

Running Head: SEXUAL PORTRAYAL OF THE FEMALE WINTER OLYMPIAN

Sports Illustrated's Sexual Portrayal of the Female Winter Olympian

Christian A. Santos-Powell

Elon University

## **ABSTRACT**

Although media coverage on women's sports during the Olympic Games has seen some slow yet steady progress, the content is far from perfect. Through the examination of *Sports Illustrated* magazines from 1955 to 2014, this study will show that women as well as Olympic athletes are being represented differently than men. By analyzing studies previously conducted on *Sports Illustrated*, it will be evident that female Winter Olympians in *SI* are being under represented and as well as sexualized.

## **INTRO**

Throughout the 50 years of *Sports Illustrated's* coverage of the Olympics games, the female Olympian has been portrayed more of a sex icon rather than as an athlete. The study will use data gathered in a content analysis to determine how female Olympians, are portrayed as sexual objects rather than impressive athletes. The *SI's* Winter Olympic issues between the 1980-2012 games will be analyzed to see if the theme of sex plays a predominate role in articles and magazine covers featuring female Olympians. On the cover, the presence and portrayal of the female Olympian will be analyzed in order to gain a better understanding. Most of the research in this study will be obtained through in-depth qualitative research. This study is important because it is breaking down the double standard that the media emphasizes more on the looks rather than the athletic performance of the athlete. The question that arises is "Does Sports Illustrated know how to portray female athletes as a powerful figure?"

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Lumpkin and Williams' (1991) content analysis of *Sports Illustrated* feature articles from 1954-1987 examined articles with reference to sport, gender, race, role of the person featured, length of article, author number of pictures, individual pictured, and descriptive characteristics.

Their results indicated that *SI* articles reflect the status and the popularity of American sports in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The coverage of African-Americans was unequal and the media typical preferred white male athletes over all.

Reid and Soley (1979) studied 72 issues of *Sports Illustrated* looking at the feature articles in the first issues of each month in the Olympic years of 1956-1976, and discovered minimal change between the two decades. Female participation started to increase in the 1970s and 1980s, but most of the coverage was on females in “sex appropriate” sports such as tennis, golf and swimming.

Lumpkin and Williams’ study revealed that:

- a) Women were shown in recreational rather than competitive situations
- b) Women were featured in individual and dual activities generally associated with the upper class
- c) Sport for women appeared to be more of a sexual than an athletic activity

In 1996, Mary Jo Kane conducted a study focusing on female athletic coverage where she discovered the category of sport and race of Olympians were proportional to media coverage. Similar to Lumpkin and Williams’ study, Kane concluded that media outlets will give more coverage to sports where females move gracefully and the overall performance is aesthetically pleasing.

Lumpkin and Williams (1991) revealed that between 1954 and 1987, black women received the least amount of coverage in *Sports Illustrated*. In 1957, Althea Gibson made black history by being the first woman of color to appear on a *Sports Illustrated* cover. Although

Gibson's achievement was monumental, it was short lived. It took nearly three decades for another black woman (Jackie Joyner-Kersey) to be featured on a *SI* cover.

Following up on Lumpkin and Williams' analysis, Bishop's replicated the study to modernize the obsolete data discovered. Through an in-depth content analysis, Bishop reviewed 72 issues focusing on the number articles per issues, sex of athlete featured, and the sport covered in each article. Similar to Lumpkin and Williams' findings, Bishop concluded that females were mostly featured in aesthetically pleasing sports, but there was an increase of women's coverage in basketball, tennis, and golf from 1988 to 1994. The feature coverage of women dropped dramatically from 9.8 percent of all *SI* photos in 1994 to 4.4 percent of all *SI* photos in 1996 (Bishop 2003). This study proves that female photographs in *Sports Illustrated* are becoming harder to find, and when present they are sexual. This outcome is due to *SI*'s demographic consists of a 78 percent male audience (W. Plunkett 1997).

### ***Athletic Coverage***

During the 1980s into the 1990s the media persisted in covering mainly male athletes. The amount of coverage on female athletes was close to none, with 93.8 percent of television coverage on male athletics (Kane 1996). There clearly is a underrepresentation of women athletics, This underrepresentation, in turn, is also viewed as creating a vicious circle since the growth of women's sports is hindered by the lack of funds which nowadays come primarily from sponsorship. Since sponsors are interested in investing in sports teams which feature regularly on television and women's sports do not qualify as such, they do not get big cash injections (Bernstein 2003). The media is a big influencer on the way the female athlete is perceived. After the success of women in the 1996 Summer Olympics, the coverage of the women athletes was on

their performance rather than image (Olympics). Although NBC devoted 61 percent of its coverage to women, the focus was on the sports of swimming, diving and gymnastics (Tuggle, C. A., and A. Owen. 1999). The image of women in the media is already a heavily sexualized one meaning that whatever activity a women is shown to be engaging in is likely to present her as sexual first and foremost (Van Zoonen 1991).

Billings' study provides valuable insight regarding how the media represents female athletes during the NBC's coverage of the 1996-2006 Olympic Games. Billings found that gender biases were more likely to occur when the event being covered involves subjective evaluation, such differences in exposure could influence the type of commentary ascribed to men and women athletes by Olympic sportscasters. The study concludes that there is a much more dominant male frame in the Winter Olympics (winter telecast 2:1 ration between men's and women's sports) compared to the Summer (coverage is slightly tilted towards men). During 2000-2004 "attractive sports" such as female beach volleyball began to rise in popularity leading to an increase of coverage by NBC. (Ka Young 2009) Although this was partly due to the success of Misty May and Kerri Walsh, athletes wearing something skimpy is a standard promotional strategy due to the erotic appeal. (Rowe 1999, Ka Young 2009).

### ***Sports Photography Objectification***

The genre of sports photography covers all types of sports, but throughout the decades the athlete's physical appearance became particular a fascination for the viewer. *Sports Illustrated* readers are 90.9% males (Kim 2009); photographers often shoot pictures they believe will appeal to their typical readers: young heterosexual males. Knowing this many of the sports photographs highlight the body and provide the viewer with erotic pleasure. There is a similarity

between sports photography and soft-core pornography (Kuhn 1985). Sports photography often highlights women's hips, thighs, buttocks, breasts, crotches and provide the viewer with a sense of power over the athlete. (Duncan 1990). Often the picture captures female athletes in a light where the pose suggests an intimate, sexual act not meant to be seen by the public. In pinup photography, a facial expression called the "come-on" signifies sexual availability (Kuhn 1985). The "come-on" expression is summarized as where the subject openly acknowledges the spectator giving off a sexual invitation (Kuhn 1985). Typically men are portrayed as dominant in photographs with higher physical elevation, larger size, positions of protectiveness or distance and females are portrayed in postures connoting submissiveness with lower physical positions, smaller size, head and body canting (Kuhn 1985, Duncan 1998).

### ***Background of the Games***

Women athletes first took part in the Olympics of 1900, with 22 out of 997 athletes (2.2 percent) competing in only golf and tennis, which is deemed as "sex appropriate" by today's standard (Olympic). Female participation in the Olympic Games is slowly yet steadily increasing throughout the years, "In 1912 Olympic Games there were 57 female athletes, 610 female athletes in the 1960 Olympic Games, and 3,800 female athletes in the 1996 Olympic Games (Olympics). The increase of female participation is due to the introduction of the International Olympic Committee in 1894. One of the main roles of the IOC is to encourage and support the promotion of women in sport at all levels and in all structures, with a view to implementing the principle of equality of men and women (Kane 1996). The IOC requires at least 20 percent of decision making positions for females (Olympics). Although females represent a small amount of the IOC it has made advances in a closer representation of females to males in the Olympics. The 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta made history with 3,800 women athletes participating in

the games (Genel 2000). This has been a reoccurring progression in more recent games. In the 2012 Summer Olympic Games, women athletes accounted for more than 44 percent of the 10,500 athletes (Olympics) and the 2014 Winter Olympics was the first in history where women had an equal amount of event to men (Olympics).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The analysis focuses on the Winter Olympic Games and uses three issues of *Sports Illustrated* in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of the portrayal of the female Olympian. The three issues of *SI* are one leading up to the games (preview edition), during the games, and after the games. The issues year will start at 1980 and will continue onwards until the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games and the data will be organized by the decade (Example: 1980-1989) Similar to both Lumpkin and Williams' study of the 1954-1987 Olympics and Bishop's study of 1980-1996 Olympics, the following areas were analyzed:

1. Gender on the magazine cover
2. Number of articles on the Winter Olympics excluding medal predictions and team profiles
3. Number of article that focuses on female Olympians
4. Classification of female cover photographs as either passive or active

When a female Olympian was on the magazine cover, it was categorized as either active or passive. Martin & McDonald defined active covers as ones which showed in-game action, and passive covers are defined as calm, posed, or nonchalant. With the classification of passive or active covers the criteria of "soft-core pornography" as Kuhn classifies in her studies was analyzed.

## FINDINGS

For the 30 years analyzed, there was more of a focus on male over female Winter Olympians in both articles and cover presence. The sample used consisted of three *SI* issues per Winter Olympic; one leading up to the winter games, one during the winter games and one after the games. The data was categorized by decades due to the time duration between winter games. Table I focuses solely on the articles within the sample. The content of the articles were then classified if it was written on male Olympians, female Olympians or both. Table II focuses on the average gender representation on the sample's magazine covers. If the cover featured a female Olympian, the number of active to passive covers was analyzed.

During the decade of 1980 to 1989, three Winter Olympic Games were held. *Sports Illustrated* wrote a total of 57 articles (n=9) excluding team features and medal predictions. In the data conducted, 12 articles focused on female athletes (21%), 34 articles focused on male athletes (60%) and 11 articles incorporated both genders (19%). Out of 9 covers, female Olympians were represented 1.5 times (17%) and all of the photos were passive.

During the decade of 1990 to 1999 three Winter Olympic Games were held. *Sports Illustrated* wrote a total of 42 articles (n=9) excluding team features and medal predictions. In the data conducted, 13 articles focused on female athletes (31%), 18 articles focused on male athletes (43%) and 11 articles incorporated both genders (26%). This could be a result of the increase of popularity of female athletics in the 1990s. Out of nine covers, female Olympians were represented 2.5 times (28%) and all of the photos were active.

During the decade of 2000 to 2009 two Winter Olympic Games were held. *Sports Illustrated* wrote a total of 19 articles (n=6) excluding team features and medal predictions. In



the data conducted, 6 articles focused on female athletes (32%), 10 articles focused on male athletes (53%) and 3 articles incorporated both genders (15%). Although the sample size is smaller, the data is consistent with the previous decade. Out of six covers, female Olympians were represented 1.5 times (25%) and 67% of the photos were passive while 33% were active.

The full decade of 2010-2019 had insufficient data due to the accessibility to the 2014 *Sports Illustrated* articles and the upcoming 2018 Winter Olympics has not occurred. Instead the 11 articles of the 2010 Winter Olympics was analyzed (n=3). In the data conducted, 1 article focused on female athletes (9%), 9 articles focused on male athletes (82%) and 1 article incorporated both genders (9%). Out of three covers, female Olympians were represented 1.5 times (50%) and all of the photos were passive.

The data from discovered from the 30 years covered was then analyzed. The data concludes that out of the 129 articles looked at (n=21) excluding team features and medal predictions, 32 articles focused on female athletes (25%), 71 articles focused on male athletes (55%) and 26 articles incorporated both genders (20%). Out of 21 covers, female Olympians were featured seven times (26%) and all 58% of the photos were passive while 42% were active. What can be concluded is that females Olympians receive the least amount of coverage and when they do, it is more passive than active.

**TABLE I – Gender Bias Articles**

Years	Number of Articles on the Winter Games	Articles on Female Olympians	Articles on Male Olympians	Articles Covering Both Genders
1980-1989 (n=9)	57	12 (21.1%)	34 (59.6%)	11 (19.3%)
1990-1999 (n=9)	42	13 (31%)	18 (43%)	11 (26%)
2000-2009* (n=6)	19	6 (32%)	10 (53%)	3 (15%)
2010* (n=3)	11	1 (9%)	9 (82%)	1 (9%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>32 (25%)</b>	<b>71 (55%)</b>	<b>26 (20%)</b>

\* Indicates online text only articles were accessed

**TABLE II – Female Olympian**

Year	Females Magazine Cover	Percentage Active (female cover in sample)	Percentage Passive (female cover)
1980-1989 (n=9)	1.5 (17%)	0%	100%
1990-1999 (n=9)	2.5 (28%)	100%	0%
2000-2009* (n=6)	1.5 (25%)	67%	33%
2010* (n=3)	1.5 (50%)	0%	100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>7 (26%)</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>58%</b>

\* Indicates online text only articles were accesses

In this data covers featuring both gender Olympians counted as half (.5)

To gain a better understanding of female representation on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, all 3,444 covers were analyzed. Only covers that features only women or only women sports teams, photograph with both genders are excluded. In this study, the professions that *SI* associated with the women were documented, if the cover was passive or active and if the cover could be considered soft-core pornography by description mention in Kuhn's 1985 study *The*

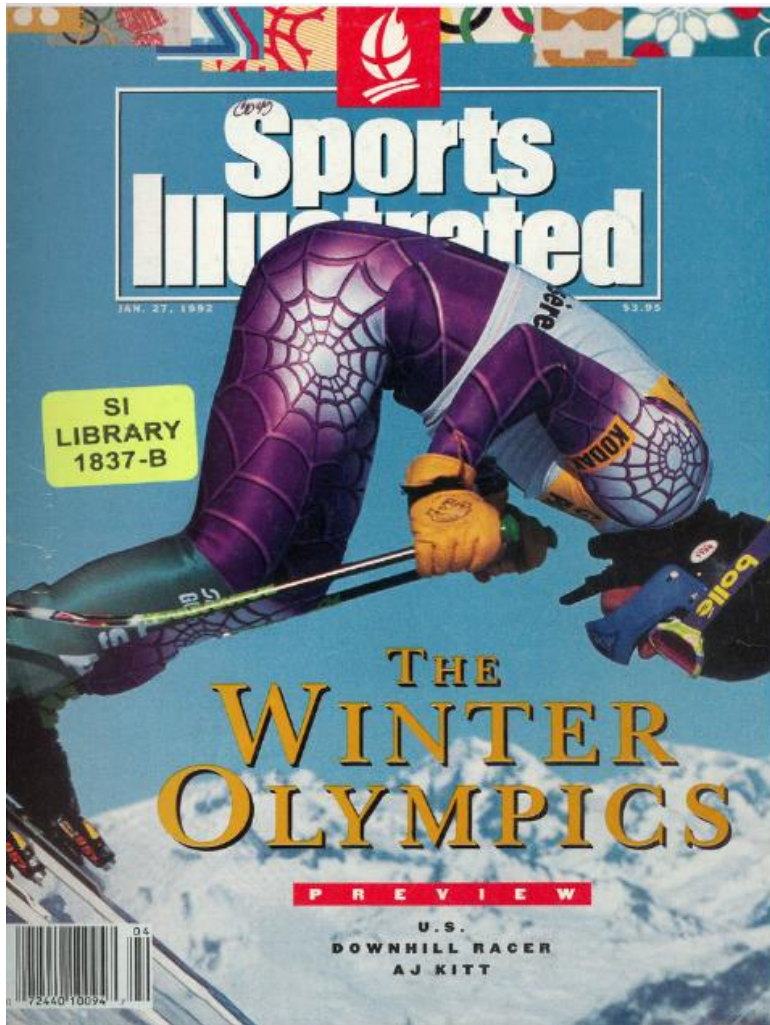
*Power of the Image.* A visual representation of what is considered an active photograph and what is considered a passive photograph is portrayed in Picture I.

A cover photo is considered soft-core pornography if:

- The pose suggests an intimate, sexual act not meant to be seen by the public
- There a focus on the hips, thighs, buttocks, breasts or crotch
- The subject openly acknowledges the spectator giving off a sexual invitation (typically in posed photo)

Out of the 3,444 covers that *SI* published since its first publication, only 162 females are featured on covers. Most of the images on the covers were passive and considered soft-core pornography.

PICTURE EXAMPLE I – Active v. Passive Example



**Active Photograph**

This photograph is considered active due to it is a still from Kitt's event. Although Kitt is a male Olympian there won't be as much *sexualization* in the photograph.

A.J. Kitt, January 27, 1992



**Passive Photograph**

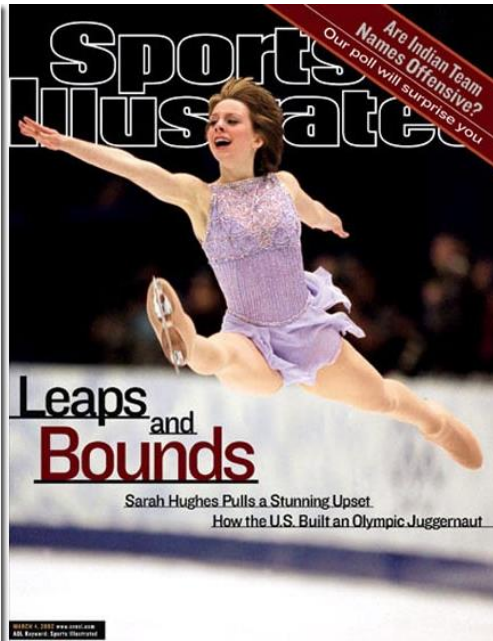
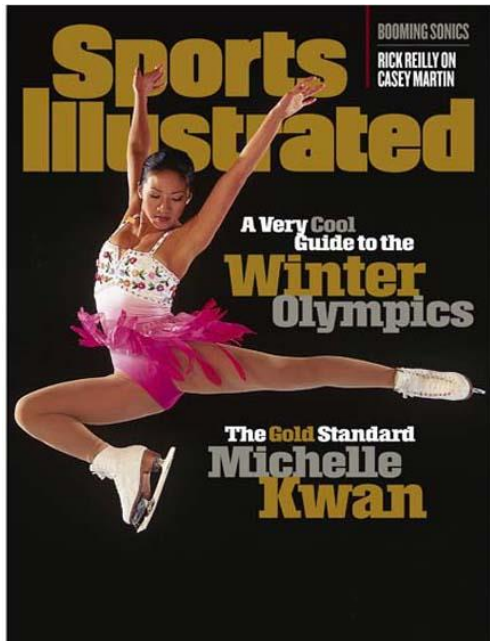
This cover is classified as passive due to the posed stance the photographer capture Lindesey Vonn. In comparison to Kitt's cover, Vonn has no helmet and the photographed is manipulated to give it an active feel. The photo would be classified as soft-core pornography due to the focus on Vonn's the hips, thighs and buttocks. In the pose, Vonn openly acknowledges the spectator giving off a sexual invitation with the "come-on" face.

Both covers are similar, but it is clearly evident that Vonn is more sexualized.

Lindsey Vonn, February 8, 2010



PICTURE EXAMPLE II – Central Point(s) of Interest



**Central Point of Interest –Passive**

This photograph would be considered passive due to the removed background and the aerial pose Michelle Kwan is captured in.

The central points of interest would be the legs, thighs and a heavy emphasis on the crotch. The white on Kwan's outfit contrasts with the background drawing the viewer focus to the chest area as well.

*Michelle Kwan, February 9, 1998*

**Central Point(s) of Interest –Active**

This photograph would be considered active due to the picture is a still from Sarah Hughes's performance.

The central points of interest would be on the legs, thighs and the crotch. The crotch area is a similar color to the background causing it to blend in.

*Sarah Hughes, March 4, 2002*

**Central Point(s) of Interest –Passive**

This photograph would be considered passive due to the removed background and the aerial pose Gracie Gold is captured in, similar to Kwan's cover.

The central points of interest would be on the legs, thighs and the crotch. Similar to Hughes's cover, the crotch area blends into the background.

*Gracie Gold, February 5, 2014*

### PICTURE EXAMPLE III – Come-on Facial Expression

#### **Kuhn's Definition:**

The “come-on” expression is summarized as where the subject openly acknowledges the spectator giving off a sexual invitation.



#### **Marilyn Monroe – 1950**

- Famous pin-up model in the 1950s and 1960s.
- Used the “come-on” face to enhance the sexual tone of her photographs.

#### **Jill Kinmont Boothe – 1955**

In the photograph Jill Kinmont Boothe is openly acknowledging the spectators. Her lips are enhanced due to the red lipstick she is wearing giving her expression a sexual tone. Her facial expression is one similar to Marilyn Monroe's as she poses in a pin-up photograph.

This photo would be classified as sexual according to Kuhn's definition of the “come-on” expression.

*Jill Kinmont Boothe, January 31, 1955*

**TABLE III – Winter Female Olympian Covers (Single Athlete Feature)**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Athlete</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>Active/ Passive</b>	<b>Soft-Core Pornography (Yes/ No)</b>
31-Jan-55	Jill Kinmont Boothe	Skiing	Passive	Yes
7-Feb-55	Carol Heiss	Figure Skating	Active	No
21-Nov-55	Gladys Maxine "Skeeter" Werner Walker	Skiing	Passive	Yes
1-Feb-60	Betsy Snite	Skiing	Passive	Yes
13-Feb-61	Laurence Owe	Figure Skating	Active	No
25-Dec-61	Francine Breaud	Skiing	Passive	Yes
5-Feb-62	Joan Hannah	Skiing	Passive	No
19-Feb-68	Peggy Flemin	Figure Skating	Active	Yes
31-Jan-72	Annie Henning	Speed Skating	Active	No
2-Feb-76	Sheila Young	Speed Skating	Active	No
20-Feb-84	Debbie Armstrong	Skiing	Passive	No
27-Jan-88	Kellie Casey	Skiing	Active	No
24-Feb-92	Bonnie Blair	Speed Skating	Active	No
2-Mar-92	Kristi Yamaguchi	Figure Skating	Passive	No
17-Jan-94	Nancy Kerrigan	Figure Skating	Passive	No
9-Feb-98	Michelle Kwan	Figure Skating	Active	Yes
4-Mar-02	Sarah Hughes	Figure Skating	Active	Yes
8-Feb-10	Lindsey Vonn	Skiing	Passive	Yes
5-Feb-14	Gracie Gold	Figure Skating	Passive	Yes
6-Feb-14	Mikaela Shiffrin	Skiing	Passive	No
4-Mar-14	Mikaela Shiffrin	Skiing	Passive	No

*Data excluded athletes who appeared on SI covers 18 months prior to their Olympic debut.  
Picture Example III explains more in-depth.*

**Active Cover(s):** 43% (9 out of 21)

**Passive Cover(s):** 57% (12 out of 21)

Soft-core pornography

Yes - 9

No - 12

**Sports**

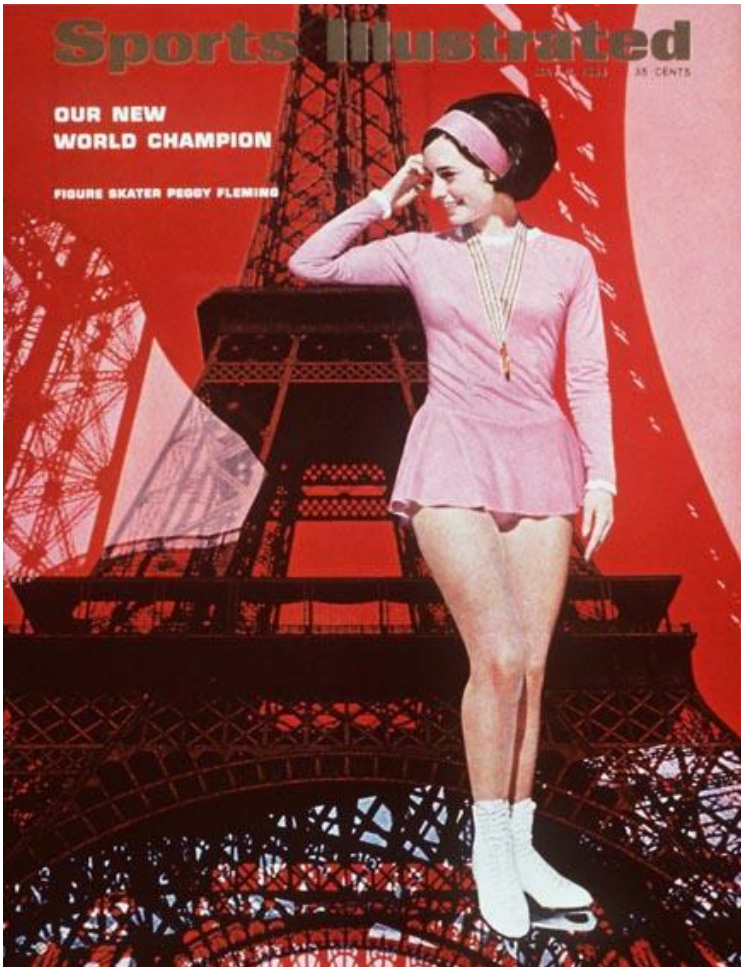
Skiing (10 covers)

Figure Skating (8 cover)

Speed Skating (3 covers)

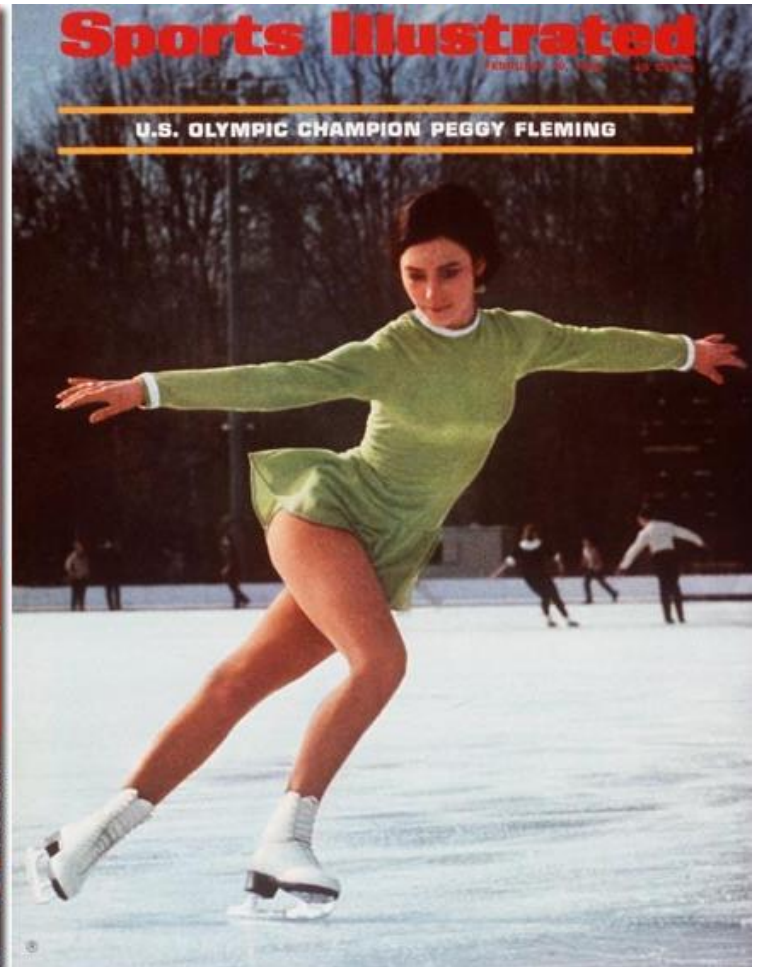


PICTURE EXAMPLE IV – Before/After Winter Olympic Games Debut



*Peggy Fleming Cover – May 02, 1966*

This cover would be excluded in Table III because the magazine issue was published before her Olympic debut during the 1968 Grenoble Winter Olympic Games.



*Peggy Fleming Cover – February 19, 1968*

This cover would be added in Table III because magazine issue was published after the 1968 Grenoble Winter Olympic Games.



MAGAZINE COVERS FEATURED IN TABLE III



## DISCUSSION

In 1996 Mary Jo Kane conducted a study where she focused on female athletic coverage, where she discovered the category of sport and race was the most influential to media coverage. Kane's study exposes the fact that the media gives more attention to aesthetically pleasing sports, such as swimming and gymnastics. The results found in the study conducted are similar to the ones found in Kane's study. The data concludes that out of the 21 covers featuring female winter Olympians, 12 covers (57 percent) featured athletes that were passive while 9 covers (43 percent) featured athletes that were active.

Out of the 21 covers three sports were featured; skiing was the most popular with 10 covers (48 percent), figure skating a close second with 8 covers (38 percent) and speed skating the least with 3 covers (14 percent). This data concluded that *Sports Illustrated* does still cover sports that are deemed sex-appropriate with 52 percent (n=21) of the coverage on skating. A main limitation of the study is the sample size in Table I and Table II. In result of the limiting sample size per decade, the data could have been misleading. Another limitation was that the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics was occurring during the initial data collection and there was not enough time or funds to analyze the coverage. Although there were some limitations that have occurred in the data collection, the content analysis strongly captures how *SI* features the featured female athlete.

The study shows that *SI*'s will alter the perception of iconic female figures to make them seem submissive due to its popularity with the male audience. The question that was asked in the beginning of the study was "Does Sports Illustrated know how to portray female athletes as a powerful figure?" and it can be concluded that they can at times, but they would rather portray them more as a sexual icon.

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