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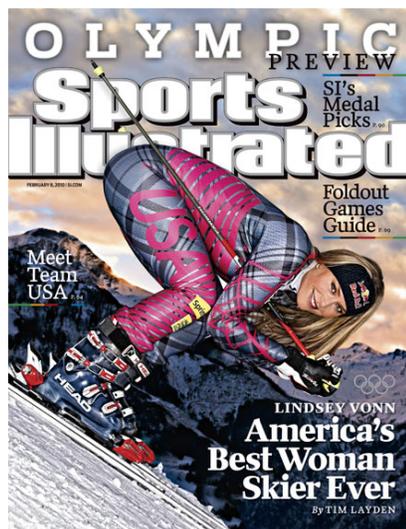
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Athlete or Model? Analysis of the Lindsey Vonn Sports Illustrated Cover

Sports Illustrated's main goal has always been to be *the* sporting magazine, rather than *a* sporting magazine (MacCambridge 23). Since they started in 1954, they have been printing and distributing their magazine that covers extensive sports coverage (34). As a result, the magazine has always covered the Olympic games and has even gone a step further by offering a special Olympic edition of their very popular product. In the past, the magazine has often covered predominantly male athletes. As a matter of fact, apart from the growingly popular swimsuit edition, featuring female athletes and models in revealing swimsuits, the top ten most covered athletes by *Sports Illustrated* just happen to be all males (Rovell). And for as long as the magazine has existed, this has been the norm. However, the February 2010 Olympic special edition cover, photographed by Bob Martin, featured a female athlete in a sexual suggestive pose. This particular cover caught the public's attention, but not for the right reasons.

On February 8th, this cover was released to the public:



At a first glance the image does not appear to suggest any issues. This image features superstar downhill skiing sensation Lindsey Vonn bent over in a tuck position on a ski hill for a special Olympic edition of the magazine. Many consumers felt that the image was sexist and offensive. In addition, a number of viewers comment on the blatant sexuality of Vonn's pose in this image. For instance, Nicole Lavoie, an associate director of The Tucker Center for Research in Girl's and Women Sports at the University of Minnesota, is quoted on thehollywoodgossip.com stating "the posed portrait wouldn't have been the choice had it been a male on the cover" (Hater). Moreover, Lavoie continues to say, "When females are featured on the cover of [*Sports Illustrated*], they are more likely than not to be in sexualized poses and not in action" (Hater). Like a number of bothered viewers, "suzy", a commentator on the site suggests that there are many different poses that could have been utilized in order to avoid "total objectification" such as "standing proudly towards the camera" (Hater). However, the commentator claims that *SI (Sport Illustrated)* opted for this particular sexualization because of the fact that "sex sells" (Hater). In summary, many viewers felt that *Sports Illustrated* could have chosen a much less provocative stance and portrayal of Vonn.

On the other hand, there are many who defend the cover and believe that there is no sign of sexualization or objectification. For example, Shannon Hood, a blogger on Frothygirlz suggests that people should be glad that *Sports Illustrated* has decided to feature a female athlete for their Olympic feature, rather than another male athlete as they so often do (Hood). Also, Shannon brings forward the interesting point that at least *SI* chose to illustrate a genuine athlete and that the general public should "rejoice the fact that it is an actual athlete instead of an anorexic model in a swimsuit issue" (Hood).

Furthermore, many people tend to believe that there is a specific set of people who find these images offensive and who see a problem. A blogger on technorati suggest that the individuals who have an issue with the image are most likely people who are jealous of Lindsey Vonn's attractiveness and success (Hayes). Therefore, suggesting that the only people who have an issue with the image are the people who are self conscious about their own appearance. A final point that was often brought up was the idea that today's female athletes should be allowed to express themselves as both attractive and athletic. Actually, "merlin5" a commentator on the site huffingtonpost suggests Lindsey Vonn "is a beautiful woman as well as an amazing athlete. She's allowed to be both" (Snyder). Thus, this demonstrates that the public also believes that Vonn has a particular skill set as well as an appealing appearance. Ultimately, according to these supporters she should be allowed to use all her assets to better her public image as both an athlete and a person.

The concern about this magazine cover is in dialogue with the current concerns of the public regarding the sexualization of female athletes. For example, many covers such as *Sports Illustrated's* July 1999 issue, featuring Brandi Chastain in her sports bra after winning the Women's World Cup, or ESPN's 2009 "The Body" issue, featuring Serena Williams wearing absolutely nothing, have been criticized for intentionally representing female athletes as sex objects. Other covers are more directly related to the Lindsey Vonn's *Sports Illustrated* cover in the way that they completely objectify women and present them to the public as sexual women rather than depicting them as the talented athletes that they truly are. For instance, *Sports Illustrated's* June 2000 cover featured female tennis star Anna Kournikova. The cover consisted of Kournikova lying on a bed, holding a pillow against her breasts with a rather suggestive facial expression; not to

mention the caption that read “Advantage, Kournikova” (popular tennis phrase changed for sexual innuendo) (Katie). This particular example relates well to the idea that female athletes are objectified, as Vonn is on the February 2010 cover, because to this day Kournikova has yet to win a major tennis tournament (Playing Unfair). Yet, she appears on the cover of a major successful sporting magazine holding a pillow rather than a tennis racket. Hence, this easily suggests that female athletes are taken out of context and used as sexual objects. Another prime example of this is once again a *Sports Illustrated* cover. The July 2005 issue featured beautiful USA softball pitcher Jennie Finch wearing a tank top and a short skirt holding a baseball bat. This particular image also ties in well with the theme of objectification because Finch is dressed in a more illusive outfit as opposed to her usual concealing softball uniform. Therefore once again proving that female athletes are shown for their attractiveness instead of their athleticism. Ultimately, the *Sports Illustrated* cover and these other images reveal more serious issues regarding the ways in which female athletes are portrayed in the media.

This magazine participates in a much larger debate about how female athletes are usually depicted as sexual objects rather than talented athletes. The *Sports Illustrated* cover featuring Lindsay Vonn is important to analyze because it participates in the gender stereotyping that occurs in the media's coverage of athletes. Analyzing this trend is important because the gender stereotyping of athletes can lead to the de-emphasis of athleticism and the objectification of female athletes, both of which negatively influence young girls who wish to participate in sports.

Although female athletics is stronger than ever in the United States, female athletes continue to receive little coverage. As a matter of fact, female sports make up 40

percent of all sports in the USA but “only receive four to five percent of the coverage” (Playing Unfair). Not only do female athletics receive little coverage, but also the coverage they do receive portrays them in sexualized roles. Unfortunately, with the male population being the larger portion of sporting viewers, the media attempts to target them with what is presented. As a result, when women athletes are shown, they are “portrayed off the court, out of uniform and in these hyper-feminized roles” (Playing Unfair). Thus, female athletes are often portrayed as models rather than athletes.

The actuality that female athletes are being portrayed as sexy rather than sporty is in truth an issue that also leads to the de-emphasis of athleticism. This domino effect of de-athleticism results in the fact that female athletes are now required to be sexual in order to gain the proper attention of the general public. As a matter of fact, tennis star Anna Kournikova said it herself: “Women athletes are all entertainers rather than competitors” (Playing Unfair). Interesting, coming from a female tennis player with more endorsements than any other female, despite never winning a WATP singles tournament (Playing Unfair). This is particularly alarming because it emphasizes the fact that female athletes are illustrated as sexualized entertainment rather than serious athletes. As a matter of fact, in an analysis of *Sports Illustrated* covers throughout the years, “approximately sixty percent of all photographs depicting females portrayed them in passive, nonathletic roles” (Creedon 37) such as the Jennie Finch or Kournikova *SI* covers that feature the female stars in provocative clothes instead of their athletic uniforms. Therefore, the public is presented with images of female athletes off the court rather than in uniform and playing their respective sport. What this does is it takes away the athletic merit and competence in women’s sports and replaces it with sexy

representation of female athletes. Accordingly, the reality that the media portrays female athletes in such a negatively sexual light results in the fact that they are not known for what they can do on the field or on the court, but instead for how they look outside of the sporting environment.

These facts transcend into reality because female athletes are objectified by the media and represented as sexualized females. The media purposely targets female athletes and portrays them in sexualized roles through “unfair coverage that has several important characteristics” (George, Hartley and Paris 95). This objectification is a “disadvantage [to] women’s position in society” and harms their overall image (95). Therefore, the media purposely chooses what stories to cover and how they will be covered all while using specific characteristics that accentuate the female body. Moreover, these characteristics involve “emphasized femininity, the trivialization of women’s achievements, sexist language...and focusing on the physical characteristics of female athletes” (95). In a study conducted by three accomplished grad students (Christeen George, Matthew Hartley and Jenny Paris) at the Thames Valley University, pertinent statistics based around gender representations in sports from various media sources were calculated and found. To conduct this search, the researchers investigated the number of pictures featuring women athletes, the overall tone of these images, the language used and the general tenor of the articles featuring females and they received the following information:

The results would appear to support the hypothesis that female athletes are reported unfairly by the press. There was significantly less coverage of female athletes, the coverage tended to emphasize the femininity of the

athletes, the achievements of female athletes were trivialized, sexist language was used to describe female athletes, coverage of female athletes tended to be negative and there was a tendency to emphasize the physical characteristics of female athletes (George, Hartley and Paris 97)

As a result, the statistics that were gathered from the experiment do in fact prove that female athletes are being shown in a negative light. When examining these particularly images, it becomes obvious that these images illustrate the “individual in provocative clothing or photograph an individual in such a way as to focus solely on sexual attributes” (Daniels and Heidi 568). In addition, such focus is often “catering attention on an athlete’s breasts” or other physical attributes of the same nature (568). Examples of such findings are the increased popularity of “numerous bikini-clad female athletes” such as Danica Patrick (race car driver) and Natalie Gulbis (golfer) appearing in various men’s magazines wearing little and even no clothes (568). Essentially, the media portrays women as sexy females instead of showing them as talented and accomplished athletes.

Ultimately, when the media sexualizes women it discourages young female athletes aspiring to continue their advancement in sports and diminishes their self-esteem as young adolescents. In fact, when girls are exposed to “harmful cultural messages,” such as those on the front of the covers mentioned in this essay, they tend to “lose confidence, self-esteem and independence” (Hundley and Billings 38). Therefore, young girls are affected by what they see in the media and will act accordingly. When a young girl picks up any sports magazine featuring a female athlete, the first thing they will notice is the sex appeal of that athlete. For instance, in a recent study where young girl athletes were shown pictures of female professional athletes, the first things that came to

mind were comments regarding the athlete's appearance. Such comments included "She is so pretty" or "her hair is so perfect" (46). It becomes obvious that young girls do not necessarily look up to professional athletes because of their athletic prowess, but more so for their attractiveness and beauty since this is the first thing they key in on. This is not a coincidence considering the media representation of the female athlete. These ideals tape into young girls emotions and make them feel inadequate if they do not resemble what they see (47). Furthermore, it also sends young athletes the wrong message. In fact, Pat Griffin, a professor at the University of Minnesota explains that the message that young girls are receiving is that "they must strip in order to be taken seriously as professional athletes" (Playing Unfair). Essentially it tells them that it is more important to look good than to play well. And in the sports world, the global goal and objective is to perform at your best and to excel at your sport rather than look sexy and be viewed as beautiful instead of talented. Briefly, the over sexualization and the de-emphasis of athletics of female athletes gravely affects the young girls of the present and future generations.

Now, after having analyzed the overall controversy involving the cover as well as the issues brought forward by this cover, I will give my own in depth analysis of this image. The *Sport Illustrated* cover featuring Lindsey Vonn objectifies and sexualizes female athletes through the use of the chosen color scheme, juxtaposition as well as the subject pose.

A first point about how the overall image objectifies and sexualizes Vonn is the color scheme chosen for the image. When observing the colors in the picture, the attention of the reader is drawn to Vonn's body. With her bright pink and blue plaid skintight outfit, Vonn's body is easily identified. What this does is it highlights her

femininity and engages the reader to be drawn into her physical attributes rather than observe the picture as a whole. Another interesting remark is the color scheme used for the mountains and the sky in the background as they appear to be brushed up and almost “Disney like” colors. Light shades of pink and of blue are present and this gives the overall picture this sense of fairytale-likeness, implying Vonn to be an almost princess-like figure and objectifying her as a whole.

Another characteristic of the image that objectifies Vonn is the juxtaposition of the magazine cover and the photo. It is no accident that the *Sports Illustrated* title on the magazine is placed directly behind Vonn in such a way that her rear end covers part of the title, not too mention a rather intrusive and tasteless letter “U”, that appears to take advantage of Vonn’s pose and position. The reader cannot help but be drawn into the sexuality of the picture by simply attempting to read the title. This, once again, objectifies the female athlete by attracting the reader’s attention to her features and more importantly her rear. This is a blatant ploy to encourage men to buy the magazine by tapping into their sexual emotions. As a result, Vonn is completely sexualized and appears as an attractive and seductive model rather than an athlete.

Finally, when observing the picture of Vonn, it becomes evident that the pose chosen objectifies this female athlete. On the cover, Vonn is portrayed in a traditional tuck position that many downhill skiers use in order to gain speed when racing down a hill. However, in this particular image, Lindsey Vonn is portrayed in her tuck position in order to enhance her sex appeal. As a matter of fact, Vonn’s rear end is elevated in such a way that it is accentuated and is clearly the focal point of the image. Along the topic of pose, Vonn’s facial expression is rather intriguing. Instead of appearing as though she is

engaged in a difficult task, like downhill skiing, she is looking out at the viewer with a smile. Moreover, not only is Vonn showing her attention to the viewer, she is rather beautified for an athlete racing down a mountain. As a matter of fact, Lindsey Vonn is wearing makeup as well as sporting her long blonde locks down by her shoulders instead of tied up. It is hard to believe that any serious athlete would beautify herself before a race when the sole purpose is to perform and ultimately win. Obviously, wearing makeup does not give any performance advantage. Thus, this is a ploy that puts emphasis on Vonn's facial attributes, which has no correlation with her athletic talent. All of these elements solidify reality that the media objectifies female athletes. When Vonn is supposed to be skiing down a hill to showcase her talent, she is instead portrayed as a blonde model with attractive features.

In conclusion, the media portrays female athletes in a negative light. Overall, the objectification and the sexualization of female athletes lead to the de-emphasis of athleticism. This, as a result, globally impacts young girls aspiring of a sports career and transmits the wrong message as well as attacking them emotionally. Women athletes should be portrayed in a positive light and should be celebrated for their accomplishments on the playing surface, rather than their attractiveness and their bodies. The younger generation of female athletes needs to be exposed to positive images. In the end, female athletes start their careers aspiring of excelling in their respective sport. It is a shame that they end up in bikinis on magazine covers or posing bent over on ski hills.

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