leadership positions (such as coach or official) were virtually nonexistent (in contrast to images of men). Only a handful of photographs challenged sport stereotypes and minimized sexual difference (Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990). The reinforcement of sexual difference in the magazine has become more profound, according to the results of studies of editorial photographs in the late 1990s (Hardin, Lynn et al., 2002).

Research has indicated that women's magazines that focus on sports and fitness emphasize sexual difference; the premise of these magazines is that the goal of any fitness routine for women is purely aesthetic—to attract men (Markula, 1995). Studies of the content in *Shape, Self*, and similar magazines have shown a strong emphasis on sexual difference (Duncan, 1994; Markula, 2001). Limited research has indicated that even the newer niche magazines may ultimately subscribe to the same formula as their predecessors. Schell's (1999) examination of *Women's Sports & Fitness* photos during the late 1990s demonstrated that photos in the magazine emphasized a "hetero-sexy" image for female athletes.

Sexual Difference and Reading Women's Magazines

Gauntlett (2002) argued that almost all women's magazines operate within boundaries that perpetuate the "hetero-sexy" ideal. These magazines offer a one-dimensional "popular feminism" to readers, which encourages personal and professional success within limits. Women can be independent, but they must also be attractive; thus, the magazines "would never encourage women to step outside their carefully imagined boundaries of the 'sexy,' the 'stylish,' and 'the fashionable'" (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 206).

Gauntlett (2002) and others have argued, however, that women's magazines and other popular texts are porous enough to suit multiple audiences. Although texts may have a dominant ("preferred") ideology, that ideology may not be entirely accepted by audiences, but instead negotiated (Hall, 2001; Roach, 1997). The polysemic nature of texts, then, enables them to become popular with different audiences (Jensen, 1990). Fiske (1989) argued that to be popular, texts *must* be polysemic ("producerly"); they must contain both dominant messages and "opportunities to speak against them" from subordinated positions (p. 25). Such room for contradiction is necessary, as "false universals" are unpersuasive to reasonably active audiences (Condit, 1994).

Popular ("producerly") texts also succeed because they contain popular meanings; popular meanings are constructed out of the relevance between the

text and *everyday life* (Fiske, 1989). Socially situated readers are invited to bring their experiences and resources to the text, thus allowing the text to speak to their individual lives (Gibson, 2000). Such a text (perhaps in the form of a women's magazine) "does not faze the reader with its sense of shocking difference both from other texts and from the everyday" (Fiske, 1989, p. 104).

This is not to say that "emergent" discourse, which arises to contest dominant ideology, does not make its way into popular culture. Williams (2001) argued that new practices and values are continually created; dominant culture is "alert" to anything that may be seen as emergent. There are "early" (unsuccessful) attempts to incorporate emergent discourse as it moves into contemporary practice (Williams, 2001). Perhaps calls for "gender trouble" in cultural imagery and discourse may be considered emergent; "gender trouble" (coined by Judith Butler in her 1990 book by the same name) is the wholesale challenge to gender categorization (Gauntlett, 2002). Sport (and sport imagery) may be a site for "gender trouble," as it affords opportunities to challenge traditional notions of masculinity and femininity.

Gauntlett (2002) argued that emergent views on gender and identity are in "slow but steady processes of change and transformation" (p. 256). Audiences, however, change more slowly than does media content, likely because media consumers are already shaped by dominant discursive forces (Condit, 1994; Gauntlett, 2002). This may explain why Fiske (1989) wrote that audiences may choose some texts and reject others "in a process that often takes the industry by surprise" (p. 129). Thus, Fiske (1989) argued, changes in representations of women must be "slow and evolutionary," not "radical and revolutionary," if texts (such as magazines) are to be popularly accepted. "Too radical a change would break the relevances between textual representation and social experience" (Fiske, 1989, p. 133).

Niche Magazines, Emergent Discourse, and Male Hegemony

Sites recognized for their potential to provide emergent discourse (and gender trouble) include niche magazines—publications that target a more narrowly defined audience than general circulation titles (such as *People* or *Time*, for instance). They have grown in popularity since the early 1990s (Miller, 1991; Niche Magazine Growth, 1999).

The 1990s was also a decade of growing popularity for women's sports, fueled by the success of female Olympians during the 1996 games. Several highly publicized niche magazines were launched by publishers "alert" to the accompanying discourse (Atkin, 1998; Wollenberg, 2000). However, the launch of these magazines brought concerns that their existence reinforced male hegemony in sports by conceding more popular sports media to men's interests. Messner (2002) wrote that niche media for women's sports essentially "leaves largely intact the masculinist culture of the sport-media complex" (p. 92).

Further, coverage of women's sports, even if niched, has been considered a risky proposition by advertisers. Much of the speculation about women's sports magazines when they emerged intact the 1990s centered on their ability to draw advertisers away from the "tried and true." "[A]dvertisers were unclear about which bought more bang for their buck: a sports title or a regular fitness magazine, such as *Shape* or *Fitness*" (Bounds, 1998, p. 1).

Women's Sports & Fitness and *SI Women* were launched in 1997; *Real Sports* began publishing in 1998. As expected in a culture where sport is at least partly defined as "not female," two of these three magazines have folded since the beginning of this research, and *Real Sports* has turned into an online publication.

The magazines joined fitness-oriented titles for women already on newsstands. One such title is *Shape.* The magazine, launched in the early 1980s, has 1.5 million subscribers, and it offers workout, fitness, diet, and beauty tips to readers. It does not report on sports events, although it occasionally features female athletes in the magazine (Shape Print Advertising, n.d.).

The newer magazines, which focused more on women in sport than *Shape* does, struggled to find an identity and sustain a market. *Sports Illustrated* launched *Sports Illustrated Women/Sport* in 1997, but, within months, changed the magazine's name to *Sports Illustrated for Women*. In 2001, the magazine changed names again, to *Sports Illustrated Women* (popularly called *SI Women*). The magazine published its last issue in December 2002, after its publisher announced the need to cut its less profitable publications in light of the U.S. economic downturn (Keller, 2002).

The Conde Nast magazine, *Sports for Women*, was renamed *Women's Sports and Fitness* in early 1998, after the company bought out a

smaller-circulation magazine by the same name. The name change enabled Conde Nast to position its publication with women's beauty/fitness magazines (including *Shape),* a place on newsstands the publisher thought would help circulation (Harvey, 1998). The magazine folded in September 2000 with a circulation of about 650,000 (Wollenberg, 2000).

SI Women and *Women's Sports & Fitness* presented beauty-oriented fitness features—much like those in *Shape*—along with material about sports. *SI Women's* editorial line-up for 2002 included features on WNBA athletes, tips on fitness and fashion, and a much-publicized swimsuit edition that, despite the hype, presented both male and female swimsuit models and was not criticized in the way its sister publication, *SI*, has been for its annual swimsuit edition (Davis, 1997; Lee, 2002). *Women's Sports & Fitness* included articles on soccer great Mia Hamm and track star Marion Jones, along with regular features on exercise and fashion. The editors of *Women's Sports & Fitness* said that the emphasis on fitness was key to the magazine's success (Harvey, 1998).

The only women's sports magazine without the aesthetic fitness angle is *Real Sports*. Publisher Amy Love created the magazine out of her house in 1998 after waiting until she thought the market had "matured" enough to support a women's sports title (Francis, 2003). *Real Sports* does not include beauty features, but instead focuses on coverage of a variety of sports. Its peak circulation as a print title was around 150,000. Editorial content includes recaps and features on all level of women's sports, from professional league play (WNBA, WUSA) to college and amateur ranks. When the magazine was available in print, it was not distributed on newsstands (Media/Advertiser Resources, n.d.).

The Present Study

In this study, we examined editorial photos in *Women's Sports & Fitness, SI Women*, and *Real Sports*, and measured them against a popular title that represents traditional fitness discourse for women (*Shape*) to assess the reinforcement or rejection of sexual difference in photographs. Although sexual difference is reinforced through both text and photographs, photographs are considered likely to be more potent influences (Rowe, 1999). Photographs are composed, manipulated, and placed in such a way that they present a subjective message in a vivid, memorable, and "easy to read" format (Duncan,

1990). They are ideological constructs that preserve and project dominant cultural values; their potency lies in their credentials of objectivity and assumed realism (Moeller, 1999; Sontag, 2003). Their messages are further strengthened by the ease with which they are consumed and by their repetition in mass media (Moeller, 1999). Moeller (1999) argued that photographs are powerful because of the "personal, intimate" relationship they invite. "One has to touch the page to turn the page" (Moeller, 1999, p. 45).

Research questions were designed to ascertain visual reinforcement of sexual difference in ways cataloged by researchers discussed earlier in this article. These include the depictions of women as inactive (passive) in relation to sport and as participating mostly in sports considered "acceptable" by feminine standards (individual and aesthetic sports, for instance). Further, the use of camera angles that force viewers to gaze "down" at women and the exclusion of women from sports leadership portrayals also reinforce sexual difference. Research questions were

1. Is there a difference in the overall number of images in the magazines?
2. How do the magazines use camera angle (straight, down, up) in editorial images?
3. How do the magazines present women in motion (active, passive)?
4. How do the magazines present women in relation to sport type (individual, team, none)?
5. How do the magazines present women in relation to sport category (individual, team, none)?
6. How do the magazines present women in relation to sport leadership (coach, official, owner, none)?

METHOD

Content analysis was used to answer the research questions. Commonly defined as an objective, systematic, and quantitative discovery of the construction of messages, content analysis is an effective way to examine media images of minority or historically oppressed groups (Berelson, 1971; Dominick & Wimmer, 1991; Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1996; Stacks & Hocking, 1998). Use of content analysis assumes that what a producer means can be revealed by identifying and counting features in a text; this method has been used to quantify the "prevalence of the

masculine point of view in popular culture" (Strinati, 1995, p. 195).

The results of content analysis, however, must be understood within their limits. Content analysis cannot predict the interaction of a text with its audience, and it cannot uncover intentions of producers. Further, it does not account for the ambiguous and sometimes-contradictory nature of gender-related media representations. Even so, content analysis is a useful method for illuminating patterns in media representations (Strinati, 1995).

The Sample

Real Sports, SI Women, Shape, and *Women's Sports & Fitness* made up the sampling units. Individuals in photos were coded separately and were units of analysis. Editorial photographs in six issues of each magazine (all magazines except *Shape* were published bimonthly; alternate issues *of Shape* were used to coincide with issues of the other magazines), from spring 1999 to summer 2000, were examined. Advertising photographs were not analyzed for this study; we focused on images produced by the magazines' editors, who are charged with creating products to cultivate and maintain readership. A total of 4,989 photographic images were coded.

Coding Procedure

A recording instrument was designed to answer the research questions; categories and definitions taken were from earlier work on sexual difference (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1998; Duncan & Sayaovong, 1990; Hardin, Lynn et al., 2002). The categorical variables analyzed included gender, photo angle, and motion. Photo angle was coded according to the camera gaze on the participant (straight on, down, or up.) Motion was categorized as active or passive; a participant was coded as passive if she was clearly posed for the camera, looked motionless, or appeared only from the neck up. Sport type and sport category were also analyzed. If a sporting activity was depicted in the image, it was coded as either a team activity (such as basketball or volleyball) or as an individual sport (such as bicycling, running, or swimming). The sport was also categorized as aesthetic, strength, high risk, or neutral. Examples of aesthetic sports are gymnastics and figure skating; weightlifting and boxing are considered strength sports; rock climbing and surf-

ing were coded as high risk; all other sports (including basketball, volleyball, soccer, tennis, and golf) are neutral sports. Lastly, participants were coded for whether they represented sports leadership, such as a coach or official.

Twelve sports administration graduate students served as coders as part of a class project. Coders were trained over three 2-hr sessions using issues *of Real Sports, SI Women, Shape*, and *Women's Sports & Fitness* that were not a part of the research data set. Coders were provided with a codebook and recording sheet on which to record each categorical variable.

A critical component of content analysis is to ascertain the degree of reliability of the coding in order to ensure that the data reflect consistency in application of the coding schemes and not the interpretations of individual coders. Intercoder and intracoder reliability were reached using the cover through page 10 of the January 1998 issue of *Shape* and the Fall 1997 issue of *SI Women*. Holsti's reliability formula was used to assess coder reliability (Stacks & Hocking, 1998). Intercoder reliability scores for the training sample ranged from 90 to 100 percent. To correct for chance agreement, Scott's Pi scores of .60 and higher were achieved. Intracoder reliability, established by comparing coding sheets on identical data (cover through page 10 of the January 1998 issue *of Shape* and the Fall 1997 issue of *SI Women*) that were completed by the same coder 24 hr apart, ranged from 96 to 100 percent. Once reliability was reached each coder ($N = 12$) coded editorial photographs in two magazines over a 3-week period.

RESULTS

As expected, the frequencies indicated that women dominate the editorial photographs in the magazines analyzed. Of the 4,989 photographic images coded, 4,393 (88%) were images of women. Only the images of women were included in the analysis, as this study was designed to examine only how women were presented. Percentages of images of women and men are displayed in Table I.

Camera Angle

The predominant camera angle used was straight-on (85%). Only 10% of all images looked

Table I. Percentages of Women and Men in Each Magazine

Magazine	Gender	
	Women	Men
Real Sports	89 (847)	11 (103)
Shape	93 (602)	7 (43)
SI Women	86 (1432)	14 (233)
Women's *SF*	87 (1512)	13 (217)

Note. Frequencies are in parentheses.

Table III. Percentages of Motion by Magazine

Magazine	Motion	
	Passive	Active
Real Sports	42 (358)	58 (489)
Shape	68 (412)	32 (190)
SI Women	36 (521)	64 (911)
Women's *SF*	52 (781)	48 (731)

Note. Frequencies are in parentheses.

down on the photo participant, and an even smaller percentage (5%) looked up at the photo participant. The newer titles did not deviate significantly from the pattern found in *Shape*, which did not seem to use camera angle to reinforce sexual difference (see Table II). *Real Sports*, however, used the lowest percentage of straight-on and up-angle photographs and the highest percentage of down-angle photographs, which could be read as reinforcing sexual difference to a greater degree than other magazines. However, when examined in context, most images with the down angle in *Real Sports* were group shots of players (in action), shot from above the basket. An example of this technique is a photo from the magazine's summer issue during 2000, in which five players vie for a rebound. Chi Square analysis, $\chi^2 = 229.93$; $df = 6$; $p < 0.05$, showed a significant association between the magazines and the camera angles.

Motion

Overall, about 53% of women were portrayed as active, and 47% were depicted as passive. In *Shape*, passive women outnumbered active women by a 2:1 ratio (see Table III). *Women's Sports & Fitness* presented women slightly more often as passive than as active (52 vs. 48%). In contrast, *Real Sports* and *SI Women* portrayed women more frequently in active than in passive poses (58 and 64% respectively). Thus, *Shape* seemed to reinforce sexual dif-

ference through passivity of women to a greater degree than the other magazines. Of the newer titles, *Women's Sports & Fitness* (which positioned itself to compete with *Shape*) also emphasized passivity for women. Chi-square analysis, $\chi^2 = 196.51$; $df = 3$; $p < .05$, showed a significant association between the magazines and their portrayal of women in motion.

Sport Type

A total of 37% of all women were depicted in individual sports, and 35% were depicted in team sports. Twenty-eight percent of participants were depicted with no sport association. The percentage of women without a sport association was much higher in *Shape* (43%) than in other magazines. *Women's Sports & Fitness* followed with 37%. See Table IV.

Shape most often (55%) depicted women in individual sports, such as bicycling, running, and weightlifting. *Women's Sports & Fitness* followed the same pattern, although to a lesser degree: 45% of its depictions of women were in individual sports. In contrast, the other two magazines (*Real Sports* and *SI Women*) depicted most women in team sports (62 and 51% respectively), and relatively few women were depicted in nonsporting contexts (15 and 20% respectively). Thus, *Shape* and *Women*'s *Sports & Fitness* reinforce sexual difference through depicting most women as either nonsporting or as involved in individual sports; the other magazines reject sexual difference through more depictions of

Table II. Percentages for Use of Camera Angle by Magazine

Magazine	Camera angle		
	Down	Straight	Up
Real Sports	23 (197)	75 (639)	1 (11)
Shape	5 (36)	89 (533)	5 (33)
SI Women	6 (95)	87 (1245)	6 (92)
Women SF	7 (109)	87 (1312)	6 (91)

Note. Frequencies are in parentheses.

Table IV. Percentages of Sport Type by Magazine

Magazine	Sport type		
	None	Individual	Team
Real Sports	15 (126)	23 (193)	62 (528)
Shape	43 (258)	55 (331)	2 (13)
SI Women	20 (276)	29 (420)	51 (736)
Women's SF	37 (562)	45 (675)	18 (275)

Note. Frequencies are in parentheses.

Table V. Percentages for Category of Sport by Magazine

Magazine	Category of sport				
	None	Strength	High risk	Aesthetic	Neutral
Real Sports	15 (124)	5 (45)	2 (19)	2 (15)	76 (644)
Shape	41 (248)	13 (78)	4 (23)	6 (34)	36 (219)
SI Women	19 (276)	4 (54)	2 (26)	4 (57)	71 (1019)
Women's SF	36 (549)	4 (58)	8 (118)	6 (89)	46 (698)

Note. Frequencies are in parentheses.

Table VI. Percentages for Leadership by Magazine

Magazine	Leadership			
	None	Coach	Official	Owner
Real Sports	96 (811)	2 (21)	1 (6)	1 (9)
Shape	96 (578)	3 (17)	1 (4)	.004 (3)
SI Women	98 (1406)	1 (18)	1 (8)	0 (0)
Women's SF	99 (1502)	1 (10)	0 (0)	0 (0)

Note. Frequencies are in parentheses.

team sports. Chi-square analysis, $\chi^2 = 923.88$; $df = 6$; $p < .05$, showed a significant association between the magazines and the types of sport presented.

Category of Sport

Overall, women were portrayed most often in neutral sports (59%). About 28% of women were depicted in ways unrelated to sport; strength (5%), high risk (4%), and aesthetic (4%) sports were depicted rarely. *Shape* most often depicted sporting women in neutral activities (such as running or tennis), but the magazine also depicted more women in strength sports than did any other title. *Shape* (along with *Women's Sports & Fitness*) also slightly more often depicted women in aesthetic sports and in high risk sports (such as surfing). See Table V. Each category of sport was similarly represented in *Real Sports* and *SI Women*; women were represented most often in neutral sports (76 and 71%, respectively).

The results seem to indicate that *Shape,* through more depictions of strength sports, may reject sexual difference more often than the other magazines. However, most "strength" depictions were images of women doing toning exercises with weights to improve their body shape. The other magazines were not much different from *Shape* in other categories, but the others did offer more overall depictions of women as sport-inclined. Chi Square analysis, $\chi^2 = 519.21$; $df = 12$; $p < 0.05$, showed a significant association between the magazines and the categories of sport portrayed.

Leadership

The overwhelming majority of women (98%) were not depicted as sports leaders. Out of the 4,393 images analyzed, only 96 images (2%) were of women in leadership positions such as coach or official. There was little overall difference among the

magazines for this variable; for instance, approximately 4% of images in both *Shape* and *Real Sports*, magazines with sharp contrasts on other variables, were of sports leaders. Chi Square analysis, $\chi^2 = 59.27$; $df = 9$; $p < 0.05$, showed a significant association between the magazines and the leadership positions shown. See Table VI.

DISCUSSION

Overall, images in these magazines both reinforced and rejected sexual difference to varying degrees, simultaneously conforming to and challenging hegemonic norms presented in sports media. The magazines seem to fall on a continuum from traditional to emergent ideology in their presentation of sporting women.

As expected, we found that *Shape* anchors one end of the continuum by providing images that strongly reinforce sexual difference. The magazine presents women mostly as passive and nonsporting or as participants in the sporting activities most acceptable for women (i.e., individual sports). *Shape* represents traditional "popular feminism," which frames appearance as the main rationale for fitness and sport (Curry et al., 2002; Gauntlett, 2002).

Next on the continuum is *Women's Sports & Fitness*. Women in the magazine were presented as passive at least as often as they were presented in active poses. One-third of the women depicted were not associated with any sport; the magazine also presented women in aesthetic, "pretty" sports and in individual sports more than *SI Women* or *Real Sports* did. A photo that might be representative of the magazine's overall approach to women's sport is a photo of four female members of the 2000 Olympics swim team, which the magazine captioned "Bold Glory." The photo depicts the swimmers in passive poses, standing naked and draped by a large American flag. The photo is an example of the images that Shugart (2003) indicted as coopting strong female athletes for

the male gaze. The photo, however, might also be an example of what Fiske (1989) called a "producerly" text because it contains contradictions that may invite multiple readings: These women are strong and athletic (no waiflike bodies here), yet they are passive. By their state of undress (shedding even their uniforms), they invite a male gaze, but their presence in a sports setting also (legitimately) invites a female gaze.

SI Women was further down the continuum, offering a mix of images that mostly rejected, but occasionally reinforced, sexual difference. The magazine most often presented women as active (64%), but 20% of its images of women did not involve sport, and almost 30% of its images were of women in individual sports. This magazine also could have done a better job depicting women in leadership roles, but instead depicted even fewer than did *Shape*. Even so, *SI Women* offered images that were in clear contrast to *Shape* in other ways.

Real Sports is at the far end of the continuum, offering the strongest examples of images that reject sexual difference. *Real Sports*, by the visual images it provides, resembles *Sports Illustrated* more than does *SI Women*. Most of the images involved team sports. Images of women exerting power in sport are commonplace and demonstrate an emergent ideology that sheds passivity as preferable for women. *Real Sports* also depicted small numbers of women in aesthetic sports; a clear editorial preference for activities such as basketball and softball (neutral) was shown.

Failure of the "Women's Sport Niche" in a Mass Market

When *Sports Illustrated Women* announced its demise in 2002, a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* wrote an article that posed the question: "Is that bad?" The author (Keller, 2002, p. 1) wrote, "Feminists are flummoxed: Is the demise of *Sports Illustrated Women* a reason to boo or cheer?" According to Keller, industry analysts said it was dollars, not gender politics, that doomed the magazine (and *Women's Sports & Fitness*); the downturn in the US economy was blamed.

Yet, at the same time, experts were also quoted as questioning the focus of *SI Women*. The magazine, experts said, had drifted from its original focus on sport and into territory that forced it to compete with *Shape*. Thus, the magazine had lost its "uniqueness"

as a niche title for women's sports and had instead joined the aesthetic fitness market, where *Shape* had established itself as "competitor-killer"(Keller, 2002, p. 1). *Women's Sports & Fitness* also succumbed to the same approach, much earlier and in more pronounced ways, according to the results of this study.

It seems that the only magazine in this study that has unfailingly offered a message in true, consistent contrast to that offered in *Shape* is *Real Sports*. *Real Sports* is the only magazine that still exists, serving a core of online devotees. Of course, its survival is a double-edged sword: it demonstrates market potential, but it reinforces Messner's notion of the "masculinist center" by providing that alternative space to mainstream coverage of women's sports.

The demise of the two magazines in between those at the ends of the continuum may point to the need for women's magazines with alternative messages to define themselves more sharply in order to gain market position. Further, the magazines must be willing to "stay the course"—to fill the niche— if they expect to build readership and to survive. Editors may have to resist male-dominated publishing companies, entrenched with ideology that assumes that women are "naturally" interested only in beauty-oriented fitness, to preserve integrity of their magazines.

Polysemy and Presentation of Active Women

Our understanding of the function of popular texts and active audiences in a hegemonic media environment, however, suggests other reasons for the demise of these titles, especially in comparison to *Shape*. *Shape* continues to thrive, publishing a formula that emphasizes sexual difference, the "heterosexy" image, and the authority of the male gaze—a naturalized discourse in US culture.

Shape must, however, be porous enough to invite multiple audiences, including readers who want (to some degree) to negotiate or resist male hegemony in regard to fitness, activity, and the body. Through its images, it seems to provide for polysemy by providing some images of active women and even some images of sport (including a handful of team sport images). Further, more than 20% of its images are of women demonstrating "strength." These kinds of images—such as that of a woman sitting on a weight bench, facing a mirror, and holding a small barbell in one hand—certainly invite the "preferred

reading" (fitness is to serve purely aesthetic ends) but leave room for resistance by positioning the woman as participating in an activity traditionally deemed masculine (weightlifting). Thus, the magazine has preserved dominant (disempowering) ideology while remaining porous enough to be read as empowering for women.

As Fiske (1989) contended, *Shape* is a popular text also because its images relate to the *everyday experiences* of women. Although women have made great strides in sports opportunity and participation since Title IX became law in 1973, sport is not a reality of women's everyday lived experience. Women's pro sports are still rare enough that most girls do not dream about a professional sports career, as boys often do, and sport is not part of the culture of gender for girls, as it is for boys (Koppett, 1994). Instead, women have experienced male hegemony as a "set of meanings and values...experienced as practices" (Williams, 2001, p. 157). Their everyday experiences are shaped by dominant discursive forces that reinforce sexual difference: They are more likely (passive) spectators than sports participants or leaders, and they are more likely to participate in individual sporting activities, which are more available and more socially acceptable for women.

Thus, it is possible that many women cannot bring *everyday experiences* to the reading of a woman-focused sports text, which makes the text less palatable to them. By rejecting sexual difference to varying degrees, *SI Women* and *Real Sports* were likely too *different* to be popularly accepted by multiple audiences. Texts that make gender trouble may be too *radical and revolutionary*; there is no relevance between textual representation and social experience (Fiske, 1989).

The rise and fall of *Women's Sports & Fitness*, however, is more difficult to explain. Images in the magazine showed that it was the closest of all the magazines to a sure thing, *Shape*. In fact, perhaps it was too close to *Shape*, and thus did not adequately position itself as unique among magazines instead of simply an imitator. Another explanation, however, is that it was *too porous*. The magazine was different from *Shape* in that it did more often mix images of activity/sport with passivity/nonsport. By doing so, the magazine may have "muddied" its focus too much; thus, no one could be satisfied. Readers who sought a hegemonic reading found too many images that opposed it. Likewise, readers who sought an emergent discourse found too many hege-

monic images, which deflated the satisfaction they sought. In relation to the niche concept discussed earlier, it seems that too much fence-sitting (no matter where most of the weight lies) is a formula for failure.

CONCLUSION

Although our content analysis has illuminated differences among the images in these magazines, we cannot account for producers or audiences or adequately address the contradictory content within these magazines, which leaves us to speculate about questions raised by our findings. Textual analysis of these and other magazines (such as *Golf for Women* or the recently launched *Her Sports*) and audience research would help us better understand the evolution (and future) of the emergent discourse about women's sports.

The fact that these magazines were launched at all is instructive and encouraging. It is instructive because it can offer lessons for future publishers and marketers about finding a formula to provide for mass appeal *or* how to stay true to a niche and attract a core progressive audience. It is also encouraging because it signals an emergent discourse about women and sport that has the potential to make "gender trouble" in ways that will chip away at male hegemony. Although early attempts often fail (Williams, 2001), they may be seen as a part of the slow and evolutionary process that leads to more empowering everyday experiences and, consequently, media representations of women in sport (Condit, 1994; Fiske, 1989; Hargreaves, 1994).

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