Get a Grip: How Consumers Interpret Images of Women Golfers and the Impact on the Back9Network's Marketing Strategy

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Get a Grip: How Consumers Interpret Images of Women Golfers and the Impact on the Back9Network’s Marketing Strategy

by

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Get a Grip: How Consumers Interpret Images of Women Golfers and the Impact on the Back9Network’s Marketing Strategy

Master of Science Thesis

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Abstract
For centuries, sport has been a space dominated by men and served as a microcosm of society in which women’s subordinate position has been highlighted. Despite the great strides women have made within the sport industry, sport continues to serve as a realm that is more welcoming to men than it is to women and that reinforces hegemonic masculinity (Cunningham & Singer, 2012; Connell, 1987). Although many sports reinforce male hegemony and patriarchy through use of violence and physicality, golf has also reproduced notions of male hegemony through the on-course rituals men take part in, the gendered language used on the course, and the discrimination of women by golf course personnel (McGinnis, Gentry, and McQuillan, 2009). This study utilized hegemonic masculinity and critical feminist theory to explore whether the Back9Network, a newly developed golf media network, is challenging hegemonic masculinity or simply reinforcing it through its portrayal of female golfers both on its website and on its Facebook page. This study employed a mixed methods approach with a sample size of n=16 at a large Northeastern University where participants were shown six images categorized as athletically competent, ambiguous, “girl next door,” “sexy babe,” soft pornography, and hyper-heterosexual (Kane & Maxwell, 2011). Overall results indicate that the more an image is sexualized in nature, the least likely it is to generate support. Further, results were analyzed under critical feminist theory and hegemonic masculinity to uncover gender differences in the way consumers interpret media portrayals of female athletes. Although women preferred the images of athletic competence and hyper-heterosexuality, men tended to rate the soft pornography the highest. However, qualitative results indicated that the soft pornography image would only entice men to look at the model and not be interested in the sport of golf and the Back9Network.
Chapter I: Introduction

Sport is one of the most powerful institutions in the United States, praised for its ability to build social capital among participants, boost the economy, and above all, entertain the public. As technology advances and becomes more sophisticated, sport is being delivered to the general public through various media platforms including television, online broadcasts, and internet streaming. However, as sport spreads and becomes even more deeply rooted in American culture, there is a need to step back and examine the role the media is playing in marginalizing female athletes and reinforcing masculine hegemony. While female athletes are marginalized and considered the subordinate in almost every sport, this study will focus on the sport of golf and how it has traditionally reinforced male dominance and the legitimacy of patriarchy. Despite this, some golf companies are recognizing the untapped market of women in the industry and are focusing their efforts on attracting women to the sport of golf and are therefore challenging hegemonic masculinity. One company that is challenging the status quo of golf is the Back9Network, a newly developed media company. The Back9Network is a lifestyle television network and media company aimed to be more inclusive by focusing on everything golf related from tour coverage to fashion, travel, and merchandise. Further, while the Back9Network wants to appeal to younger demographics, a significant portion of its target market is women of all ages. This study will use images of female golfers pulled from the Back9Network’s website and Facebook page to determine whether the company is attracting women to the game of golf or simply reinforcing hegemonic masculinity.

Critical Feminist Theory and Hegemonic Masculinity

Sport has traditionally been seen as a space for men and an unfit environment for women up until a few decades ago. In fact, it was not until the passing of Title IX in 1972 that women’s
participation rates really skyrocketed. Statistics show that after the establishment of Title IX, which prohibited the exclusion and discrimination of individuals on the basis of sex from educational programs or activities receiving financial assistance, women’s participation in sport increased about 900% (Cunningham and Singer, 2012). Despite this drastic increase in the number of female athletes, sport continues to be seen as a space dominated by males and unwelcome to females, one tenant of critical feminist theory. Critical feminist theory also holds that sport is a gendered institution that esteems “masculine” values while diminishing those values considered “feminine,” (Birrell, 2000 as cited in Cunningham and Singer, 2012).

Studies have shown that sport is an institution that reinforces hegemonic masculinity, a theory developed by Connell. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as, “the configuration of gender practices which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women,” (p. 77). One way sport reinforces hegemonic masculinity is through its glorification of violence and aggression. By ritualizing aggression and embedding the “toughen up” mentality in children at a young age, the link between competitive achievement and masculinity is strengthened (Messner & Sabo, 1990). The most prominent examples of violence in sport can be seen in ice hockey in which fighting is encouraged by coaches and fans. In fact, violence has been so ingrained in the sport of ice hockey that court systems have continuously denied the validity of assault and battery lawsuits on the grounds that violence is part of the game and have generally ruled that players have consented to the violence by participating and should “expect” to get hit (Fuller, 2010).

The absence of physicality in the sport of golf should theoretically even the playing field between men and women and challenge the male hegemony that other sports have traditionally
reinforced. In fact, some researchers have found golf to be “female appropriate” because female golfers are able to dress and act feminine while participating (Fink, 2012). McGinnis, Gentry, and McQuillan (2009) have also described how the handicapping system, different sized equipment, and different distanced tees should make golf an ideal sport for men and women to participate equally.

Despite these factors and the lack of physicality and violence that is present in other sports, golf is arguably the guiltiest of reinforcing the existing gender order and the subordination of women. For instance, McGinnis et al. (2009) have studied how male rituals on the course and in the clubhouse are contributing to the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity. These researchers found that male behavior on the course such as men “marking” the golf course by urinating, using foul language, and drinking and smoking cigars are creating an environment unwelcome to women. Similarly, clubhouse personnel are contributing to the discrimination of women in golf by their use of condescending language and actions towards female golfers (McGinnis et al., 2009). An undercover study was performed by Finch and LPGA player, Kim Hall, in which Hall disguised herself under five personas including “ugly duckling,” “tom boy,” “damsel in distress,” “average Jane,” and “golf pro look.” Although not a controlled experiment, Finch and Hall found that men deliberately sped away to avoid playing with a female looking for a foursome, regardless of her appearance. In addition, the only time Hall was accepted as a female golfer was when she shot from the same tees as the males in the foursome and demonstrated golf skills. This study revealed how women have a more difficult time attending a golf course as a single looking to join a foursome and are therefore discouraged from playing all together.
Studies have also shown that female golfers are often made to feel unwelcome on the course due to the perception that they are slower players. The Hall undercover study revealed the perception that women are slower golfers several times throughout Hall’s time as an undercover golfer. Hall found male golfers in her foursome only warmed up to her and socialized with her when she proved she could “keep up.” Similarly, McGinnis et al. (2009) found male golfers’ body language created an unwelcoming environment for women, especially when the men felt that the women were playing too slowly. For instance, the researchers found that male golfers would fold their arms when female golfers were teeing off in an attempt to quicken their pace (McGinnis & Gentry, 2006). Despite male golfers’ perceptions that females play much slower than their male counterparts, research has shown that women only play slightly slower (Chambers, 1995 as cited in McGinnis et al., 2009). In addition, some researchers have found that women are faster players than men due to the fact that they do not analyze every putt before taking a stroke (Newport, 2010). Regardless, women often feel too embarrassed to play with men due to the misconception that they play too slowly.

In addition to the condescending body language male golfers use to make females feel uncomfortable on the course, the golf course as a whole is a gendered site that is more welcoming to male golfers. The most apparent example of the gendered nature of the golf course is referring to the forward tees as “ladies tees.” Not only is the term “ladies” derogatory in and of itself, but the forward teeing areas are used to designate skill level as opposed to gender (McGinnis & Gentry, 2006 as cited in McGinnis et al., 2009). The “ladies tees” has been a phrase used so frequently that it has become embedded in the golf industry to the point where women who play from anything but the red forward tees are considered an anomaly. This was the case in the Hall undercover study. When Hall played at her usual professional skill level, she
played from the same blue tees that the rest of her foursome did. Hall recalled that the beer-cart girl drove up to the group, despite them waving her off just to say to Hall, “The guys up ahead said there was a woman playing from the blue tees and doing really well. I just wanted to come out and say, ‘Good for you!’” (Finch, 2012). Though trying to be encouraging, calling Hall out for playing at the blue tees demonstrates how women are expected to play at the forward tees and not doing so calls her skill level into question. Further, men who hit a bad shot often have their gender called into question and told to “put a skirt on and play from the forward tees,” (Hundley, 2004). This further reinforces how the forward tees are known as the “ladies tees” and how naturalized the phrase has become.

In addition to the gendered language used to describe the tees, the slopes and ratings on the golf course scorecard were studied under a semiotics framework. Hundley (2004) found that the scorecards provided women’s course slopes and ratings on the forward and middle tee boxes only, while the men’s course slopes and ratings are always provided for the middle and back tee boxes. Further, when the course provided slope ratings for men and women on the same tees, the women’s slopes and ratings were rated significantly higher, indicating that men are stronger and therefore more qualified to play from those particular tees (Hundley, 2004). In addition, by studying the semantics on the golf course, Hundley found that by not even providing slopes and ratings from the back tees for women, female golfers are discouraged from even trying to play from those tees, regardless of their skill level.

Golf can also be seen as a gendered institution favoring male golfers through the “othering” of women. Female golfers are not only “othered” in terms of where they can tee off without judgment, but also in terms of their dress code, merchandise, and through the gender marking of their tournaments. Hundley (2004) described how imposing different dress standards
on men and women contributes to the perception that men and women are naturally different. While men are required to wear slacks and collared shirts with sleeves during tournaments, the standards for women are less strict, and female golfers are permitted to wear shirts without sleeves and shorts. Hundley (2004) further points out that even during casual golfing, women are permitted to wear sleeveless shirts, shirts without collars, and even skirts.

McGinnis and Gentry (2006) also describe how merchandise discrepancies in golf pro shops are contributing to the “othering” of female golfers. For instance, the lack of clothing for women, in addition to the placement of women’s clothing in the back of most pro shops, alienates women in an already male dominated realm. Female golfers are also “othered” by the gender marking of their tour. While men participate in the Professional Golfers’ Association (PGA), women participate in the Ladies Professional Golf Association. While this may be subtle, gender marking golf tours reinforces that the men’s tour is the referent while the women’s tour is the “other,” (Fuller, 2010).

The Role of the Media

The media plays a significant role in fortifying male hegemony and the existing gender order through its underrepresentation of female athletes, its tendency to sexualize them and trivialize their accomplishments, and portraying women in domestic roles rather than as athletically competent. The percent of television devoted to the coverage of women’s sport is devastatingly low. According to Angelini (2008), only 5% of total televised sports coverage is given to females (as cited in McCutcheon). Another example of this drastic underrepresentation is that SportsCenter provides only 1.4% of coverage to women (Hollar, 2010).
Unfortunately, this lack of media coverage for women’s sports is reflected in golf as well. According to Messner and Cooky (2010), ESPN’s SportsCenter and the network affiliates’ news shows devoted 71.7% of coverage to football, men’s basketball, and baseball. While men’s golf was the fourth most covered sport, it only received 5.6% of coverage. Although men’s golf received significantly less coverage than the other three sports, it still received over five times the amount of coverage that women’s golf received. Messner and Cooky (2010) point out that women’s golf, soccer, tennis, and softball combined received less than 1% of the total coverage. The lack of coverage for women’s golf and women’s sports in general reinforce the dominance of males in the sport industry.

The media perpetuates male hegemony by sexualizing female athletes. The sexualization of female athletes occurs on multiple fronts and can be seen from everything from the uniforms women wear and the media’s focus on the “toned and thin” female body ideal to the type of sponsorships female athletes participate in as a way to gain recognition. Female athletes’ uniforms are generally intended to highlight sexuality by framing the body and are usually more revealing than the uniforms worn by their male counterparts (Hargreaves, 1994 as cited in Smart, 2005). The difference in the types of uniforms worn by male and female athletes is still a current issue and is demonstrated by Sepp Blatter, the president of FIFA, advocating for the use of different uniforms for female soccer players. Blatter believed that female soccer players should wear tighter shorts and followed up with, “Beautiful women play football nowadays, excuse me for saying so,” (as cited in Smart, 2005, p. 178). Similarly, the type of attire worn by female golfers is different than that worn by men and is generally more revealing. The difference in attire naturalizes the difference between males and females as opposed to socially constructed, and therefore, reinforces male hegemony. Rather than have the same dress standards for male
and female golfers, the difference in dress code reinforces in viewers minds that men and women are inherently different, and therefore require different dress, which precludes them from being seen as equals on the golf course.

The sexualization of female athletes is also demonstrated by the media’s tendency to focus on female athletes who conform to traditional standards of sexual attractiveness (Hargreaves, 1994 as cited in Smart, 2005). Further, those female athletes whose image is consistent with traditional standards of sexual attractiveness are more likely to secure sponsorships. Anna Kournikova is one athlete who has notoriously received more media coverage for her sexuality and body image over her athletic accomplishments. Despite never having won a major tournament, Kournikova’s sex appeal attracted more media attention resulting in her being the world’s highest paid women’s tennis player because of her endorsements (Liang, 2011). Similarly, Danica Patrick is another female athlete known for her sex appeal and her sponsorship with Go-Daddy that constantly depicts her as a sex figure rather than an athlete.

Unfortunately, the sexualization of female athletes is no different in the sport of golf. Although some have argued that golf is “female-appropriate,” the notion of “sex sells” pervades the golf industry as well. In fact, LPGA commissioner, Ty Votaw, believes that appearance is one of the top five points the public focuses on, and it is therefore important to be mindful of it. According to Votaw, performance is important, “But, you have to also find ways in which you make yourself relevant to our fan base, play the game and represent the sport with joy and passion, be mindful of your appearance and also be approachable so the fans want that autograph and that interaction with you” (Donvan, 2002). The emphasis on appearance and the sexualization of female golfers is also demonstrated by the Wilhelmina Seven or W7. The W7 is
a group of seven female golfers signed under the modeling agency Wilhelmina Models. Diester Esch, chairman of the modeling agency, states, “We created this initiative to complete a void in the marketplace for beautiful and athletically talented female golfers,” (Kelley). Rather than focus on the athletic prowess of female athletes, the sexualization of female golfers by the media and companies such as Wilhelmina models contributes to the male dominance within the sport industry.

**Heteronormativity and Sport**

In addition to sexualizing female athletes, the media perpetuates male hegemony by portraying female athletes in domestic roles and ultimately reinforcing heteronormativity. Heteronormativity holds that heterosexuality is the norm, that there is a gender binary in which there are only males and females, and there are fixed gender roles associated with males and females (Smith). The media oftentimes exaggerates female athletes’ heterosexuality by focusing on pregnant athletes and on their heterosexual relationships. One example of this is the portrayal of Mia Hamm by the media. Despite Hamm being one of the best soccer players in the world, her marriage to Nomar Garciaparra and the birth of her twin girls is constantly in the limelight (Furrow, 2010). Therefore, when female athletes excel athletically, the gender binary which pairs males and masculinity and females and femininity is compromised since female athletes are not “supposed” to excel at a “masculine” activity. In order to restore the gender binary, the media focuses on traditional gender roles and portraying female athletes as women first and athletes second.

Heteronormativity is a principle that pervades the golf industry as well where heterosexuality is the norm. According to Creedon (1994), “Sponsors, LPGA staff, and players attempt to eradicate what they delicately call the ‘image problem’ by publicly denying the
existence of lesbians on tour.” (p. 282). Further, Creedon (1994) describes how marriages between heterosexual tour players and their husbands are emphasized, and traditional femininity is emphasized through the hiring of hairstylists and makeup artists. Therefore, despite the presence of athletically competent female golfers on tour, denying the existence of homosexuals and complying with traditional standards of sexual attractiveness are merely reinforcing male hegemony.

Heteronormativity is also apparent in terms of expected gender roles of male and female golfers. McGinnis and Gentry (2006) studied how women faced constraints which precluded them from participating in golf. A dominant theme McGinnis and Gentry (2006) found was women have to postpone their play until their children are old enough to leave at home. According to McGinnis and Gentry (2006), “The informants, however, noted that men do not appear to have the same family obligations as women, or are at least allowed more leeway when it came to playing golf, and do not allow paid work or familial obligations to compromise golf participation,” (p. 230). The researchers found this “ethic of care” theme pervade the study in terms of why women’s participation in golf has remained significantly less than that of men’s participation. As a result, male hegemony is reproduced through the maintenance of gender roles and golf remains a gendered site that is more welcoming to men than it is to women.

The Problem

Despite the fact that countless studies have been performed that find that sex doesn’t sell, sex is constantly being used as a marketing tool within the sport industry which is perpetuating male hegemony. In addition, the Back9Network could be potentially undermining its goal of attracting women to the sport of golf by further alienating them in the way it is portraying females. The golf industry’s reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity also has significant
consequences, which extend beyond just the reproduction of the existing gender order. It actually stifles women’s growth athletically and professionally, as well as contributes to negative perceptions girls have at a young age of the available opportunities they have. Playing golf is not only a sport women can engage in as they grow older, but it is also a healthy hobby that is both challenging and stimulating at the same time (Hoffman, 2010). In addition to contributing to a healthy lifestyle, golf offers women enormous opportunities in the business world.

According to Hoffman (2010), golf provides women with the opportunity to spend five hours with top business executives. It also enables female professionals to network and build their social capital. Lowen (2011) describes how the majority of top-level executives play golf and playing golf provides women with an essential business tool. In fact, Lowen (2011) found that about 90% of Fortune 500 CEOs play golf.

Capitalizing on a Hole in the Market

Although golf has contributed to hegemonic masculinity in sport, some companies are hoping to capitalize on the untapped market of women and are looking to attract them to golf rather than alienate them as the golf industry has traditionally done. Not only would targeting women as golfers provide them with immense opportunities in the professional world, but it would also help the golf industry grow, something that it has been struggling with the past few years. According to Mullaly (2010), about 33% of private club members are women, while only 19% of public golfers are women. These percentages demonstrate a vast untapped market in the golf industry and offer the greatest opportunity for growth (Newport, 2010).

Newport (2010) describes how women spend just as much money on golf equipment and merchandise as men, just one reason why those in the golf industry should be trying to attract women to the game rather than make them feel alienated. Further, women represent the fastest
growing segment in the golf industry, while the percentage of men has remained stagnant (Fitzgerald, 2007). In fact, about two-thirds of all new golfers were women (Newport, 2010). As a result, women golfers offer tremendous opportunity for the golf industry to grow. The challenge remains on how to resist male hegemony within the industry, and how the media can be used as a tool to make golf appealing to women.

The Back9Network’s founder and Chief Executive Officer, Jamie Bosworth, launched the Back9Network in 2010 with the hopes of attracting women to the sport of golf. He believed that the golfing public was being underserved by current golf media outlets, such as the Golf Channel, and there was a need to expand the target market. As a result, Bosworth had the goal of developing a global, multi-platform network that would not only cover professional tours, but also on the golf lifestyle including travel, food, gear, fashion, and more (“About Us/Contact,” 2013). By focusing on the lifestyle of golf as well as storytelling and personalities, Bosworth aims to make the game of golf more inclusive while keeping the existing fan base of golf satisfied. However, the question remains on whether Bosworth and the Back9Network really are expanding the game of golf and opening its doors to women, or merely reinforcing male hegemony and contributing to male dominance in the sport industry.

The Back9Network’s website and Facebook page offer different depictions of female golfers from sexualized models to athletically competent women in professional golf gear. This research sought to better understand how the Back9Network’s portrayal of female golfers is impacting consumers’ interpretations of the sport of golf. Specifically, this study examined a range of images pulled from the Back9Network’s website and Facebook page to determine how consumers felt about these images and whether their interest in the sport of golf was impacted (as measured by their desire to watch golf, read about it, or play it). This study utilized critical
feminist theory and masculine hegemony as the framework to understand answers to the
following questions:

RQ1: How do consumers interpret media images of female golfers in competitive action versus
sexualized female golfers?

RQ2: How do consumers’ interpretations impact their consumption levels of golf and their desire
to participate in golf?

RQ3: Is there a difference between the interest levels of women and men after viewing the
image of a serious female golfer in competitive action?

RQ4: Is there a difference between the image that generates the least support from males and the
image that generates the least support from females?
Ch. II: Literature Review

History of Women in Golf

Women have played golf for hundreds of years but their long-time presence in the game has not been enough to challenge male dominance. The participation of women in golf extends back to 1567 in which Mary Queen of Scots was observed playing in the fields. Further, women have been playing golf for prizes for over 200 years now (Hauser, 1998 as cited in Hundley, 2004). Despite the history of women playing golf, golf remains a male dominated sport that reproduces ideologies of male dominance while subordinating women. Scholarly literature has been written that supports the ways golf has maintained hegemonic masculinity that helps provide the backdrop of this study.

The Persistence of Masculine Hegemony in Golf

Lee McGinnis has been a leading researcher of women in golf and has conducted various studies that support how golf is a masculine domain more welcome to men than it is to women. As touched upon earlier, McGinnis and Gentry (2006) used constraints framework to determine the reasons women stay in the game of golf, and why they choose to leave. They identified interpersonal, structural, and intrapersonal constraints that women face in golf and determined which constraints are most influential in a woman’s choice to stay in the game. The researchers interviewed 20 women of various golf backgrounds to determine the constraints women face in golf. They then analyzed the various reasons female golfers gave for not participating more extensively and categorized the reasons as being intrapersonal, interpersonal, or structural. McGinnis and Gentry (2006) identified intrapersonal constraints as psychological states and
attributes. They found that lack of ability and frustration with the game were often cited by female golfers as reasons why they did not play more extensively.

In addition, the researchers identified interpersonal constraints as those that are the result of interaction between individuals. They found women felt they were treated differently than men by golf course personnel indicated by the lack of eye contact and being singled out as the reason for slow play. Further, women often faced interpersonal constraints in terms of the nonverbal behaviors they encountered on the course with men such as the drinking, smoking, and even urinating on the course. Finally, McGinnis and Gentry (2006) identified structural constraints that women faced that men did not such as merchandise discrepancies, lack of competitive activities specifically designed for women, and family obligations centered on the ethic of care and traditional gender roles. Overall, the researchers found that the interpersonal and structural constraints are more influential than the intrapersonal constraints in determining extent of participation.

In a similar study, McGinnis, McQuillan, and Chapple (2005) performed research in which they tried to better understand answers to two research questions, “What barriers and constraints to participation do women experience on the course, and what strategies do women use to negotiate playing and persisting in golf?” (p. 314). To answer these questions, McGinnis et al. (2005) conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with women golfers and used a theoretical framework based on tokenism, statistical discrimination, and social closure. Tokenism and statistical discrimination were demonstrated on the course by the difference in treatment women received from golf course personnel and by men in terms of women’s shorter hitting distance, perceived slower play, and closer tees. In order to negotiate tokenism, the researchers found women either accepted their isolation on the course, turned against other female golfers, but most
of all, adhered to stereotypical typecasting and embraced gendered roles where they maintained a feminine identity (Kanter, 1977 as cited in McGinnis et al., 2005). In addition, McGinnis et al. (2005) found social closure demonstrated by females feeling unworthy of being on the course. However, the researchers identified several strategies for keeping female golfers involved in golf. Some strategies identified were finding women friendly courses (classified as such by the availability of facilities, availability of women’s golf clothing, and more women golf personnel), playing with other female golfers, and challenging stereotypes rather than adhering to them. McGinnis et al. (2005) mentioned that adhering to gendered stereotypes merely maintains hegemonic masculinity rather than challenges it.

The maintenance of hegemonic masculinity in golf has also been examined under ritual theory to study the gendered expectations that still exist in golf, and how they reinforce hegemonic masculinity. McGinnis, Gentry, and McQuillan (2009) found women negotiate masculinity-enforcing rituals in different ways, which can be categorized as accommodating, unapologetically challenging, or unaware. The researchers found the majority of women interviewees chose to accommodate the rituals in that they maintained their feminine identity and preferred the status quo, while the second highest number of women fell into the unaware group. These participants seemed “unaware” of the inequity in golf, or at least ignored it. The only group of women who directly challenged the gendered practices of golf were those who were categorized as unapologetic, which was the smallest group of women. Therefore, because hegemonic masculinity is embedded in the rituals on the golf course, most women accept their subordination on the course.

Annika Sorenstam was the first woman to compete on the PGA tour in over 50 years. While some hoped her participation would challenge male hegemony that has traditionally
pervaded the golf industry, Billings, Craig, Croce, Cross, Moore, Vigodsky, and Watson (2006) actually studied how she was depicted in the media. The researchers analyzed reporters’ dialogue and footage from the first and second rounds of the 2003 Colonial Tournament. It was found the majority of reporters’ content focused on Sorenstam. Billings et al. (2006) hypothesized that if Sorenstam played well her success would be attributed to factors other than her athletic skill. The researchers found some support for this hypothesis in that Sorenstam’s success on the course was attributed to her composure and not her athletic ability. Despite the fact that there was no support of the researchers’ hypothesis that commentators would make more comments about Sorenstam’s body and attractiveness, there was evidence that reporters made more comments about Sorenstam’s emotions. In addition, when reporting on the male competitors in the tournament, reporters were more likely to make comments about the men’s backgrounds and winnings. The researchers concluded that depicting Sorenstam differently maintained the socially constructed gender differences between male and female golfers and reproduced female golfers’ position as second-class (Billings et al., 2006).

The difference in reporting on female athletes is not unique to golf. Various studies have been conducted to determine the difference in commentary between men’s and women’s sports. Fuller (2010) studied the discrepancies between the reporting on men’s and women’s sporting events and noted significant differences. Terms like “girls” or “ladies” would constantly be used to describe women, while male competitors were never referred to as “boys.” In addition, Fuller (2010) noted differences in the way men’s and women’s routines were described at the X Games. While commentators described men’s routines as “risky” or “powerful,” they generally used terms such as “beautiful” and “graceful” for female performances (Fuller, 2010, p. 148).

**Critical Feminist Theory and Representations of Female Athletes**
In addition to utilizing hegemonic masculinity as a framework, this study was also grounded in critical feminist theory to determine how golf and the media have reproduced ideologies of male dominance and reinforced women’s subordinate position. Critical feminist theory is useful in determining how sport is grounded in the experiences of powerful men, and how it reproduces male dominance over women (Coakley, 2009). Further, it is useful in studying how sport is a gendered institution that is more welcoming to men and boys than it is to women and girls (Cunningham & Singer, 2012).

Machingambi & Wadesango (2011) utilized critical feminist theory to explore the gendered nature of the 2010 World Cup and how this reinforced sport as a masculine realm and the impact it had on girls’ educational aspirations. The researchers also argued the 2010 World Cup served as a hegemonic institution that reinforced the power of men over women (Machingambi & Wadesango, 2010 as cited in Machingambi & Wadesango, 2011). Under the theoretical lens of hegemonic masculinity and critical feminist theory, Machingambi and Wadesango (2011) explored how sport “is an institution created by and for men to reinforce the ideology of male superiority,” (Machingambi & Wadesango, 2011, p. 153). They found women at the 2010 World Cup were not only underrepresented but also portrayed by the media in insignificant roles such as cheerleaders and girlfriends. The underrepresentation of women was demonstrated by their lack of presence on the executive committee who planned the event as well as by the fact that nearly all coaches, referees, and commentators were men. Further, when women were the focus of the media, they were portrayed as frivolous and were sexualized compared to the male athletes who were portrayed as masculine and heroic (Machingambi & Wadesango, 2010 as cited in Machingambi & Wadesango, 2011). The researchers believed that this severe underrepresentation of women, combined with the fact that the event was televised
internationally to millions of people, reinforced male dominance. In addition, the
underrepresentation of women and their portrayals in trivial roles by the media had long reaching
effects on girls, who were shown to develop a negative perception about their own abilities and
available opportunities which decreased their overall self-concept (Machingambi & Wadesango,
2011).

Kane and Maxwell (2011) also grounded their research in critical feminist theory to
explore how consumers interpret particular media images, and whether these interpretations
influence their interest and support for women’s sports. Doing so enabled them to explore how
society is composed of inequitable power relationships in which men are valued while women
are marginalized (Birrell, 2000; Hoeber, 2007 as cited in Kane & Maxwell, 2011). Further,
Kane and Maxwell (2011) sought to challenge the ideologies of male dominance embedded in
the media as well as dispute the validity of “sex sells.” Using a technique that combined focus
groups, free association, and a Likert scale to determine consumers’ interpretations, the
researchers found images of female athletes in competitive action prompted the most interest in
women’s sports. Kane and Maxwell (2011) also debunked the “sex sells” narrative in women’s
sports by showing images reflecting soft pornography received lower scores based on a scale that
measured interest levels. They also found showing sexualized images of female athletes
alienates the core fan base of women’s sports, women and older men (Kane and Maxwell, 2011).

Kane, LaVoi, and Fink (2013) have also used critical feminist theory to study
interpretations of media images of female athletes and assess how female athletes themselves
respond to various representations. In using this theoretical framework, Kane at al. (2013),
focused their research on the structure of power in society and the ways in which certain groups
are privileged over others (Fiske, 1993; Alvesson & Willmott, 2003 as cited in Kane et al., 2013).
In applying critical feminist theory to sport, Kane et al. (2013) explored the taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in the media as well as evaluated the “sex sells” narrative. They interviewed 36 intercollegiate female athletes and asked them questions to determine their beliefs on their self-identities and representations of themselves and their sport as a whole. The athletes were shown four images that represented four different categories including athletic competence, mixed message (combining femininity and athleticism), sexy/classy lady, and soft pornography. When athletes were asked which of the four images best represented themselves and their respective sport, Kane et al. (2013) found the primary choice among the majority of female respondents was the athletic competence image. However, when given the option to choose two images that would best represent themselves and their sport, the researchers found that many female athletes choose the sexy/classy lady image or mixed message image in conjunction with the athletic competence image. As a result, the researchers found support for the dual identity theory which supports female athletes’ desire to be seen as both an athlete and a woman. The only time the soft pornography image was chosen in some combination with another image was when the women were asked which image they felt would attract the most male fans. Interestingly enough, studies have been performed that show that the “sex sells” approach is not even successful when targeting male consumers.

Consumer Interpretations of Media Representations of Female Athletes

While many studies have focused on female interpretations, Daniels and Wartena (2011) took a different approach by focusing on adolescent boys’ responses to media images of female athletes that ranged from sexually objectified to female athletes in competitive action. Daniels and Wartena (2011) found boys who were shown images of sexualized female athletes were more likely to make statements about the woman’s appearance rather than her athletic abilities.
Further, when boys did comment on a sexualized athlete’s athleticism, the comments tended to be more neutral and even negative in that some boys questioned her physical abilities. On the other hand, boys who were shown images of performance-based female athletes were more likely to make comments about the performance aspects of the image and less likely to gender mark by constantly referring to the athlete as a woman. Further, these boys were more likely to become engaged in the sport, indicated by the play-by-play statements they would make (Daniels and Wartena, 2011). Therefore, although the female athletes in the study conducted by Kane, LaVoie, and Fink (2013) believed that the sexualized female athletes would garner the most support from male consumers, Daniels and Wartena’s research counters that claim.

While research has shown that sexualizing female athletes does not elicit support from either female or male consumers, it is also important to look at the effect these images are having on women and girls. Daniels found when girls viewed sexualized images of female athletes, they were admired or were jealous of the athletes’ bodies. In addition, they evaluated their own bodies negatively which has contributed to the rise in eating disorders (Jarrett 2012; McCutcheon). On the other hand, when girls were shown images of female athletes in a sporting context, they were more likely to comment on the athletes’ determination, passion, and commitment (Jarrett, 2012). Cunningham and Singer (2012) found similar support for this. They found viewers of images portraying female athletes’ bodies in action are more likely to observe what the bodies are doing as opposed to what they look like.

Krane, Ross, Miller, Ganoe, Lucas-Carr, and Barak (2011) have also studied the impact images of female athletes are having on girls, particularly those of whom are athletes themselves. In the study, the girls were members of club and recreational sport teams, averaged about 11.5 years old, and were asked which images of collegiate female athletes they liked best. The
Researchers found the girls preferred images of authentic female athletes in athletic poses as opposed to athletes who posed for the picture. The girls also preferred images that depicted passion for the sport and in which the female athletes displayed mental strength. Girls tended to dislike images of female athletes in posed positions because they did not appear natural or legitimate athletes. Krane et al. (2011) further determined that the female athletes displaying competence and determination in images were most likely chosen as role models by the girls. Further, the researchers found that the girls tended to focus on athleticism and not femininity when viewing the photographs, and therefore found that portraying images of athletically competent female athletes was the most effective way to market to young girls.

**Consequences of Media Representations**

In addition to the negative impact the media’s portrayals of female athletes is having on girls, it is important to evaluate the broader impact of these representations. One consequence of the media’s portrayal of female athletes is that gender stereotypes are reinforced and women’s subordinate position is solidified. Jones and Greer (2011) explored how gender stereotypes of female athletes are influencing audience perceptions of women’s sports. They used gender schema theory which states that individuals develop expectations (or schemas) and use them to fit into societal norms and base stereotypes on these schemas (Campbell, Shirley, & Candy, 2004 as cited in Jones & Greer, 2011). These schemas are then applied to gender, and individuals tend to associate certain characteristics and behaviors with certain gender schemas (Jones & Greer, 2011). The study was grounded in gender schema theory and 267 students were shown four different combinations of a short news story and an accompanying photograph. Some participants were shown a photograph of either a masculine or feminine athlete participating in a masculine sport such as basketball, while other participants were shown an image of either a
masculine or feminine athlete participating in a feminine sport such as volleyball. While the feminine athletes were shown in sexual clothing in a sexualized pose, the masculine female athletes were larger in size, wore athletic clothing, and were in a position displaying power. Using a Likert scale, Jones and Greer (2011) found feminine appearances of female athletes only increase men’s interest in a story and a sport when the athlete was participating a stereotypical feminine sport. The researchers believed this congruence was the result of established gender schemas. On the other hand, female respondents were most interested in both the story and sport when the female athlete challenged gender norms (i.e. when a masculine athlete played volleyball, and when a feminine athlete played basketball). As a result, the media plays a powerful role in reinforcing gender stereotypes and “gender-appropriate” sports.

Knight and Guiliano (2002) also utilized gender schema theory as a framework to study the effect media coverage has on consumers’ perceptions from a quantitative standpoint. These researchers describe gender-role consistency and how the media has a tendency to represent female athletes as women first and athletes second. On the other hand, males are generally portrayed in ways that highlight their athleticism (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983 as cited in Knight & Guiliano, 2002). Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire as well as read a hypothetical newspaper story about an athlete. The participants saw identical profiles with the only variance being the gender of the athlete and the type of coverage they received (either attractive- or athletic-focused). When the article focused on the attractiveness of the athlete, both male and female athletes were perceived negatively by participants. However, because male athletes are seldom portrayed by the media with their appearance as the focus, the researchers found that portraying female athletes in terms of their attractiveness and not athleticism had more salient consequences. Knight and Guiliano (2002) found that in addition to reinforcing existing
gender stereotypes, representing an athlete in terms of their appearance can have a significant effect on consumer perceptions and actively shape how they view male and female athletes.

The sexualization of female athletes by the media is also impacting the reputations of these athletes. Rather than criticizing the institution that facilitates the sexualization of female athletes, these women are being blamed for their decisions to sign sponsorships that reduce them to sexual objects. One critic of these female athletes wrote in reference to Danica Patrick, “Danica used her agency as a female athlete in a way that was both sexually and economically motivated,” (Boggs, 2012). This quote demonstrates that although the sexualization of female athletes is not surprising, it is surprising that female athletes are receiving the blunt of the blame due to their “agency.”

Similarly, Knight and Guiliano (2002) found participants in their study criticized female athletes for their sexualization rather than the media. One respondent, who after reading a hypothetical article about an athlete who’s appearance was the focus, said, “I wonder what her priorities are…is she using the ‘swimming thing’ to parlay a sweet modeling career?” (Knight and Guiliano, 2002, p. 225). As a result, criticizing female athletes for the way they are being portrayed only perpetuates male hegemony. However, Liang (2011) argues that the blame should not be placed on female athletes and their agency due to the fact that because female athletes are not given the same endorsements and exposure as male athletes, they tend to rely on their sex appeal as a way to secure sponsorships. Liang (2011) further found female athletes who do not confirm to the media’s sexualization of them experience backlash for not being feminine enough. Therefore, female athletes are put in a tough predicament in that in order to secure media attention and sponsorships, they must conform to traditional standards of female attractiveness.

The Back9Network and Hypotheses
The Back9Network’s strategy to attract women to the sport of golf stands at an advantage by understanding how golf has maintained hegemonic masculinity, and how the media’s portrayals of female athletes have been problematic. Therefore, by studying research that evaluates what does attract women to the game of golf, the Back9Network can focus its marketing strategy around these aspects in order to attract women to golf. McGinnis and Gentry (2006) found by addressing interpersonal constraints, women would feel more comfortable on the course. By treating women as equals, gender disparities are reduced and steps are taken to an overall goal of gender neutrality. Through interviewing women golfers, they found female golfers tend to feel unwelcomed by the lack of eye contact they received from golf course personnel and being ignored upon walking into the pro shop. For instance, golf personnel tended to direct conversation toward female golfers’ husbands, boyfriends, or other men in general. McGinnis and Gentry (2006) believed the solution to all of this is to treat women as equals on the course and not as appendages to their significant others.

The Back9Network can use aspects of this research to appeal to women, specifically when it comes to their website. Rather than portray women in secondary positions to men, the Back9Network can take steps that reduce gender disparities. Based on the literature written by McGinnis and Gentry, this study pulled various images of female golfers from the Back9Network’s website and Facebook page to evaluate the difference in interpretations of consumers. It also explored whether an image that portrayed a woman with her significant others or more specifically, in a heterosexual relationship, would elicit less interest in both the Back9Network’s website and the sport of golf overall than an image where a female golfer was the primary focus. Based on previous literature on women in golf, I suspected images that depict
female golfers in competitive action independently would generate the most support for golf from women respondents.

McGinnis and Gentry (2006) also found treating women as serious golfers and as professionals and not just as social golfers is an important strategy to attracting women to the sport of golf. The researchers believed that doing so reinforces women’s position as non-serious athletes who just participate to socialize. McGinnis and Gentry (2006) believed that in order to better attract female golfers, courses should offer clinics and tournaments designed for serious female golfers. However, they also believed that the golf industry does need to be wary of promoting gender segregation by creating separate spaces for female golfers. McGinnis and Gentry (2006) found women interviewees often mentioned a feeling of discomfort when separate spaces were created for them to participate in golf. This included creating separate golf leagues for men and women, which would only perpetuate gender segregation. Further, while some golf publications are specifically aimed at women, steps should be taken to report on the same things reported to men rather than “frills and flowers” and fashion (McGinnis & Gentry, 2006).

In order to capitalize on these aspects of the research, the Back9Network can cater to women by focusing equally on women’s tournaments, reporting on equipment for both serious male and female golfers, and by focusing on techniques all golfers can use to improve their game. Also, upon initial glance of the Back9Network’s website and Facebook page, there seems to be room for improvement in terms of depicting females as serious golfers. Articles and web content segregate women by content, and those in which female golfers are the focus tend to focus on the social components of being a golfer. In addition, articles with female golfers as the focus tend to focus on fashion in articles such as the “Top 9 LPGA Fashionistas,” (back9network.com). Therefore, based on prior studies, this study explored whether images of
female golfers in competitive action would generate the most support for the Back9Network and the sport of golf, while also questioning if images that depict female golfers in non-serious positions or posing sexually would generate the least amount of support from respondents.

While no known research has been performed to study male’s perceptions of media images of female golfers, there have been studies on how males interpret sexualized images of female athletes. As previously mentioned, studies have been performed that demonstrate boys who are shown sexualized images of female athletes are more likely to make comments about the woman’s appearance than her athletic abilities. On the other hand, when shown images of performance athletes, boys are more likely to show interest in women’s sports demonstrated by their greater likelihood to make play-by-play statements (Daniels and Wartena, 2011). Kane and Maxwell (2011) yielded similar results when it came to male participants. According to the researchers, males showed more interest in women’s sports after viewing an image of a female athlete in competitive action. However, when comparing the mean scores of Likert scales between males and females with regards to the competence image, females rated it much higher than males. Further, while females rated the soft pornography photo the lowest, males rated the ambivalence image as their lowest. Therefore, based on previous research, while I predicted that the image of the female golfer in competitive action would generate the highest interest for both males and females, I did suspect that female ratings would have a higher overall mean.

Summary of Predictions

This study sought to answer how consumers interpret media images of female golfers in competitive action versus sexualized female golfers. It also explored how these interpretations impact consumers’ consumption levels of golf and their desire to participate in golf. In addition,
this study utilized the results of previous studies as well as collected quantitative data to
determine whether there was support for the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Images of women as serious golfers in competitive action will receive a higher
mean score from female respondents than from male respondents.

Hypothesis 2: Images of female golfers that resemble soft pornography will receive the lowest
scores from females, while images of ambivalence will receive the lowest scores from males.
Ch. III Research Methods

The purpose of this study was to evaluate how consumers interpret particular media images of women golfers and the effect they have on their interest to watch golf as well as participate in the sport. Given the purpose of this study, the goal was to use images pulled from the Back9Network’s website and Facebook page to determine whether the portrayals of female golfers are attracting women or reinforcing male hegemony like traditional golf has done. As a result of the research questions and hypotheses developed for this study, the study will use a mixed methods approach with three components under the framework of critical feminist theory and hegemonic masculinity.

Study Participants and Setting

The study was conducted at a large, public university in the Northeast. A convenience sample of 8 males and 8 females who were between the ages of 18 and 29 was collected during a two week period during the spring 2013 semester. Study participants were separated into four focus groups, with two of the groups being comprised of four males and the remaining two being comprised of four females.

Individuals were recruited during the afternoon and evening hours at areas on campus with the most foot traffic, a student food court and recreational center. The student researcher handed out flyers with the study’s information along with contact information if individuals were interested in participating. Parameters were set so that informants had to be between the ages of 18 and 29, be interested in the sport of golf, yet have no previous experience playing it.

Research Design
A mixed-method research design was employed to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. There were three phases to this study in which participants were asked to take part in. These phases were based on methods developed by Kane and Maxwell (2011) and collectively took about 30-45 minutes to complete. During the first phase of the study, participants were shown six images of female golfers that were categorized by the student investigator and primary investigator as athletic competence, ambivalence, “girl next door,” “sexy-babe,” soft pornography, and hyper-heterosexual (Table 1). After viewing each image, participants were asked to complete a Likert scale composed of nine statements that evaluated an individual’s consumption level, likelihood to speak favorably of the Back9Network and the sport of golf, and desire to play golf. In the next phase of the study, participants were asked to free associate. Finally, participants were asked to discuss with the group how each image made them feel.

Procedure

The student investigator arranged a time via e-mail convenient for participants. Participants were e-mailed prior to meeting to notify them of the purpose of the study and were sent consent forms with additional information about the study. The student researcher secured a private room on campus to protect the privacy of participants and notified participants of the date, time, and place to meet. During the first phase of the study, participants were shown six images of female golfers displaying various levels of athletic competence and sexuality via a PowerPoint presentation. The student investigator chose each image and categorization of each image was verified by the primary investigator. The photographs were pulled from the Back9Network’s website and Facebook page and when categorization of an image was unclear,
the student investigator and primary investigator discussed and reached a consensus. The same six images were shown to each focus group.

After each image was shown to participants, participants were asked to complete a Likert scale that contained nine statements. The statements required participants to respond whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, agreed, or strongly agreed with each statement. Statements included general statements about an image increasing their desire to watch golf or participate in golf, while other statements were more specific and asked participants to respond to statements about their interest in the Back9Network. Participants were urged to be as honest as possible when completing the survey and told that if they did not feel comfortable answering any question, they could choose to remove themselves from the study. In order to protect the privacy of participants, responses to the Likert scale were not linked to any participant by name.

After being shown all six images and completing the respective six scales, participants were asked to free associate and write down any additional thoughts and feelings they had about each image. After about five minutes, participants were asked to come together to discuss their thoughts and feelings as a group. Focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed to ensure full accuracy of responses. The groups were homogenous by design to ensure that participants felt comfortable expressing their views of each image. The student investigator served as moderator for the focus groups and asked follow-up questions to clarify responses as well as get at more in-depth information.

**Data Analysis**

For the qualitative portion of this study, the student investigator and primary investigator explored themes that emerged from the free associations of each participant and the transcribed
data of the discussion phase of the study. The student investigator uncovered themes and cross-referenced with the primary investigator when themes were unclear. Themes were analyzed by image, and the student-researcher looked for consistency in participant responses. Overall, the student investigator and primary investigator agreed on almost every theme that emerged. On a few occasions, the primary investigator uncovered themes that the student investigator did not initially see. For instance, a few participants made comments about a woman’s muscularity in one of the images, and while this was originally dismissed, the student investigator reread the transcripts and agreed that it was an important theme to include.

Quantitative data were analyzed by calculating means and standard deviations of each image. Likert scale statements were divided into 3 categories: consumption, word of mouth, and play. Consumption included statements that evaluated a participant’s likelihood to read about the Back9Network, visit the Back9Network’s website for golf information, watch online videos on the Back9Network’s website, and watch the network on television. Word of mouth included statements that evaluated a participant’s likelihood to speak favorably of the Back9Network, encourage others to visit the network’s website and watch it on television, and encourage others to play golf. Finally, the last category evaluated a participant’s desire to play golf. Using statistical software, the means and standard deviations of each image were calculated for each of these three categories for all participants. Means and standard deviations were also calculated by participants’ gender to uncover whether there are gender differences when it comes to consumer interpretations of female golfers.
Table 1. Specific images from the Back9Network’s website and Facebook page used to represent Kane and Maxwell’s (2011) six categories of media representations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athletic Competence</td>
<td>Female golfer portrayed in uniform, on the golf course, in action</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Athletic Competence Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalence</td>
<td>Some indication of athleticism, but the primary features a non-athletic, off the golf course feminine portrayal</td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Ambivalence Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Table 1. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Girl Next Door”</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Wholesome” representation with no indication of athleticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sexy Babe”</td>
<td></td>
<td>image of “hot” female golfer which falls just short of soft pornography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft Pornography</td>
<td>Image that reinforces sexual objectification such as female golfers appearing semi-nude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyper-Heterosexual</td>
<td>Female golfer explicitly linked to traditional heterosexual role such as girlfriend, wife, or mother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ch. IV Results and Discussion

Quantitative Results

In order to evaluate the quantitative results, the Likert scale used was broken down into three categories including consumption, word of mouth, and play. Consumption measured an individual’s willingness to visit the Back9Network’s website for information about golf, read about the network in daily sport pages and magazines, watch online videos on the Back9Network’s website, and watch the network on television. Statements that measured an individual’s willingness to speak favorably of the Back9Network, encourage others to visit its website and watch it on television, and encourage others to play golf were categorized as word of mouth. Finally, there was one statement that measured an individual’s desire to play golf and was therefore categorized on its own. See Appendix A for the Likert Scale used.

Overall Results Based on Surveys

Of all three categories, consumption, word of mouth, and play, a consistent, yet surprising pattern emerged in which the image categorized as hyper-heterosexual prompted the most interest overall. However, similar to the results found by Kane and Maxwell (2011), the images categorized as sexy babe and soft pornography received the lowest ratings as demonstrated by Figures 1, 2, and 3. Further, when results were broken down by gender, there was complete support for hypothesis 1 and partial support for hypothesis 2. To recall, hypothesis 1 stated that images of serious female golfers will receive higher scores from females than from males. There was full support for this hypothesis demonstrated by the higher means of females over the means of males across all three categories, consumption, word of mouth, and play. While female respondents tended to rate the image of the female golfer in competitive action as one of their highest, males consistently rated this same image as their lowest.
Hypothesis 2 stated that women would rate the image categorized as soft pornography the lowest, while men would rate the image categorized as ambivalence as their lowest. There was partial support for this hypothesis from the quantitative results collected. In two of the three categories (consumption and word of mouth), women did rate the image categorized as soft pornography the lowest, and in the 3rd category (play), it was rated the second lowest after the “sexy babe” image. On the other hand, males consistently rated the image categorized as athletic competence as their lowest. However, the ambivalent image was rated the 2nd lowest across all three categories, consumption, word of mouth, and play. With regards to consumption, the mean of the ambivalent image was 2.59 for both male focus groups (SD=0.65). For word of mouth, the mean was 2.44 (SD=0.78), and for play, the mean was 3.00 (SD=1.07). Therefore, while it wasn’t the lowest ranked, the ambivalent image was consistently ranked the second lowest after the athletic competence image. Despite the temptation to say that males prefer images of soft pornography over athletic competence, there is a need to analyze qualitative results to uncover themes that emerged.

When it came to consumption, indicated by participants’ likelihood to read about the Back9Network, visit the network’s website for golf information, watch online videos on the Back9Network’s website, and watch the network on television, the image categorized as soft pornography received the lowest overall mean score of only 2.30 with a standard deviation of 1.02. Similarly, when it came to word of mouth, the images categorized as sexy babe and soft pornography received the lowest scores. While the “sexy babe” image received the lowest mean score of 2.39 (SD=1.00), the soft pornography image was the second lowest rated with a score of 2.41 (SD=1.08). Finally, these results were consistent when looking at participants’ desire to play golf after viewing each image. Once again, the two images classified as sexy babe and soft
pornography received the two lowest scores with mean scores of 2.38 (SD=1.20) and 2.56 (SD=1.21) respectively.

Although Kane and Maxwell (2011) found that the image categorized as athletic competence generated the most interest in women’s sports, this study found that the image categorized as hyper-heterosexual received the highest mean scores overall among all four focus groups. Based on consumption, this image received an overall mean score of 3.11 (SD=0.87). Similarly, this image received the highest overall mean score based on individuals’ willingness to speak favorably of the Back9Network, encourage others to visit the Back9Network’s website and watch it on television, and encourage others to play golf with an overall mean score of 3.11 (SD=0.82). Finally, this image had the highest overall mean when participants were asked to rate their desire to play golf, with a mean of 3.31 (SD=0.87). Therefore, a pattern emerged that shows consumers were more interested in the Back9Network and the sport of golf after viewing the hyper-heterosexual image, and significantly less interested when images were more sexualized in nature. Figures 1, 2, and 3 further show these findings in greater detail.

![Consumption: Overall Means](image)

**Figure 1**- Overall mean scores of each image based on consumption
**Findings by Gender**

Despite the clear pattern that emerged when looking at the overall means of all focus groups combined, there was a sharp contrast between the images females ranked as their highest and lowest and those which males ranked as their highest and lowest (Appendix B). When it
came to consumption, male respondents ranked the image categorized as soft pornography their highest, with a mean score of 2.88 (SD=0.96). The mean for female respondents for the soft pornography image was just 1.72 (SD=0.75). The mean differences between male and female respondents was found to be statistically significant (t(14)=2.695, p=.017). On the other hand, male respondents ranked the image categorized as athletically competent the lowest, with a mean score of just 2.03 (SD=0.49). While male respondents ranked the athletically competent image as their lowest, female respondents rated it as their second highest with a mean score of 3.09 (SD=0.82), after the hyper-heterosexual image where the mean score was 3.41 (SD=0.76). The difference in means for the athletic competence image was found to be statistically significant. After conducting a t-test, the student investigator found t(14)= -3.138, p=.007. The differences in means for the “girl next door” image as well as the “sexy babe” image were also found to be statistically significant. When it came to the “girl next door” image, the mean for males was 2.81 (SD=0.81), while the mean for females was 1.84 (SD=0.87). The t-test result was t(14)=2.241, p=.042. In addition, the mean for males for the “sexy babe” image was 2.81 (SD=0.81), while the mean for females was 1.88 (SD=0.80) where t(14)=2.326, p=.036. Figure 4 further highlights the difference in consumption levels between males and females.
The contrast in ratings between male and female respondents was also reflected in mean scores when it comes to word of mouth, indicated by participants’ likelihood to speak favorably of the Back9Network, encourage others to visit the Back9Network and watch it on television, and encourage others to play golf. When it came to males, there was a tie between two images with the highest mean. Both the “girl next door” and soft pornography image had the highest mean score of 3.03 (SD for “girl next door”= 0.76 and SD for soft pornography=1.03). When it came to these same images, the mean for females for the “girl next door image” was 2.13 (SD=0.86), while the mean for females for the soft pornography image was rated the lowest at 1.78 (SD=0.75). The differences in means between males and females for the “girl next door” image and the soft pornography image were found to be statistically significant. When it came to the “girl next door” image, t(14)=2.238, p=.042. For the soft pornography image, t(14)=2.775, p=.015.

![Consumption Means: Males vs. Females](image)

**Figure 4:** Difference in consumption levels of men versus women
Once again, males ranked the athletically competent image as the lowest, with a mean score of just 2.13 (SD=0.46). Females rated the athletically competent image second highest, with a mean score of 3.22 (SD=0.78), right after the hyper-heterosexual image where the mean was 3.34 (SD=0.63). The difference in means between males and females for the athletic competence image was found to be statistically significant, where t(14)=-3.397, p=.004. Figure 5 further shows the gender differences in means when it comes to word of mouth.

Figure 5- Difference in word of mouth levels of men versus women

Males and females had slightly more consistent results when it came to the last category, play. Participants were asked to evaluate their desire to play golf after viewing each image. Males rated the image categorized as hyper-heterosexual the highest, with a mean of 3.5 (SD=0.93). Females also rated the hyper-heterosexual image high, giving it a mean score of 3.13 (SD=0.83), but rated the athletic competence image the highest, with a mean of 3.38 (SD=1.30). On the other hand, males rated the athletic competence image the lowest with a mean score of just 2.88 (SD=0.99).
Males and female responses also diverged when it came to the “girl next door” image, the “sexy babe” image, and the soft pornography image, and the differences in the means for these three images were found to be statistically significant. For the “girl next door” image, the mean for males was 3.38 (SD=0.74), while the mean for females was 1.88 (SD=0.99), and t(14)=3.424, p=.004. When it came to the “sexy babe” image, the mean for males was 3.13 (SD=0.64), while the mean for females was the lowest of all 6 images and was found to be 1.63 (SD=1.19). When a t-test was conducted, it was found that t(14)=3.144, p=.007. Finally, for the soft pornography image, the mean for males was 3.38 (SD=0.74), while the mean for females was 1.75 (SD=1.04). This difference was also found to be statistically significant where t(14)=3.606, p=.003. As a result, there was a clear difference in male and female participants’ perceptions of the images in all three categories. Figure 6 below displays the differences in more detail.

![Figure 6](image.png)

**Figure 6**- Difference in means between males and females regarding desire to play golf

**Qualitative Results**
All 16 participants were shown six images of female golfers that were categorized as athletically competent, ambiguous, “girl next door,” “sexy babe,” soft pornography, and hyper-heterosexual. Interestingly, while clear themes emerged among female respondents, results from male respondents varied. Further, when the student investigator probed participants further with follow-up questions, an additional theme pertaining to the “sexy babe” image that was not previously addressed in either the research questions or the literature review emerged when participants made comments about the woman’s muscularity in the picture. Overall, however, there was much support for Kane and Maxwell’s (2011) previous research that indicated that the image of the female golfer associated with athletic competence generated the most interest in golf, especially from female respondents. Further, when the two images of female golfers that were categorized as “sexy babe” and soft pornography were shown to all participants, there were more comments about the woman’s body and pose and questions about the legitimacy of her athletic capabilities.

**Image 1: Athletic Competence**

The image of the female golfer in competitive action generated the most positive comments from focus group participants during both the free association phase and discussion phase. During the free association phase, participants were asked to write down any feelings, emotions, and questions they had about any of the images. The result was that clear themes emerged that focused on the female golfer’s physical form as well as her attitude. Many participants mentioned that the photo was an action shot and not posed. For instance, one male respondent, Ian, made a comment about the woman’s “good form” and another male respondent, Evan, commented how her stance made her look like “an actual golfer.” Further, this image prompted the most comments about the woman’s mentality and attitude as a golfer. Adjectives
such as, “focused,” “serious,” “talented,” and “intense,” emerged several times across participants’ free associations. One participant, Melissa, best articulated this idea by writing how the woman in the image, “looks focused, competitive, intense, really into the game.”

In addition, several male and female respondents made comments in their free associations that extended beyond just the woman’s stance and mentality. While no questions were asked during this phase about which image would best be used to market golf, these participants made comments about how this particular image would best be used in a marketing strategy. One female respondent, Julie, wrote how, “Image 1 was definitely the best to be used as a marketing ploy,” while another female respondent, Mary, wrote how the imaged seemed, “like the best picture to advertise to women golfers.” In addition, Michael, a male participant wrote how the image, “feels like a picture of an actual golfer which would make me look into the site for more information.” As a result, it was clear that both male and female participants envisioned this particular image in terms of an advertisement that would draw them in both in terms of playing golf and consumption of the Back9Network’s website.

These themes were also reflected during the discussion phase of the study. Many male and female participants in each of the four focus groups made comments about the fact the image was not posed, and the fact that she was in the midst of a shot made her look like a legitimate golfer. Two female participants best expressed this theme. Melissa commented how, the woman in this picture was, “actually focused and everything. She looks like immersed in the sport and super intense,” and Katherine mentioned “I like how number 1 is an action shot and you can see that she’s actually playing the sport.” Further, both male and female participants made comments about the woman’s “aggressive” and “competitive” look and how this made her look like a serious golfer. However, despite the similarities in responses from both male and female
respondents, responses diverged when participants were asked which image would most likely make them want to read about, watch, and play golf. When asked which image would most make them want to grab and a club and play, all eight female respondents chose this image as their primary choice, mentioning how her serious demeanor and stance attracted them the most. One female respondent, Amanda, even mentioned how this image would draw her in both in terms of wanting to play golf and learn more about golf by saying, “it looks like she can give me some tips!” In addition, when participants were asked which image would most make them want to read about the Back9Network, Image 1 was chosen by most participants either as the sole choice, or in a combination of two images.

Despite these clear themes that emerged with female respondents, responses from male participants varied. While most male respondents made comments about the fact that the woman in the photo was a serious golfer, several mentioned that it would be the least likely to catch their eye if browsing on the internet. However, when asked to clarify, these males mentioned that while they might stop and look at the sexualized images of the female golfers presented in the study, they would do so because of the appearance of the female in the photo and not because the photo stimulated their interest in golf or the Back9Network. Ian supported this idea by saying, “It makes me want to watch the women more than it makes me want to watch golf.” Further, a common theme that emerged among male respondents when discussing the image of the female golfer in competitive action was that they would be more attracted to the image and the game of golf if the backdrop displayed a more scenic view. When discussing the background, Andrew said,
“I feel like number 1 and 2, you could get better in game photos of them. Like they are obviously trying to be respectful and use legitimate photos but you could find cooler shots of women golfers playing that are more visually appealing.”

When asked to expand, Andrew went on to say, “Like maybe if it was a cool location. Like number 1 is just like green, blurry background. Like if it was cool weather or something.”

Interestingly enough, when the background was discussed, the golfer’s gender was not discussed, demonstrating how the female in the photo was perceived and accepted as a golfer and not a female golfer. William, a male participant, captured the essence of this theme by saying,

“I think the most appealing golf photo would have to be one that doesn’t play up the fact that the golfer is a man or a woman but a picture of someone from behind, like mid-swing or something, looking out on a course…that makes the person in the picture arbitrary and it doesn’t matter if it’s a male or female.”

Although the researchers did not anticipate a discussion of the backdrop, it was interesting to note how respondents accepted the woman’s position as a golfer, did not make gender marking statements, and instead, focused on the lack of scenery in the photo.

**Image 2: Ambivalence**

Reactions to this image were mixed among male and female focus groups and results were not consistent with Kane and Maxwell’s (2011) findings. Kane and Maxwell (2011) originally felt that a mixed message photo that displayed a female athlete as both “sexy” and athletic would appeal to all groups by giving “you the best of both worlds,” (p. 212). However, they found that participants generally made negative statements about the image by calling the image “fake” or “boring.” Interestingly enough, while the researcher in this study expected the
results to reflect Kane and Maxwell’s (2011) results, this image elicited comments that were overall very positive.

In analyzing the free associations of participants, several themes emerged. Many respondents focused on the attitude and facial expression of the golfer. Some words that were common throughout responses were, “fun” and “happy.” One female respondent, Melissa, even wrote, “Seems happy and proud to be involved with golf. Attracts more females to play golf. Makes it seem like a fun, cool, sport.” However, the fact that she was posing for the photo was noted by a few participants. Both male and female respondents mentioned how she looked like she could be on a magazine cover and that it would be a good picture for displaying clothes. While Ian simply wrote, “magazine cover” in reference to this image during the free association phase, Michelle was a little more detailed and wrote, “It would be a good picture for displaying clothing brands.” Therefore, it was not her gender or appearance that compromised the golfer’s perceived legitimacy, but rather her posed stance.

The posed stance of the woman in the photo was a theme that was reflected in the discussion portion of this study as well. Both male and female respondents mentioned that the photo seemed “scripted.” Brittany commented during the discussion phase, “Then 2, you’re like, ‘OK she’s like good at [golf], and modeling for it!’” In addition, while some respondents did make note that she was dressed as a golfer, Evan also mentioned that “she’s just kind of standing there.” Despite these mixed comments, a strong theme did emerge when participants were asked which image the Back9Network should use to attract the most people to both the sport of golf and their company. The majority of both men and women said that this image would most likely elicit support from the most people. One male respondent, James, said, “Yeah, I did like 2. She had the smile and it looks like she’s ready to play,” while two female respondents, Mary and
Melissa, commented how the woman, “looks really nice,” and how “she looks like someone you want to golf with.” Therefore, while very few respondents made comments about her as a serious golfer, they were attracted to her smile and positive facial expression.

One theme that emerged in both female focus groups but not male groups was the youthful appearance of the female golfer and how that attracted them to it and the sport of golf. One female respondent, Julie, best expressed this theme by saying, “It looks like number 1 looks like she’s a little old for young girls to idolize but number 2 is young enough.” Further, when asked which image would most make them want to read about the Back9Network, most females who listed more than one image chose this one in conjunction with one of the others. When probed further, one female respondent, Brittany, said, “She’s younger and that hits more home to me.” Therefore, while most respondents were attracted to this image and did agree that its use would attract the most people to the sport of golf and the Back9Network, it was because of her youthful appearance and smile and not because of her perceived athletic capabilities as a golfer.

Image 3: Girl Next Door

The image of the female golfer categorized as the “girl next door” elicited the strongest consistency among responses from both male and female respondents. Further, of all the images presented to participants, this image was most consistent with previous studies. Kane and Maxwell (2011) found that participants in their study expressed the strongest sense of disconnect about the image, questioning what it had to do with sports and what the purpose of the image was. Results from this study strongly reflected those results as well. Respondents from all four focus groups questioned the purpose of the image and asked what the image had to do with golf during both the free association phase and discussion phase. The common phrase written on participants’ free associations was, “it has nothing to do with golf.” In fact, this phrase was
written on 8 of the 16 free associations (4 men’s and 4 women’s). Another theme that emerged after analyzing the free association segment of the study was that the woman in the photo looked like a clothing model and not a golfer. Michael and Melissa wrote a few statements that supported this theme by saying, “does not remind me of golf; looks more like a fashion ad,” and “shows a cute outfit,” respectively. Therefore, despite the woman’s position on a golf course, participants felt a sense of disconnect between the woman in the picture and the sport of golf and rather, associated her with a clothing advertisement.

These themes were expressed even more strongly during the discussion phase of the study, especially during both female focus groups. One female respondent, Michelle, best expressed the disconnect theme by saying, “OK I guess number 3, like it doesn’t have anything to do with the sport. Like I saw it and was like, ‘cute clothes,’ but what does it have to do with golf?” This sentiment was expressed even more strongly in female focus groups. One female respondent, Katherine, said, “3 didn’t make me feel negative, it was just a useless picture. Like it’s useless, you don’t know what the point of the picture is.” This sentiment was further reflected in the other female focus group. When asked which image should the Back9Network use to attract the most people, one respondent, Amanda, said, “They should just get rid of number 3, because I don’t really get it,” while another one, Melissa, agreed saying, “Yeah, I agree, 3 can go.”

While female respondents expressed stronger negativity toward this image, the sense of disconnect was also expressed by male respondents. One male, Andrew, said, “Number 3 kind of looks like a reporter maybe. We wouldn’t even know it was about golf at all but you can kind of tell it’s on a golf course but otherwise, you wouldn’t know at all.” Further, when they were asked which image the Back9Network should use when marketing their network, some male
respondents said this image could work but said the connection between her and the sport of golf should be stronger. One respondent, Brendan, said, “I think 3 would work if she had a golf club or something,” demonstrating respondents feeling of disconnect when looking at this image.

**Image 4: “Sexy Babe”**

The image of Sophie Horn posing in her sports bra elicited the most surprising responses from both male and female respondents during both the free association phase and discussion phase of this study. Kane and Maxwell (2011) found that many women acknowledged her sex appeal, while males frequently used adjectives such as “hot” or “sexy.” While the student investigator expected to find themes that were consisted with those found by Kane and Maxwell (2011), the strongest theme that did emerge focused on the muscularity of the woman in the photo and a sense of “intimidation” felt by both male and female respondents. Several adjectives that were written on multiple free associations were, “tough” and “strong.” Further, the majority of respondents mentioned how the picture looked like it could be an advertisement for a gym and did not look like it had anything to do with golf. To support this theme, Michelle wrote during her free association, “Are we displaying golf or in shape athletes? Could be a gym commercial without the golf club.”

The theme of the woman’s strength and muscularity was further reflected during the discussion phase of the study of both male and female focus groups. During one male focus group, Michael said, “Number 4 reminds me…like I feel like it’s a gym,” and Andrew agreed saying, “I think it is a workout ad.” This theme also emerged during the discussion phase of female focus groups as well. Amanda said,
“The 4th one, like if I didn’t know this was about golf, I wouldn’t ever realize it’s a golf club. Like it looks like she’s ready to go workout, and that’s some kind of weird workout thing to me. Like the first time I see that, I didn’t think golf, it's like workout.”

Further, both males and females made comments about the woman’s body. William said, “4 the focus is more on her body and there’s no golf course in her picture. It doesn’t remind me of anything golf.” In addition, Brittany made a direct comment about the woman’s body saying, “OK, she has great abs.” Therefore, this image elicited more comments about the woman’s body and how she looked like she was going to work out.

While respondent’s focus on the woman’s body was an anticipated theme, the focus on her muscularity and strength was not, leading to a deeper analysis of the evolution of the “ideal” female body type. Historically, women were thought to be physically inferior to men, and quasi-scientists attributed this to a woman’s genital organs. In addition to not being physically capable, sport was seen as a sphere in which only men and boys could participate (Messner, 1990). To describe this, Messner (1990) says, “Without sport, then, boys became womanlike, delicate, and degenerate. Without sport, men could lose control over their sexual desires, become susceptible to sexual excesses, and eventually suffer from sexual exhaustion,” (p. 53). As a result, sport was view as a space only for men, where women were not only excluded but also seen as physically incapable of participating.

Despite the gradual acceptance of the participation of women in sport, the focus on women’s bodies has not subsided. Thereberge (1993) notes, “the centrality of the body and physical performance to athletic experiences makes sport a particularly powerful site for the construction and confirmation of gender ideologies,” (as cited in Cunningham and Singer, 2011, p. 335). This quote demonstrates how sport has been a site where gendered body standards have
been amplified (Messner, 1988 as cited in Cunningham and Singer, 2011). While women are expected to be toned and thin, men are expected to be big and muscular (Choi, 2003; Galli & Reel, 2009; Luciano, 2007 as cited in Cunningham & Singer 2011). However, as women become more involved in sport, a more muscular body type is replacing the “toned and thin” ideal that has permeated the media, creating a conflict between muscularity and femininity, a theme that emerged when this image was shown to all four focus groups (Birell & Cole, 1994). Rather than focus on the woman’s mentality, the majority of participants mentioned feeling intimidated by her muscularity.

Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, and Kraer (2004) call the conflict between muscularity and femininity a paradox in which, “Western culture emphasizes a feminine body and demeanor that contrasts with an athletic body and demeanor,” (p. 315) This clash between the sporting culture and Western culture has had significant effects on female athletes, their self-esteem, and their overall health. While some researchers have found some female athletes develop a healthier lifestyle (Marten-DiBartolo & Shaffer, 2002; Miller, Sabo, Farrell, Barnes, & Melnick, 1999 as cited in Krane et al., 2004), other researchers have found that this clash has led female athletes to develop eating disorders and exercise excessively (Duquin, 1004; Johns, 1996; Krane Greenleaf, & Snow, 1997 as cited in Krane et al., 2004). Therefore, although ideally, female athletes have toned bodies, they must avoid masculine-perceived, muscular bodies to avoid being construed negatively (Krane et al., 2004). The responses from participants when shown this image demonstrate negative perceptions of the woman’s strength and power, as it undermines Western culture’s feminine ideal body type. Rather than praising the woman’s strength, the majority of participants mentioned a sense of intimidation and one male respondent, William, made a direct comparison to himself saying, “Number 4 looks stronger than me.”
In addition, this image had significant consequences on the way female respondents evaluated their own bodies. This theme was consisted with previous literature performed by Daniels, Jarrett, and McCutcheon who found that when girls viewed images of sexualized female athletes, they were more likely to be jealous of the athletes’ bodies and evaluated their own bodies negatively. One female respondent, Katherine, expressed this theme most clearly stating, “And also like 4, to me, I know I don’t look like her. So like girls, and even guys, not all golfers look like that. And I know you can’t find one picture to depict what everyone looks like but you can pick one that’s an average type person.”

As a result, the image not only elicited responses where the woman’s body was the main focus but also had far reaching consequences that caused female respondents to feel negatively about their own appearance.

**Image 5: Soft Pornography**

Similar to results found by Kane and Maxwell (2011), this study also found that the image categorized as soft pornography elicited negative responses from both male and female participants. Several themes emerged during the free association phase of the study that were consistent across male and female respondents. William called the photo, “too sexy,” while Michelle called it “too provocative.” It also became very apparent that females had even stronger negative sentiments about the image. To support this, Michelle wrote how, it “demeans women,” Julie described it as “degrading,” and Amanda wrote how it was “disgusting.” In addition, several participants noted how the Back9Network was trying to use sex to sell golf. Brendan said, “5 uses female attraction as a marketing strategy,” while Katherine said, “really trying to sell golf with sex appeal.” Therefore, while “sex” was the focus of the majority of
respondents, almost all commented about the degrading nature of the photographs or the company’s clear attempt to use sex to sell golf.

These themes were reflected in the discussion portion of the study as well. However, the level of negativity was expressed more strongly by female respondents. In one female focus group for example, all four respondents named this image as the most offensive, and therefore most alienating. Katherine best expressed this sentiment saying, “I feel like number 5 is something you would see in Sports Illustrated, like it has nothing to do with women trying to play golf. If you are trying to get more women involved, that is not the way you do it. That’s something I can see guys looking at in a male’s sports magazine.” Another respondent reiterated this negativity stating, “I just really dislike 5. Like it’s not even a good picture, like her legs are a different color than her arms, it looks photo shopped.” As a result, it was clear that women tended to focus on the degrading nature of the photo and were most offended by its sexual explicitness.

Almost every female did make a comment that this image would appeal to men, supporting results from Kane, LaVoie, and Fink (2013) who also found that females tended to believe that the primary way to appeal to a male core was by portraying female athletes in a sexualized manner. When asked which image would appeal to most men, Katherine said, “I think maybe 5 just because of the provocativeness. Like it’s a girl bending over, a guy’s going to be like, ‘Wow,’ instead it a girl hitting a ball, it’s going to be totally different.” Brittany supported this idea that the image would more likely appeal to men saying, “It seems like they are trying to attract men.”

Interestingly enough, while some males did say they were attracted to this image, every male respondent said that their attraction was limited to the physical appearance of the model
and did not extend to the sport of golf or the Back9Network. This theme emerged during both the free association and discussion phases of the study. Brendan wrote, “5 seems to use female attraction as a marketing strategy. The women are indeed attractive, but that does not stimulate my interest in the sport of golf, just my interest in the physical attraction of some of its athletes.” Similarly, James wrote, “Though I do not want to promote the use of women as sex symbols, I think it is effective while men are there but I do not think photos can entice men to play golf.” Further, this idea was mentioned several times throughout the discussion phase of the two male focus groups. When discussing which of the above images they would click on if they were on the internet, Brendan said 5. However, he followed up with, “None of them would stimulate my interest in golf…in other things maybe,” demonstrating how although the picture might attract male’s attention, it would not attract them to the sport of golf or the Back9Network. As a result, there is strong support for Kane’s article and findings that, “Sex Sells Sex, Not Women’s Sports.” In this article, Kane writes,

“Scholars have long argued that a major consequence of the media’s tendency to sexualize women’s athletic accomplishments is the reinforcement of their status as second-class citizens in one of the most powerful economic, social and political institutions on the planet. In doing so, media images that emphasize femininity/sexuality actually suppress interest in, not to mention respect for, women’s sports.”

Therefore, this quote demonstrates that sexualizing female athletes not only suppresses interest in women’s sports but also reduces respect for women’s sports.

The idea that individuals are less likely to respect female athletes and women’s sports when viewing a sexualized image of a female athlete was another theme that did emerge in all four focus groups, especially when discussion centered on this image. Female respondents focused on the unrealistic nature of the image, and how they were more likely to feel
embarrassed for the woman in the picture than want to be like her and engage in the sport of golf. Melissa said, “I think 5 also is just ridiculous, like it has nothing to do with golf. You don’t wear those shoes to play golf, you don’t play golf in that environment, you don’t have to look like that to play golf, and it doesn’t make me want to play.” Brittany echoed these sentiments by saying, “My initial reaction to 3, 4, and 5 would not be, ‘Yeah, I want to get out there and hit the links!’ It was like, ‘Oh, these women are very scantily clad.’ Like that’s not how you’re going to go on the course. It struck me more as, ‘Oh God, what are they doing?’” Therefore, it was apparent that women were more likely to mention how the image seemed ridiculous and would not attract them to the sport of golf.

Similarly, male respondents also focused on how the image seemed ridiculous to them, providing additional support for Kane’s findings that sexualizing female athletes reduces respect for both the athletes and women’s sports overall. Ian best articulates this idea by saying, “I think number 5 is just ridiculous. I think to go just with the looks of the woman and what she’s doing in terms of golfing in a short dress and wearing high heels in the middle of the street, it’s just strange.” Almost every other male also commented on how they felt the image was either ridiculous, “too much,” or “pushing the envelope.” As a result, they tended to mock the woman in the photo. Several males mentioned how, “you can’t golf on a street,” and how her high heels made her look over the top. Therefore, results from this study provided strong support that sexualizing female athletes reinforces their position as trivial, second-class, and non-serious athletes.

**Image 6: Hyper-Heterosexual**

Of all images shown to focus groups, this image prompted responses that most differed from Kane and Maxwell’s (2011) findings. While Kane and Maxwell (2011) found that responses to the image in their study were very neutral. However, respondents in this study
generally made very positive comments about this image. During the free association phase, several male and female participants wrote about how they liked this image the best because it showed the family side of golf and the social side of it. Amanda best articulated this idea saying, “Number 6 showcases a family aspect of the sport and the support that come with it or the fans that come with it.” This idea was also mentioned several times throughout the discussion phase of all four focus groups. Several female participants mentioned how they felt drawn to the couple and wanted to know more about them, which would therefore prompt them to most want to read about golf and the Back9Network. Katherine best expressed this idea by saying, “I like 6 the most because in the background you can see other players and fans and it’s more…for me, it draws me in, rather than just one person…you might be able to read about the event they were at or what kind of course they were at or something like that where there was more going on than just a person hitting a ball.” Further, Michelle said, “I like number 6 because it shows you like a family aspect of it and the fan aspect that comes with playing the sport of golf.” As a result, female participants generally had very positive remarks about this photo and were drawn to not only the image but also the idea that the sport of golf has a family aspect of it and can be very social.

While male participants expressed similar ideas, their comments were more reflective of those found by Kane and Maxwell (2011) and were slightly more neutral than those of female respondents. However, male respondents still were drawn to this image due to the fact that it displayed both a male and female in the picture, how it was respectful, and how it encompassed golf by actually showing a course in the background. As a result, these aspects also drew male respondents in. One male respondent pointed out that that this image would draw him in if he was looking for information about golf because it was at an actual event. Similarly, every male
of one focus group felt that this image should be used if the Back9Network was looking to appeal to the broadest range of demographics. Evan best expressed this idea by saying, “I think it encompasses both men and women. It’s not just a picture of a woman and I think it’s respectful and shows the most about golf.”

Although the overwhelming positive comments about this image were surprising at first, the student researcher found that female respondents’ focus on the social and family aspects of golf is actually very consistent with previous literature on golf. In fact, Mysel’s *What Women Really Want…Out of Golf and how to get Their Business* explores the ways to attract women to golf and the reasons women choose to play golf. The first thing Mysel (2012) mentions is the social setting of golf is one reason women are drawn to the sport. He says, “Women tend to favor experiences that are social or playing with friends and family.” Similarly, Philips found when golfers were asked what they enjoyed most about playing the game, 82% said that they enjoyed the time with their friends. As a result, it is possible that the females in this study were drawn to the social aspects of golf, as most women are.

This image also elicited responses that were consistent with previous literature on golf and heterosexist perceptions of women as supporters of their significant others and not as golfers themselves. While a few male respondents referred to the woman in this picture as a “spectator,” female respondents also made comments that labeled the man in the picture as the golfer and the woman as his significant other. Brittany supported this idea by saying, “Number 6 is like, ‘oh, that’s nice, a woman being there for her husband at the golf course.’” In the other female focus group, two of the four women asked whether the man in the picture was a famous golfer, yet did not address the woman in the picture with the same question. As a result, there was strong support for McGinnis and Gentry’s (2006) literature on the constraints female golfers face.
McGinnis and Gentry (2006) found female golfers tended to feel as appendages to their male partners indicated by golf course personnel only addressing the men in the group and ignoring the women. The responses from participants in these focus groups reinforce this constraint women face as golfers, and the need to address them as golfers themselves. Interestingly enough, unbeknownst to focus group participants, the woman in the photo was actually the professional golfer, while the man in the photo was an actor.

In addition, the focus on the individuals in the photo as a couple brought about another heterosexist theme. By focusing on the individuals as a heterosexual couple, participants were reinforcing the resistance to the “image problem” tour players face. As previously mentioned, Creedon (1994) described how many deny the existence of lesbians on tour to offset this “image problem.” This idea emerged in one focus group in which there were a few male participants that made comments that some of the women in the images appeared “butch.” For instance, upon pulling up the PowerPoint with image number 1 of the female golfer in competitive action, James commented prior to the sound recorder even being turned on how the woman “looked butch.”

Further, this idea emerged during the discussion phase of that same focus group. One participant, William, commented, “There has to be a balance between too butch of a model and too sexy of a model.” In addition, another male participant asked a fellow group member, “Do you think #4 is sexy or do you think it’s too butch,” referring to the “sexy babe” image. Therefore, it is apparent that many individuals, especially males, are prompted by heterosexist ideals to comment on how the woman in competitive action as a golfer and the muscular woman are “butch.” Further, they are more likely to be drawn to the hyper-heterosexual image, where the woman’s appearance is more consistent with traditional femininity. Creedon (1994) also
points out in order to offset this “image problem,” there is more of an emphasis on heterosexual couples. A few respondents made positive comments about how the two individuals in the picture appeared to be a heterosexual couple. One male, Ian, described the photo as a, “married golf couple,” and assumed stereotypical gender roles in which the male was the athletic one, and the female was the one in a supportive role. Therefore, despite the attraction to this image, images such as these reinforce hegemonic masculinity by reproducing heterosexist ideals.

Limitations

As in all research, there are limitations that should be noted, and there are several limitations to the findings in this study. The first limitation is that a convenience sample of n=16 was employed. Due to time limitations and a lack of students who signed up for the study, only four focus groups of four individuals each were conducted. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable to the population. In addition, all 16 participants came from the same Northeastern University, so it is possible that if this study were to be conducted in a different region of the country, results may not be consistent. It is possible if this study were performed in the West or South, where golfing opportunities are more plentiful due to the lack of cold weather, the percentage of female golfers may be higher, leading to a higher acceptance of them.

Another limitation of this study was the images themselves. Because the Back9Network is a fairly new media network, where its consumption is only available online, there was a limited amount of images that could be chosen to fulfill the categories set by Kane and Maxwell (2011). Therefore, some images were not the best fit for the categories. In particular, the “girl next door” image depicted a woman on a golf course. During the first focus group, all four of the male respondents mentioned they were attracted to this image because of its background and did not make any comments about the woman herself. In order to elicit more consistent
responses among all respondents, the background had to be cropped so that the focus was on the woman in the picture. However, surveys from this first group were still included when analyzing overall results. Therefore, it is possible the men may have rated the image higher due to the background, generating a higher overall mean for this image.

Another limitation was the issue of social desirability. According to Boelcke and Harris (2013), social desirability occurs when a person may respond to questions in a way he or she feels is socially acceptable, rather than answering in a completely honest manner. Before taking part in this study, all participants were made aware of the objective of the study and that it was assessing the notion of “sex sells” in golf. Therefore, it is possible the participants were more concerned with answering in a way that was socially acceptable, despite being encouraged to be completely open and honest. There is some evidence that indicates that social desirability played a part in this study, especially when it came to male focus groups. While most men rated the image categorized as soft pornography the highest during the survey portion, they were more likely to refer to the image as “ridiculous” during the discussion phase. Therefore, it is possible that males felt more comfortable during the survey portion, where complete anonymity was ensured.

Finally, the last limitation was the psychological phenomenon called groupthink. Fritscher (2008) describes how groupthink occurs when, “rather than critically evaluating information, the group members begin to form quick opinions that match the group consensus.” Although focus groups were homogeneous in design so that participants felt comfortable expressing their opinions, it is possible that groupthink played a role. There were a few cases where participants were probed during the discussion phase. One example of this was when participants from a female focus group were asked which image would most make them want to
play golf. While Michelle immediately answered number 1, or the image displaying athletic competence, the other 3 women followed her lead and all said number 1 as well. While it is possible that they all happened to agree, it is also possible that groupthink played a part in the way participants responded.

**Implications for Sport Managers and the Back9Network**

Despite the notion of “sex sells,” this research supports what Kane had found years ago: sex sells sex, not women’s sports. Although male participants did rate the soft pornography image as the highest when it came to consumption and word of mouth, qualitative results indicated that that image would only entice males to look at the model, and not to be interested in the Back9Network or the sport of golf. As a result, the women in images that were sexualized in nature were objectified. In addition, the sexualization of female golfers had significant consequences on female consumers, who consistently rated the images categorized as “sexy babe” or soft pornography the lowest across the categories of consumption, word of mouth, and desire to play. In addition, female respondents not only used words as “degrading” and “disgusting” to describe these images, they often evaluated their own bodies negatively and were more likely to feel alienated by such images than attracted to them.

The results from this study indicated women were overwhelmingly more interested in the sport of golf and the Back9Network when the image displayed an athletically competent female golfer. Therefore, the Back9Network can capitalize on the results from this study, and therefore, attract more women to their network as well as to the sport of golf. By portraying female golfers as athletically competent, the Back9Network can provide more empowering forms of female athletes (Kane & Maxwell, 2011). In this way, they can challenge hegemonic masculinity by portraying women as serious athletes.
In addition, the Back9Network has the potential to open the doors to many opportunities for women of all ages. By portraying women as serious golfers in competitive action rather than sexualized figures, young girls are provided with more role models to look up to, and will therefore be more encouraged to want to play golf (Messner & Sabo, 1994). In addition, by starting golf at a young age, females have the opportunity to be exposed to a sport that will help them in the corporate world. Andrews (2012) wrote an article entitled, “Nice girls who play golf do get the corner office,” which demonstrates the vast amount of opportunity golf affords women in the corporate world. In the article, Andrews writes how informal networking is an area in which women felt disadvantaged compared to men. One of these informal networks was golf, which allows individuals uninterrupted time to spend with potential clients, business partners, and even bosses (Andrews, 2012). Therefore, although just one network, the Back9Network can take a step in a direction that can transform not only the golf industry, but also the corporate world, and serve as a model to other media networks who are trying to attract women to golf.

**Conclusion**

This study began by emphasizing how sport has been a domain that praises masculinity and where women are marginalized, sexualized, and trivialized (Cunningham and Singer, 2012). It highlighted how sport has traditionally reinforced hegemonic masculinity and how golf, despite the absence of physicality that should even the playing field between men and women, also reproduces patriarchal ideals. Although the Back9Network offers enormous opportunity for women in the sport of golf, portraying female golfers in a sexualized manner does not increase support for the network or the sport of golf overall. In fact, it merely reinforces female athletes as second-class citizens and trivializes their accomplishments (Kane, 2011).
Portraying female golfers as athletically competent offers significant reward for the Back9Network. This study showed that the more an image of a female golfer is sexualized in nature, the least likely it would to generate support from women. In addition, despite males indicating an interest in sexualized images, they too reiterated that their interest would be limited to the model, and would not extend to the sport of golf of the Back9Network itself. Therefore, portraying females as serious golfers in competitive action offers the most opportunity for growth in the golf industry.

In addition, sexualizing female athletes has devastating consequences on women. Women who viewed sexualized images of females are more likely to focus on the women’s body, negatively evaluate her own, and develop eating disorders. Further, sexualizing female athletes is more likely to reduce support for women’s sports than increase it. By challenging sexualized media portrayals of female athletes, the Back9Network can empower females, rather than marginalize them, and introduce them to a sport that will provide them with a healthy lifestyle and the opportunity to break through glass ceilings.

References


Cunningham, George B. and John N. Singer. Sociology of Sport and Physical Activity. College Station, TX: Center for Sport Management Research and Education, Texas A&M University, 2012.


Fink, J. S. (2012). Homophobia and the marketing of female athletes and women's sport. In G. B. Cunningham (Ed.), *Sexual orientation and gender identity in sport: Essays from activists, coaches, and scholars* (pp. 49-60). College Station, TX: Center for Sport Management Research and Education.


Kane, Mary Jo, and Heather D. Maxwell. "Expanding the Boundaries of Sport Media Research: Using Critical Theory to Explore Consumer Responses to Representations of Women's


Appendices

Appendix A

Please circle the number that best represents how you feel.

IMAGE 1

I will read about the Back9Network in daily sport pages and magazines.
Strongly Disagree-----1-----2 -----3---- 4-----5-----Strongly Agree

I will visit the Back9Network’s website for information about golf.
Strongly Disagree-----1-----2 -----3---- 4-----5-----Strongly Agree

I will watch online videos on the Back9Network’s website for information about golf.
Strongly Disagree-----1-----2 -----3---- 4-----5-----Strongly Agree

I will speak favorably of the Back9 Network.
Strongly Disagree-----1-----2 -----3---- 4-----5-----Strongly Agree

I will encourage others to visit the Back9Network’s website.
Strongly Disagree-----1-----2 -----3---- 4-----5-----Strongly Agree

I will watch the Back9Network on TV.
Strongly Disagree-----1-----2 -----3---- 4-----5-----Strongly Agree

I will encourage others to watch the Back9Network on TV.
Strongly Disagree-----1-----2 -----3---- 4-----5-----Strongly Agree

I want to play golf after viewing this image.
Strongly Disagree-----1-----2 -----3---- 4-----5-----Strongly Agree

I will encourage others to play golf after viewing this image.
Strongly Disagree-----1-----2 -----3---- 4-----5-----Strongly Agree
Appendix B

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<th>Activity</th>
<th>Athletic Competence</th>
<th>Ambiguous</th>
<th>“Girl Next Door”</th>
<th>“Sexy Babe”</th>
<th>Soft Pornography</th>
<th>Hyper-Heterosexual</th>
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