Strike a Pose! The Femininity Effect in Collegiate Women’s Sport

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The apologetic strategies women employ to manage the cultural tension between athleticism and hegemonic femininity are well documented. Existing research, however, tends to be small-scale. The cumulative symbolic implications of female athlete appearance on cultural ideals remain under-theorized as a result. Our quantitative content analysis of a stratified, random sample of 4,799 collegiate women athletes’ roster photos examined whether sport, school type, and geographical location are related to gendered appearance. Despite important contextual variation, we found overwhelming homogeneity across settings. Our results suggest that the normalization of women’s athleticism is limited and depends on subordinated femininities. Thus, despite some positive changes, team sport still helps stabilize and naturalize the gender order.

In 2009, University of New Mexico soccer player Elizabeth Lambert became an Internet sensation when ESPN aired highlights from a women’s regional championship semifinal game. The segment first showed Lambert punching, elbowing, and kicking opposing players while broadcasters called her actions “questionable,” “physical,” and “rough.” Lambert then yanked an opponent’s ponytail hard enough to throw her to the ground. After airing on SportsCenter, Lambert’s ponytail yank went viral, receiving several million views on YouTube, and coverage in The New York Times, Huffington Post, and on CBS News. The University of New Mexico indefinitely suspended Lambert from soccer, allowing her back only after she saw a psychologist (Longman, 2009).

Negative reactions to women like Lambert are not new; the idea that women who play physical and aggressive forms of sport are deviant dates to the late 1800s in the United States (Cahn, 1994). Because team sport has long been associated with men and masculinity in a manner that naturalizes the gender order (Kane, 1995; Messner, 1988; Travers, 2008), athleticism has historically placed women in dynamic tension with hegemonic femininity. Some women manage the tension between athleticism and hegemonic femininity by “apologizing” for their athleticism (Blinde & Taub, 1992; Schultz, 2014). Existing work on the apologetic illustrates the “situatedness” of gender (Martin, 2006), but it tends to be small-scale observational or interview studies focused on individuals in a particular sport, team, or region (Davis-Delano, Pollock, & Vose, 2009).

Insightful as this work is, its small-scale approach does not allow consideration of gendered embodiments across contexts. Individual appearance also operates at the level of the symbolic (Goffman, 1977; Kimport, 2012; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Given sport’s role as producer of gender imagery and ideology (Messner, 2011), athlete appearance conveys meanings that extend beyond individuals. How do sport settings shape women athletes’ gendered embodiments? Do athletes embody gender styles that symbolically challenge the hierarchical and complementary relationship between hegemonic masculinity and femininity? If so, what are the implications for the gender order? In the absence of a broadly comparative approach, the contextual nature of athletes’ gendered embodiments are under-theorized. Because women’s athleticism may destabilize the gender order, a large-scale study that compares athletes’ gendered appearances across different sport settings is crucial for advancing scholarly accounts of women’s athleticism, gender politics, and social change.

Using a stratified, random sample of 4,799 roster photos of collegiate athletes in the four most popular collegiate women’s team sports—basketball, soccer, softball and volleyball—this study develops a large-scale comparative approach to studying athletic femininities. We focus on team sports because individual sports have historically been constructed as closer to feminine ideals...
Working-class sports such as softball (Cahn, 1994). Simi-
larly, “mannishness” intertwined with “natural athlete”
class difference. For example, when negative stereotypes
by linking “masculine” female athleticism with racial and
White athletes are also more likely to embody feminini-
ties that align with ideals than black athletes are. When
theorizing the possible cumulative implications of ath-
etics’ appearance in the realm of the symbolic, our results
suggest that the normalization of women’s athleticism is
limited, as the valued form of athletic femininity depends
on and reproduces subordinated types. Thus, despite
some positive changes, team sport still helps stabilize
and naturalize the gender order.

**Sporting Femininities**

When North American team sport emerged in the late
1800s, normal sporting bodies were those of boys and
men. Essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality
constructed women as intrinsically feminine, men as intrinsically masculine, and both as heterosexual.
The equation of team sport with masculinity and male
heterosexuality naturalized these relations (Crosset,
1990; Kimmel, 1996). Whereas male athleticism was
normalized and valorized, hegemonic femininity encour-
age men to restrict their comportment, take up less
physical space, and act passively (Cahn, 1994; Young,
1990). Sport was thus seen as incompatible with normal
womanhood. The “masculinity” of female athleticism
also engendered suspicions of deviant sexuality. This
formation persisted throughout most of the 20th century
and into the Title IX era (Davis-Delano et al., 2009; Kane
et al., 2013). By constructing women athletes as deviant
and possibly lesbian (Blinde & Taub, 1992; Cahn, 1994),
modern team sport helps construct and naturalize a gender
order where the ascendant forms of masculinity and femi-
ninity are hierarchical and complimentary heterosexual
opposites (Kane, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2012; Messner,
1988; Schippers, 2007).

In addition to constructing oppositional difference
between women and men, sport also produces distinctions
among women. Gender intertwines with race, class and
sexuality such that multiple femininities are produced;
the resulting types are defined in hierarchical relation to
each other (Collins, 1991; Connell, 1987; Ezzell, 2009;
Schippers, 2007; Sterk & Knoppers, 2009). White, middle
class, sexually “normal” (i.e., heterosexual and properly
restrained) athletic femininity has historically been the
most acceptable form (Cahn, 1994). Then, as now, the
dominance of this ideal depended on marginalized or subordinated femininities (Collins, 2005; Connell &
Messerschmidt, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Schippers, 2007),
by linking “masculine” female athleticism with racial and
class difference. For example, when negative stereotypes
of women athletes first emerged they were strongest in
working-class sports such as softball (Cahn 1994). Simi-
larly, “mannishness” intertwined with “natural athlete”
racial ideology to construct black women athletes inher-
ently more masculine than whites (Birrell & McDonald,
2000; Carrington, 2013; Carter-Francique & Flowers,
2013). For both working class and Black women, sport-
ing “masculinity” was linked with sexual deviance and
hyper-sexuality.

Girls’ and women’s sport participation has increased
dramatically since the passage of Title IX (Acosta &
Carpenter, 2014). One result is that some women’s ath-
eticism may be normalized—and, at times, celebrated
(Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Ezzell, 2009; Heywood &
Dworkin, 2003). Many girls and women now embrace
the power, aggressiveness and body contact required in
sports like basketball, rugby, and soccer (Broad, 2001;
Chase, 2006; Ezzell, 2009; Finley, 2010; Heywood &
Dworkin, 2003; Malcom, 2003; Ross & Shinew, 2008;
Shockey, 2005; Theberge, 2003). Despite the influx of
girls and women into sport, research finds that the female
athlete as lesbian stereotype still exists (Davis-Delano
et al., 2009; Kane et al., 2013; Kauer & Krane, 2006;
Schultz, 2014). Such results indicate that the tension
between athleticism and hegemonic femininity persists.

This tension remains greater for athletes of color
and working-class athletes. The muscular coarseness
attributed to skater Tonya Harding, for example, was the
counter-point to Nancy Kerrigan’s esteemed femininity
(Stoloff, 2000). Contemporary constructions of sprinter
Caster Semanya (Cooky, Dycus, & Dworkin, 2013),
tennis players Venus and Serena Williams (Douglas,
2005; Schultz, 2005), and the WNBA (Banet-Weiser,
1999; Muller, 2007) echo historical racial formations of
Black women, where slippage occurs between muscular-
ity, manliness, deviant sexuality, and “blackness” (Col-
lins, 2005). At the symbolic level, constructing women
from subordinated race and class groups as masculine
“others” in relation to white women helps naturalize
and reify conceptions of race and class that undergird
the gender order (Carrington, 2013; Collins, 1991, 2005;
Schippers, 2007).

Women athletes use various “apologetic” strategies
to navigate the association between manliness, sexual
deviancy, and athleticism (Blinde & Taub, 1992). One
tactic involves overemphasizing cultural signs of woman-
hood and “normal” sexuality (Cahn, 1994; Davis-Delano
et al., 2009). Other strategies include striving for toned
and lean bodies (Dworkin, 2001; George, 2005; Ross &
Shinew, 2008), having long hair (Cox & Thompson, 2000;
Schultz, 2014), and/or wearing make-up and hair bows
during workouts and competitions (Adams, Schmitke,
& Franklin, 2005; Kauer & Krane, 2006). Such self-
regulation may be a “tangible manifestation” of how
norms are internalized and translated into interactions
with one’s own body (Fahs, 2011). The apologetic thus
reflects, enacts, and stabilizes symbolic aspects of the
gender order. To wit, gender reflects biological sex,
and sexual attraction between “opposite” genders is the only
normal, acceptable sexuality (Seidman, 2003; Warner,
1993). All three categories are now considered natural
and complimentary hierarchical binaries that align in predictable, “natural” ways (Kitzinger, 2005), binding masculinity and femininity in a hierarchical binary relationship (Schippers 2007).

However, because gender relations are neither fully cohesive nor consistent across settings in sport (Messer, 2002), gender plays out differently in different sporting contexts (Musto, 2014). Athletic femininities may vary across schools, sport, or geographic region (Davis-Delano et al., 2009; Kane & Buysse, 2005). Given the history of racialized constructions of female athleticism, gender expression may also vary by race or ethnicity. Existing apologetic research, though, mostly concerns white athletes in particularized contexts, making it difficult to theorize the cumulative implications of women’s athleticism on broader cultural ideals. Inquiry more attuned to institutional contexts and sport’s role in producing cultural forms that naturalize inequalities of gender, race, class, and sexuality is needed. A comparative, intersectional approach is better suited to understanding the symbolic implications of post-Title IX women’s athleticism in sport and the broader gender order.

**Gender Meanings in NCAA Roster Photos**

To theorize how femininities vary across local sporting contexts, we examined a stratified random sample of 4,799 collegiate athlete roster photos collected from women’s National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA] team websites. These websites are a primary way athletic departments market their teams to the public. In addition to team pictures and win-loss records, team websites link to individual athlete pages that include “career highlights,” short biographies, and a small, color roster photograph of each student-athlete.

Team sites and roster photos are part of a larger cultural presence that includes team posters, media guides, and media coverage of athletic events. Unlike media guides, team pictures, or event coverage, all of which vary extensively across particular sports and between women’s and men’s athletics (Buysse & Embser-Herbert, 2004; Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015; Kane & Maxwell, 2011), roster photos follow well-known conventions: a head shot from the shoulders up, against a plain background. All team members are dressed and posed alike in roster photos. This uniformity makes roster photos an excellent site to compare gender embodiments across contexts, providing “points of access to the constitutive meanings and power relations of the larger world” (Birrell & McDonald, 2000, p. 3).

Hairstyle and length in athlete roster photos provide an ideal window into contextualized gender practices. Research indicates that hair is often the most important gender marker, a sign that dramatizes seemingly “natural” gender difference (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Hair also carries deep cultural meanings of gender, race, class, and sexuality and is often an important aspect of identity and self presentation (Collins, 1991; Schultz, 2014; Weitz, 2004). The link between hair and beauty gives hair “added importance in the process of constructing hierarchies of femininity” (Collins, 2005, p. 195). Straight long hair, for example, is a widely idealized signifier of whiteness, femininity and heterosexuality in the United States (Collins, 1991, 2005; Hamilton, 2007; Lucal, 1999; McGann, 1999; Weitz, 2004). Hair, especially its length, is not as malleable as other gender markers such as makeup or jewelry. Although teams might have guidelines concerning accessories or make-up in roster photos, it is unlikely that teams regulate hair length.

Hairstyle and length also signify sexuality, with conventional gender indicating conventional sexuality (Hamilton, 2007; Jackson, 2006; Weitz, 2004). Conversely, nonconventional gender markers—such as short hair—often signify lesbianism (Hamilton, 2007; Kimport, 2012; Lucal, 1999). Research indicates that collegiate women athletes are well aware of these dynamics. A basketball player interviewed by Kauer and Krane (2006, p. 48) noted: “If you’re an athlete and you have short hair, then you are definitely a lesbian. It’s what people think, I swear.” A short-haired softball player explained, “When I first got my hair cut, they’re like, ‘oh, what’s that mean, that you’re gay’?” (p. 48). Similarly, a softball player in Ross and Shinew’s (2008, p. 47) study described the ideal feminine type as “wearing make-up all the time and [having] longer hair and that sort of thing.” Research on nonathlete collegiate women shows a similar theme. As Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) document, the ability to enact a normative femininity appealing to many heterosexual men is “embodied capital” in college gender regimes and erotic markets. The ascendant ideal is middle class and white, with long, straight blonde hair. Whether “natural” or acquired, the long hair creates symbolic distance from women lowest in the college party scene hierarchy: “boynish” women and lesbians.

Although long hair is popular among women in the U.S., at competitive levels of sport long hair can be relatively labor intensive and restrictive. Long-haired athletes must keep their hair out of their and their teammates’ eyes. Even when tied back, long hair can come loose and—as demonstrated by Elizabeth Lambert’s now infamous ponytail yank—be grabbed by opponents. However, if athleticism places women in dynamic tension with hegemonic femininity, athletes might eschew shorter hair lengths and styles in favor of those that clearly signal and highlight categorical gender difference and normative femininity. Rather than short hair, or even a ponytail, athletes might wear their hair “stylized” (Buysse & Embser-Herbert 2004) in a manner that makes femininity clearly visible to the viewer: long hair worn down, and draped in front of the shoulders. Athletes might also avoid markers historically associated with lesbians (Walker, 2001) and masculine subcultures like punk or Goth scenes (Leblanc, 1999; Wilkins, 2004), such as shaved heads, mohawks, brightly colored hair, or visible piercings. Because the “stylized” look is easier to attain with straight hair (Collins, 1991, 2005; Weitz, 2004), the
tension between athleticism and hegemonic femininity may also play out differently for African American, Asian, or Latina athletes than it does for white athletes (Johnson, 2015).

Because local contexts support their own systems of gender relations (Britton, 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987), athletes’ gender styles may also vary systematically across institutional settings. For example, NCAA sport divides colleges and universities into three athletic divisions based on the number of varsity sports and the amount of scholarship money offered to student-athletes (NCAA 2014). Division I schools fund the greatest number of sports and scholarships, whereas Division III schools do not provide athletic scholarships. Division I is the highest level of collegiate competition and is most visible in mass media. Beyond this divisional difference, athletes’ gender styles may vary based on sport or geographical location. Different sports carry different gender meanings, in part because they require different amounts of bodily contact, force, and aerobic capacity (Hattery, Smith, & Staurosky, 2007; Kane, 1995; Kane et al., 2013; Riemer & Visio, 2003). Because softball and volleyball are less aerobic than soccer and basketball, for example, the bodies of soccer and basketball players may better approximate hegemonic ideals (Davis-Delano et al., 2009), provided they are not “overtly” muscular (Dworkin, 2001; Ezzell, 2009; George, 2005). Of the sports we sampled, basketball is usually seen as the most “masculinized” (Buysses & Embser-Herbert, 2004; Davis-Delano et al., 2009; Hattery et al., 2007), volleyball is relatively feminine and gender appropriate (Kauer & Krane, 2006), and in the U.S., soccer is more “gender neutral” (Hattery et al., 2007, p. 261), although some view it as “appropriately” female (Sterk & Knoppers, 2009). Softball is more mixed. It emerged as a female version of baseball (Cahn, 1994), and is one of the most widely-offered college sports (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). However, softball initially flourished in “masculine” working class contexts (Cahn 1994), and has historically had a large lesbian presence (Griffin, 1998; Travers, 2006). Some scholars still characterize it as masculine (Buysses & Embser-Herbert, 2004; Kauer & Krane, 2006). Collegiate players are aware of this masculine coding and lingering lesbian stereotype (Davis-Delano et al., 2009; Kane et al., 2013; Schultz, 2014). Lastly, given demographic and cultural differences across the U.S., geographic region may influence athlete gender styles. Such findings highlight the importance of large-scale, quantitative research that makes comparisons across multiple sport contexts.

Data and Methods

We used quantitative content analysis to survey athletes’ appearances in roster photos, constructing a random sample of 4,799 photos drawn from collegiate websites during the 2009-2010 academic year. Given important differences between Divisions I and III, we first stratified during the 2009-2010 academic year. Given important sample of 4,799 photos drawn from collegiate websites appearances in roster photos, constructing a random We used quantitative content analysis to survey athletes’

Results

After presenting a descriptive overview of our results, we then use a series of logistic regression models to analyze how gendered appearance varies across sports, schools, and geographical locations. Variables were selected according to BIC approximation (Raftery, 1995). For
large sample sizes, BIC values are preferred to p-values, and lower BIC value indicate that the model better captures the main features of the data. Because missing data comprised less than 5% of the sample (n = 148), missing data were omitted via list-wise deletion before analysis (Allison, 2002).

**Sample Characteristics**

Our stratified, random sample revealed overwhelming homogeneity in athletes’ hair lengths and styles. As evidenced in Table 1, approximately 96% of collegiate women athletes had long hair, 4% had medium length hair, and less than 1% of athletes had short hair. Of the 37 short-haired athletes, only three wore mohawks and only two spiked their hair. No athletes had buzzed or shaved heads. Less than one percent of all athletes (0.8%) dyed their hair bright colors, and tattoos, facial piercings, or stretched earlobes were similarly rare (2%). By these measures, the sample adhered overwhelmingly to conventional feminine standards of beauty.

The long-haired athletes varied somewhat in how they wore their hair, making feminine appearance more or less prominent. More than half (57%) sported what Buysee and Embser-Herbert (2004) described as highly “stylized” hair, in this case, long hair down and draped in front of the shoulders. Especially in a competitive athletic context, managing long hair is more labor and time intensive than short hair. It is also difficult to wear hair down while competing. Although at odds with athleticism, unrestrained long hair is difficult to overlook, especially when pulled in front of the shoulders. Other long-haired athletes posed with their hair tied back (33%), a style that obscured most of their hair, but aligned with how long-haired athletes wear hair during practice or competition. The remaining long-haired athletes either wore their hair down, pushed back behind their shoulders (3%), or had a ponytail draped in front of their shoulders (7%).

Aside from hair length, athletes did not tend to exhibit other appearance markers that might have embellished or accentuated their appearance. It was uncommon for athletes to wear accessories like headbands (12%), or barrettes, ribbons or clips in their hair (5%). Braids and dreadlocks were also uncommon (4%). Approximately one quarter of athletes wore earrings (27%), and less than one out of every ten athletes wore a necklace (9%). Across the sample, long hair was athletes’ primary marker of femininity.

**Multivariate Analysis: Athletic Femininities in Context**

We next modeled how athlete appearance varied across local contexts in NCAA sport. Given our sample’s homogeneity and the import of hair as a gender cue (Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Weitz, 2004), our primary analytic focus concerned athletes’ hair lengths and styles. Table 2 presents coefficients and odds ratios from three logistic regression models, which explore factors that increase athletes’ odds of: (1) wearing their hair tied back, (2) wearing their hair pushed back behind their shoulders, and (3) having hair that is shorter than shoulder length. For the first two models, comparisons were made among long-haired athletes (n = 4,446), and the full sample size was used for the third model (n = 4,651).

Controlling for other factors, “older” athletes were more likely to have short hair ($\beta = 0.23, p < 0.01$). Hairstyle was also related to athletes’ perceived race. Black athletes were more likely to pose with their hair in a ponytail and more likely to have their hair pushed behind their shoulders than white athletes ($\beta_{black} = 0.80, p < 0.001; \beta_{behind\ shoulders} = 1.13, p < 0.001$). They were also more likely to have short hair ($\beta_{short\ hair} = 2.10, p < 0.001$). No statistically significant differences were found between white athletes and athletes who were classified as other races or ethnicities, such as Asian or Latina athletes.

Athlete appearance was also related to sport type. Independent of other variables, basketball players wore their hair in less stylized ways than softball and volleyball players. Compared with basketball players, softball and volleyball players were more likely to wear their hair down ($\beta_{softball} = -0.78, p < 0.001; \beta_{volleyball} = -0.75, p < 0.001$) and more likely to drape their hair in front of their shoulders ($\beta_{softball} = -0.78, p < 0.001; \beta_{volleyball} = -0.96, p < 0.001$), styles that made long hair prominent. Basketball players, though, were more likely than soccer players to pose with more highly stylized hair. Soccer players had greater odds of wearing their hair in ponytails ($\beta = 1.64, p < 0.001$) and having their hair pushed behind their shoulders ($\beta = 1.05, p < 0.001$), styles that do not necessarily draw attention to hair length.

In addition to age, race, and sport type, region of the country and athletic division were related to roster photo hairstyle. Athletes in regions other than the Southwest (Big 12 conference) were more likely to pose with hair in a ponytail ($\beta_{ACC} = 1.18, p < 0.001; \beta_{Big\ Ten} = 1.33, p < 0.001; \beta_{Big\ East} = 1.38, p < 0.001; \beta_{Big\ Ten} = 1.08, p < 0.001; \beta_{Ivy} = 1.01, p < 0.001$) and have their hair pushed back behind their shoulders than athletes who attended schools in the SEC ($\beta_{ACC} = 0.93, p < 0.001; \beta_{Big\ Ten} = 1.18, p < 0.001; \beta_{Big\ East} = 1.32, p < 0.001; \beta_{Big\ Ten} = 0.87, p < 0.001; \beta_{NCA} = 0.61, p < 0.001$). Finally, when compared with Division I athletes, athletes who attended Division III schools had greater odds of wearing their hair in a ponytail ($\beta = 1.10, p < 0.001$), and greater odds of wearing their hair pushed behind their shoulders ($\beta = 1.05, p < 0.001$). Athletes in the South or Southwest and Division I athletes were thus more likely to have their hair pulled forward in front of the shoulders, a style that made their long hair prominent.

**Discussion: Situated Variation Across Contexts**

Women’s athleticism has become more acceptable since the passage of Title IX (Dworkin & Messner, 1999; Ezzell, 2009; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003), yet research
Table 1  Descriptive Statistics of NCAA Women Athletes on Division I and III Basketball, Soccer, Softball, and Volleyball Teams ($N = 4,799$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race &amp; Ethnicity</td>
<td>4765</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>3889</td>
<td>81.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>11.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian, Latina or Other</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>6.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair Length</td>
<td>4759</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long</td>
<td>4549</td>
<td>95.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>3.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long Hair Styles</td>
<td>4549</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ponytail (Behind Shoulders)</td>
<td>1504</td>
<td>33.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ponytail (In Front of Shoulders)</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>6.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down (Behind Shoulders)</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>3.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down (In Front of Shoulders)</td>
<td>2593</td>
<td>57.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium Hair Styles</td>
<td>173</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Half” Ponytail (Bangs Tied Back)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short Hair Styles</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Cut</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>86.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohawk</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiked Hair</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Hair Styles</td>
<td>4759</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangs</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>10.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braids, Dreadlocks, Twists</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>3.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyed Hair</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair Accessories</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headband</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>11.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrettes, Bows or Clips</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>4.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweatband</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hat</td>
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<td>0.00%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jewelry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Earrings</td>
<td>1292</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necklace</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>8.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Modifications</td>
<td>4759</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Piercing</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>1.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stretched Earlobes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tattoo (on neck or collarbone)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.06%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
still finds that women athletes are stereotyped as “man-nish” or lesbian (Davis-Delano et al., 2009; Kane et al., 2013; Schultz, 2014). Research on the apologetic helps illuminate how individuals use appearance to navigate the tension between athleticism and hegemonic femininity. However, the small scale and particularized nature of this research makes it difficult to consider contextual variation. Our analysis of 4,799 NCAA roster photos explored athlete appearance across multiple sport locales. Whereas individuals enact apologetic behavior, our results demonstrate that the “apologetic” is more than an individual phenomenon. Although nearly all of the athletes had long hair, our results indicate that local contexts—sport, division, and region—play an important role in mediating athlete appearance. Holding other factors constant, Black athletes, soccer and basketball players, athletes in the Midwestern, West, or Eastern regions of the United States, and Division III athletes were more likely to have their long hair in a ponytail or wear their hair pushed back behind their shoulders. In contrast, white women, volleyball and softball players, women in the Southern or Southwest areas of the United States, and women who attended Division I schools had greater odds of posing with their hair displayed in the more “stylized” manner.

Table 2 Estimates (log-odds and odds) From Selected Logistic Regression Models of Collegiate Female Athletes’ Likelihood of Exhibiting Features of Femininity in Their Roster Photos (=1, 0 otherwise)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Model 1: Hair In Ponytail</th>
<th>Model 2: Hair Behind Shoulders</th>
<th>Model 3: Hair Shorter Than Shoulders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>exp(β)</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year in School</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (reference)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.80 ****</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>1.13 ****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian, Latina &amp; Other</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball (reference)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>1.64 ****</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>1.05 ****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Softball</td>
<td>-0.78 ****</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>-0.78 ****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volleyball</td>
<td>-0.75 ****</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>-0.96 ****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEC (reference)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
<td>1.18 ****</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>0.93 ****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Ten</td>
<td>1.33 ****</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>1.18 ****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Twelve</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big East</td>
<td>1.38 ****</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>1.32 ****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivy</td>
<td>1.08 ****</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>0.87 ****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pac Ten</td>
<td>1.01 ****</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>0.61 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I (reference)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>1.10 ****</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>1.05 ****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.48 ****</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-2.22 ****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi-square</td>
<td>1,261.87</td>
<td>960.20</td>
<td>173.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>4,446</td>
<td>4,446</td>
<td>4,651</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIC</td>
<td>-1153</td>
<td>-851</td>
<td>-64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BIC Values for Inclusion:
weak:|t| ≥ 2.91(*) ; positive:|t| ≥ 3.23(**) ; strong:|t| ≥ 3.80(***) ; very strong:|t| ≥ 4.29(****)
Among athletes in our sample, soccer and basketball players were more likely to wear a ponytail or wear their hair pushed back behind their shoulders than softball and volleyball players. Wearing one’s hair in a ponytail or pushed behind the shoulders does not make long hair prominent in the way that long hair worn down and pulled forward does. Research has found that women who in engage in other “gender inappropriate” activities such as roller derby reorient their expectations toward femininity (Finley, 2010; Hollander, 2013), and a similar process may occur in basketball and soccer. Aggressive displays of bodily force regularly occur in soccer and basketball, whereas softball has relatively little, and volleyball has none. Sports with little to no body contact may facilitate femininities that adhere more closely to cultural ideals.

Furthermore, both basketball and softball are viewed as more “masculine” than soccer. Although soccer is a full contact, highly aerobic sport, soccer players are embraced as gender conventional “girls next door” in the U.S. (Longman, 2000, p. 43). Relatively new to the U.S., soccer is not entwined with softball’s historical association with feminization. Softball and soccer are also differently classed; the former historically flourished in working class contexts (Cahn, 1994; Griffin, 1998), the latter in white middle class and upper middle class suburbs (Longman, 2000; Schultz, 2014; Sterk & Knoppers, 2009). The suburban whiteness of soccer also contrasts sharply with basketball’s urban blackness (Carrington, 2013; Longman, 2000; Muller, 2007). The gender “appropriateness” of soccer for women in the U.S. may be an effect of its middle class whiteness (Longman, 2000), which allows athletes to embody femininities that otherwise depart from hegemonic ideals.

Athlete appearance also varied with division and geographic location. In all sports, Division I players were more likely than those in Division III to wear their hair in more stylized ways. Historically, highly visible and competitive professional women’s sport leagues have had appearance standards for athletes (Cahn, 1994; Lenskyj, 2012). Division I schools may similarly be more likely to shape athlete appearance, whether by formal or informal means. Finally, we found that athletes in Southern or Southwest areas of the United States were more likely to have stylized hairstyles than other athletes. These results align with other gender and sports media studies, which find less equitable media coverage and more sexist team names in women’s sports at Southern schools (Eitzen, 2012; Kane & Buysse, 2005; Sagas, Cunningham, Wigley, & Ashley, 2000; Ward, 2004).

Regardless of sport, differences existed between black and white women athletes. Black women were more likely to have short hair than white women. When they had long hair, black athletes were more likely to pose with hair tied back or wear their hair pushed back behind their shoulders. This finding might reflect the different “interpretive contexts” of white and black women face in sport (Collins, 2005, p. 135). Racialized imagery constructs athletes of color, and black women in particular, as “naturally” more masculine than white women (Collins, 1991; Schultz, 2014). Collins (2005, p. 135) argues that “black women athletes have more leeway in reclaiming assertiveness” and the “aggressiveness” needed in competitive sport, and thus, may orient to other appearance standards.

Despite the strength of our comparative sample, our research has limitations. Given the import of hair as a marker of gender and sexuality, we analyzed hairstyle and length as proxies for femininities. It is important, however, not to conflate a gender marker with broader patterns of gender relations. Although our decision to code perceived race aligns with race attribution in everyday life, we do not know the athletes’ self-identified race. Nor do we know how athlete appearance in our sample compares to that of male athletes or nonathlete college women. Our results thus highlight the need for additional research. Future research might also examine whether and how teams, athletic departments, or schools shape athlete appearance through formal or informal policies. For example, the lack of jewelry in the roster photos may reflect NCAA-level prohibitions, an ironic twist given the history of formal policies that encouraged (and sometimes required) feminine appearance and attire (Cahn, 1994; Collins, 2005). Tracing historical shifts in women’s athletic embodiment could thus illuminate the constitution of gender over time.

**Conclusion: The Femininity Effect**

Research on the apologetic explores how cultural narratives shape individual appearance. However, the individualized focus of this work does not allow consideration of the equally important relationship, namely, the collective effects of individual appearance on cultural ideals. Comparing across individuals, we found some patterned contextual variation in hair length and style, but we also found overwhelming homogeneity. Less than one percent of the athletes had short hair. More than half posed with “stylized” hair: long hair worn down pulled in front of the shoulders in a manner that made the hair prominent. Mohawks, buzzed, spiked or dyed hair, tattoos, and facial piercings were uncommon. Athletes rarely wore braids, dreadlocks, afros, and other markers of racial “difference.”

In addition to being ubiquitous in our sample, long hair and ponytails are part of the cultural imagery of female athleticism more broadly. Ponytails, for example, have become the “hallmark of female athleticism” in the U.S. (Schultz, 2014, p. 1), almost part of the uniform for female athletes. So expected are long hair and ponytails that athletic gear sports ponytail “portals.” Helmets, hats, hoods on running gear, pretty much anything an athlete might put on her head has an opening that both gives her hair some breathing room—and makes her long hair conspicuously present. In light of increased rates of participation in the post Title IX era (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014) and claims that women’s athleticism is normalizing (Dworkin
inequality. The post-Title IX influx of girls and women into athletics raised the possibility that new images and narratives might disrupt oppositional gender constructs. Widespread, taken for granted, seemingly innocuous, the long-haired, ponytailed feminine athlete is a potent symbol of normalized female athleticism. But long hair only normalizes some female athleticism, while simultaneously producing other powerful ideological effects. The femininity effect centers whiteness, conventional femininity, and heterosexuality. The “normal” feminine female athlete supports the idealized relationship between masculinity and femininity at the heard of gender hegemony (Messerschmidt, 2012; Schippers, 2007). As such, the femininity effect mitigates the disruptive potential of female athleticism in the gender order.

Notes

1. Hegemonic femininity is the idealized form of femininity in the broader gender order (Connell, 1987). Rather than defining femininity as a static set of traits, behaviors, or characteristics that one has, we define hegemonic femininity as “a specific contextual pattern of practice that ideologically legitimates the subordination of women and femininity to men and masculinity” (Messerschmidt 2012, 60). In addition, femininities are constructed both in relation to each other and in relation to the idealized relationship between hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity (Schippers, 2007). As a result, Schippers (2007) refers to gender styles enacted by females as “femininities”—even if a particular “femininity” includes elements coded masculine, such as short hair, masculinity, or aggression. She refers to femininities that incorporate aspects of ‘masculinity’ and/or otherwise refuse to be subordinate to hegemonic masculinity as “pariah” femininities.

2. Due to small photo size, we could not consistently code athletes’ hair textures, use of highlights/lowlights, or use of make-up.

3. In the NCAA, athletes are eligible to participate in sport for four academic years, but can extend their eligibility to five years by “redshirting.” Athletes’ year in school was determined based on their athletic eligibility.

4. BIC is calculated according to the following formula: \( BIC_k = n \log(1 - R_k^2) + p_k \log n \), where \( R_k^2 \) is the value of \( R^2 \) for model \( M_k \) and \( p_k \) is the number of independent variables in model \( M_k \) (Raftery, 1995). Regression results are reported with one asterisk indicating weak evidence for variable inclusion \((|t| \geq \sqrt{\ln N})\), two asterisks suggesting there is positive evidence \((|t| \geq \sqrt{\ln N + 2})\), three asterisks indicating strong evidence \((|t| \geq \sqrt{\ln N + 6})\), and four asterisks meaning there is very strong evidence \((|t| \geq \sqrt{\ln N + 10})\).

5. 25% of Black athletes had braids, dreads or twists.

6. Some male athletes have long hair, most noticeably in highly masculinized sports such as American professional football. American football is a masculinized terrain saturated with images of large, powerful, and violent men, some of whom have long hair. The hyper-masculinity and high national profile of the NFL might offset the ostensibly “feminine” long hair.
References


