

# Exposure to Sexualized Images of Athletes Negatively Affects Adolescent Male Athletes' Appraisals of Self and Others

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## Introduction

- Sexualized images are prevalent in the media and many studies have found negative effects of these images on female viewers, including increased self-objectification, decreased self-esteem, and lower evaluations of the status and competence of the subject in the photo (Daniels, 2012). However, less is known about male responses to sexualized images of men.
- Although most research has used images of models, more recent research has investigated images of *athletes*. It is important to study images of athletes because they can be both empowering and debasing; images of performance athletes (e.g., the focus of the image is on their athletic competence) are assessed to be competent role models, whereas sexualized images provoke objectified judgments (e.g., Daniels, 2012).

**Goal:** To examine the effects of viewing sexualized versus performance images of male athletes on male adolescent athletes' perceptions of self and the athletes in the images.

**Hypothesis:** Participants who view sexualized images will have lower appraisals of the self and more negative perceptions of the athletes in the images compared to participants who view performance images of the same athletes.

## Method

### Participants

- 83 male adolescent football players (Mean age=15.4, SD = 1.24, Range = 12-17)
- Majority of sample (75%) was Caucasian

### Procedure

- All data were collected online.
- Participants were randomly assigned to view 5 images (either sexualized or performance) of male celebrity athletes.

## Method (cont.)

- After viewing each image, participants were asked to complete a short writing exercise to encourage them to carefully view the photos.
- Next, participants completed explicit and implicit measures of self-perceptions, and several other measures not used in the current study.
- Finally, participants viewed the images again, and answered questions about their perceptions of the athletes in the images.

### Experimental Stimuli

- 5 pairs of images (sexualized and performance images of the same athletes), chosen from a pilot study with college males ( $n = 20$ ).



Fig. 1: Sample sexualized image



Fig. 2: Sample performance image

### Dependent Variables

#### ❖ Perceptions of Athletes

**Evaluations of Athletic Images Scale** (modification of Gurung & Chrouser, 2007 and Knight & Giuliano, 2001). An 18-item measure to assess perceptions of the attractiveness, athletic competence, and respectability of each of the athletes depicted in the images. Ratings were made using a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

## Method (cont.)

### ❖ Explicit Perceptions of Self

**Physical Self-Description Questionnaire** (PSDQ; Marsh et al 1994) –9 subscales measuring state self-esteem: coordination, body fat, sport, global physical, appearance, strength, flexibility, endurance, and global esteem.

### ❖ Implicit Perceptions of Self

**The Ten Statements Test** (based on Fredrickson et al 1998). This measure assesses state self-objectification by having students complete the following sentence stem "I am \_\_\_\_". A total objectification score was computed as a proportion of statements out of 10 that were self-objectifying (e.g., "I am fat.", "I am muscular").

## Results

### Mean Ratings for Self-Perceptions

	Experimental Group		
	Sexualized $n = 39$	Performance $n = 45$	$p$
<b>Explicit ratings (PSDQ)</b>			
Coordination	4.65	4.98	.07
Strength	4.85	5.13	.09
Flexibility	3.85	3.97	.61
Endurance	4.26	4.38	.56
Global esteem	4.94	5.18	.09
Body fat	2.57	2.16	.17
Sport	4.90	5.16	.17
Global physical	4.50	5.03	.02*
Appearance	4.13	4.50	.05*
<b>Implicit Ratings (TST)</b>			
Proportion of objectified statements	.14	.08	.14

## Results (cont.)

### Mean Ratings for Perceptions of Athletes

	Experimental Group		
	Sexualized $n = 38$	Performance $n = 44$	$p$
Attractiveness	5.08	4.85	.30
Athletic competence	4.85	5.78	.00*
Respectability	3.83	5.13	.00*

## Discussion

- Participants in the sexualized condition had lower ratings of global physical self-esteem and appearance self-esteem than those in the performance condition, indicating that viewing sexualized images made them feel less confident about their physical characteristics.
- Participants in the sexualized condition also rated the athletes as lower in respectability and athletic competence than did participants who were in the performance condition. This suggests that professional athletes who present themselves in a sexualized manner in the media may be perceived as less desirable role models by adolescent male athletes.
- These findings are among the first to demonstrate the negative effects of viewing sexualized images of male athletes on adolescent males. Although there has been a recent increase in the prevalence of sexualized images of athletes (e.g., the ESPN Body Issue) and many claim that these images are empowering and inspiring to young athletes, these results demonstrate otherwise.
- Future research should consider moderators of these effects, such as identification with celebrity athletes, peer influences, media habits, and parental mediation of media.