

# Researcher finds female athletes conform to gender norms on personal sites

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Ever since the first sports page rolled off the press, there has been an uneven amount of coverage for men's and women's sports. With the dawn of the Internet, there was hope that women could bypass traditional media and present a more full picture of their sports, but a University of Kansas professor has published an article showing that female athletes' personal sites almost uniformly confirm traditional gender norms, presenting the women as both sexy and athletic, strong but not challenging to men.

Barbara Barnett, associate professor of journalism at KU, authored "Girls Gone Web: Self-depictions of [Female Athletes](#) on Personal Websites." Spawned from a book chapter on sports, females and [mass media](#), Barnett wanted to examine how female athletes present themselves when they control the message through their own sites. Barnett conducted extensive analyses of the websites of top female medal winners in the 2010 Winter and 2012 [Summer Olympics](#) as well as those of the highest-paid female athletes in 2011, the most recent year information was available, according to *Forbes* magazine.

"A lot of people said the Internet was a chance to change all of the presentation of women athletes as sexy or inferior to male athletes, but I wondered, 'Has it really done that?'" Barnett said. "One of the things I noticed is these stories don't really change. These [gender roles](#) are so ingrained that people don't challenge them."

While the athletes did in fact give much more thorough coverage of their

sports, highlighting wins and losses as well as the rigors of training, they also very often included photos of themselves in sexy or provocative poses, included details on their personal lives presenting them as traditional wives, girlfriends and mothers, and devoted to traditional female expectations such as a love of shopping and cooking.

Barnett examined the websites looking to determine how the women depicted their athletic skills, finding that almost without fail, they talked most about how hard it is to be an elite athlete. Many included blog entries about the rigors of training, the agony of recovering from injuries and the amount of time it takes to be a world-class competitor.

"That's one of the things that I found stunning," Barnett said. "They focus on their sport day and night. It affects everything about who they are, and they make it clear that the 'offseason' isn't really off."

In the early days of women's athletics, there was much criticism that female athletes were too masculine and that rigorous physical activity would hinder their reproductive abilities, attractiveness and carry a host of other negative effects with it. The women tended to challenge the age-old notion that they were physically too weak to compete but were also quick to point out they were still capable of being attractive. A good percentage of the sites featured photos and videos of the athletes posing in sexualized ways, sometimes with sporting equipment as props, other times in evening wear or underwear.

Many of the women who are now world-class athletes grew up in the era of "third wave feminism," Barnett said. The idea holds that women can be both strong and meet traditional feminine expectations. Or, in the case of many of the athletes, that they can be both Olympic athletes and sexy. The athletes have grown up both with the idea that they can ascribe to the theory without making political statements and being so used to [gender norms](#) that they often don't feel the need to challenge them.

"You see women reinforcing the 'natural order of things' through these websites," Barnett said. "They reinforce that they're not a threat to men, that they don't want to challenge men, they want to challenge themselves."

The athletes also showed a propensity to present themselves as part of a brand and were very savvy about the business side of sports. Many of the sites featured information about the athletes' sponsors as well as pictures of themselves with their sponsors, using their products and touting the quality of said goods. They also showed a propensity for avoiding controversy, both in realization that doing so could cost them money that enables them to take part in their sport and because there is a different set of expectations for male and female athletes and that controversial behavior among women is frowned upon, Barnett said.

Barnett will present her findings at the International Association of Media and Communication Research conference in Dublin, Ireland, this month. The findings are important, she said, because sports hold a mirror to society and can reflect where priorities really stand.

"We learn a great deal about society and who and what is valued through sports," Barnett said. "And a lot of our heroes are athletes. Sports are a good indicator of what's important in society."

Provided by University of Kansas

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