

ADVERTISING TO THE MODERN FEMALE ATHLETE

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this body work to my parents Arthur Taylor and Monica Taylor who have supported me through all of my academic and athletic endeavors; I could not have completed my degree without you. Thank you for always encouraging me to go above and beyond what I ever thought I could be capable of.

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ABSTRACT

This two-part study examined portrayals of women in social media posts (Instagram) from four top athletic apparel companies: Nike, Reebok, Lululemon and Jolyn. Interviews were conducted with gatekeepers – decision makers – who place the models who appear in these posts and ads to gauge the evolution of the portrayal of women in athletic clothing ads; and three diverse focus groups of female college athletes (synchronized swimming, basketball and golf) were conducted to measure their attitudes about how women were portrayed in the ads – specifically whether the portrayals objectified women. The gatekeepers both reported an evolution from the athletic wear ads featuring thin, traditional models in the 1990s to showcasing more athletic women, in more athletic poses, today. A structured sample of the seven most recent posts from each brand was collected and focus group participants were asked their opinions of the brands before and after exposure to the posts. Responses diverged between the various teams, with the golfers finding the posts the least objectifying and the basketball players reporting the most objectification. Discussion includes implications going forward for companies intending to advertise to the modern female athlete

I. INTRODUCTION

In the world of entertainment, it is no secret that women are often subject to objectification. Traditionally a woman is portrayed in media as pretty, beautiful or sexy so she may be acknowledged as ‘feminine.’ Even professional and Olympic-level athletes are often ranked in order of sexiness or beauty before there is even discussion of their talent. Female athleticism challenges the gender norms for women in media and society in general. Rather than fulfilling traditional gender submissive roles such as mothers, wives and sex objects, female athletes are powerful, strong, competitive and usually a little sweaty (Hansen, p.15). Traditional journalists and sports reporters are not the ones who are solely responsible for the portrayal of female athletes in mass media. Athletic clothing and apparel brands generate and produce content on a number of digital platforms, which, gives them the ability to have just as much of an impact on portrayals of female athlete in mass media. Brands such as Jolyn, Lululemon, Nike and Reebok have a large number of social media accounts and have the ability to create their own idea of what a female athlete is.

This study examined how athletic apparel brands represent female athletes in their company media and discover if the brands are using their media to effectively reach their targeted audience of female athletes. Instagram is a widely used application with a focus on visual content. This makes it a perfect application for an athletic brand to attract a literal following but also for a brand to establish their own “brand identity.” Through discussion with current female athletes, this research discovered if these brands are representing themselves well on social through the eyes of female athletes. There is

existing research on how television advertisements, magazines and billboards portray women, and more specifically women in sport. However there is not much existing research on how athletic brands specifically portray women in sport. It is important to acknowledge that clothing brands are responsible for a good deal of the media content about female athletes. The advertising industry is often criticized for its objectification of women (Monk-Turner, et al. 2008) by featuring them in little to no clothing. It is common however for athletic clothing advertisements to portray a woman in a bra and fitted pants or short shorts, but is it in a sexualized manner? This study examined whether female athletes believe that a woman working out without her shirt on in spandex is sexualizing her body or simply showcasing the clothing through their eyes.

Content marketing, made easy with the large array of social media options, allows for each of these athletic apparel companies to interact with their consumers. Content marketing, as defined by Hubspot, is the literal act of creating, publishing and distributing content on a regular basis for the brand's targeted audience of the brand. Content marketing when done correctly, produces content that is not only something that the target audience wants to view or read but is also where the ideal customer spends their time. Content marketing is one of the main features of digital marketing (Karafova & Kusa, 2015). Content marketing incorporates communicating with the consumer through blogs, Instagram, Facebook, and other forms of social media that their ideal consumer may be on. By being where the consumer is, it is easier to be a regular presence in their consumers' lives. The clothing brands that are being used as examples for the purpose of this study - Jolyn, Lululemon, Nike and Reebok - all have accounts on Instagram. Instagram is a visual platform that makes it easy for retailers to debut their product to

their consumer without having to pay for television or print advertisements. By creating content and sharing it through social media platforms such as Instagram, these brands are creating an image of female athletes. The content posted to each of these company pages is targeted at their consumer, the purpose of content marketing is to attract the users to their page and ultimately their brand to create a customer. Content marketing usually requires some investigation into the life of the ideal customer in order to have an understanding of what exactly this customer wants to see. This marketing method is consumer focused and actually gives the consumer the ability to shape the media produced and published.

In a preliminary interview with an expert in the modeling industry it was revealed that the modeling and advertising industries have been forced to change with health becoming such a major concern on mass society. According to Sports and Lifestyle Unlimited agency founder Dave Weiss (Weiss, 2017). During a phone call with Weiss, he made it clear that health and fitness is the latest trend in American society, and due to this, simply being extremely thin is no longer the ideal “look.” Weiss’s agency was one of the first in the industry to focus on being the agency for athletic models, but today major high fashion agencies such as Wilhelmina and Ford have added athletic and lifestyle segments to their agencies. Additionally, it has become more acceptable for a woman to be a tough athlete; being athletic is no longer strictly for the boys, according to a study by Daniels and Wartena (2011). Between 2012 and 2017 there has been an increase of athletic women being used in advertisements, with the largest increase being online (Namie,& Warne, 2017). Women actually preferred advertisements showing women engaging in physical activity over traditional sex appeal advertisements. This

change has allowed for athletic brands to expand their female clothing lines and represent athletes who are women in their advertisements rather than always going for the more feminine and delicate frame. Previous scholarship has also identified differences in the way males and females respond to women in advertising. When boys (males ages 12-17) see content with women portrayed as athletic, they did not care as much for the advertisement as they do for advertisements with more traditional portrayals of females. However, when they are objectified and viewed as more submissive, the males responded more positively (Daniels & Wartena, 2011). But among a female audience, in a separate study, it was found that images of a woman being athletic yielded reactions that were focused on the performance of the athletic activity more than appearance of the woman in the photo (Daniels, 2009). Yet, other scholarship shows that a woman's body is most often portrayed in the media as an attractive sex object rather than as athletic, yielding objectification among viewers (Blair, 1994; Bratu, 2013). The point is that how women are portrayed matters.

Every Olympic Games there is a list of the “sexiest women going to the games” on websites such as Maxim or Ranker. Sean Abrams, a writer for *Maxim*, wrote in his article on the 10 hottest female athletes going to Rio, “Even if the games themselves prove to be lackluster, we'll still have something to keep our eyes on” (Abrams, 2016). This statement is revealing about what some reporters think of the value of women athletes. In the article, Abrams goes on to discuss the body types of the women on the list rather than simply focusing on the power or speed and skill of these women. However, it is fair to ask the question, do women enjoy being on these lists, or do they believe that it is disrespectful to discuss their aesthetic over their skill? Although there has been an

increase in the use of female athletes in media how much is this really breaking the traditional gender portrayal mold? Simply using more women athletes is not necessarily recognizing that the women featured are incredible athletes if the content is focused on how they look. Creating content focused on the body of the model as opposed to them training or in motion may actually be content that appeals to males more than females. For an athletic brand creating clothing for women it is important to consider what the female consumer wants to see and what even makes them feel comfortable and that they can relate to the brand.

This research investigated four athletic clothing brands: Jolyn; Lululemon; Nike; and Reebok. Each of these brands have their company history and information about their manifesto posted on their website and in SEC filings. This information is valuable to this study because it gives insight to how each of these brands not only were born but how they have grown and evolved. An understanding of the brand and its priorities will also determine who the targeted audience is and allows for a better understanding of how well the content on Instagram falls into line with their values.

Lululemon began in the city of Vancouver, Canada, and originated for the purpose of outfitting women for yoga classes (Lululemon, 2017). One of the pillars of Lululemon is community and building strong meaningful relationships. Lululemon has used these relationships with their consumers, whom they refer to as their guests, to not only improve on their yoga designs but also to expand into other facets of athletic clothing, including running, cycling, casual styles and an entire men's line as well. Lululemon focuses on empowering and inspiring their guests and employees, who they take pride in being athletes and "sweaty minded" people. Lululemon is a company that

strongly believes in balance and health, both physically and mentally. They do not use professional athletes to advertise their clothing and they do not sponsor any particular sports teams or leagues. Rather this brand relies on their “ambassadors” who are members of the various athletic communities (cycling instructors, yoga teachers, and other members of the fitness community) to wear and talk about how great their brand is. Lululemon is not about winning or training hard but rather achieving clarity and achieving one’s goals in an effort to become one’s “best self.”

The one brand that only has a women’s line is the Jolyn. This company, based out of Huntington Beach in California, was founded for the purpose of creating fun and attractive swim suit styles that can withstand the chlorine, sea water, and aggressive training that many swimmers put their suits through. Jolyn has a big quirky personality, it does not take itself too seriously and the goal of the brand is to provide gear good enough for the women whom inspire them to design. The brand likes to recognize themselves as “aquatic outlaws” (Jolyn, 2017) and takes pride in being a different sort of competitive swimming company. Jolyn’s main focus is the affordability of their durable swimwear, as well as having the largest variety of silhouette design out of any other athletic swimming brand. Jolyn only has one brick-and-mortar location – in Huntington Beach; all other sales are either online or through local sales representatives. Part of the criteria for the sales representatives is to already be involved in the swimming or fitness community. Jolyn hosts events and sets up pop up shops at competitions and events to sell their product. Similar to Lululemon, Jolyn is not a sponsor of a major sports league or any major college teams, and most of their advertising is through word of mouth and through social media. Jolyn has no shortage of Instagram accounts. In addition to the

@jolynclothing account each region has its own account and so do some of the specific sports the Jolyn is popular among, such as running or beach volleyball. Jolyn seems to be very actively reblogging their fan's photos when their accounts are tagged in an item. Jolyn shares photos of all kinds of women too, not just athletes.

According to the history section on the news page for Nike the company signed their first athlete, a runner, two years after the company originated. The company was first named "Blue Ribbon Sports" at its founding in 1964 but changed its name to the goddess of victory Nike in 1971 shortly after their "Nike" shoe gained so much popularity. The athletic apparel giant began solely as a shoe brand created by a University of Oregon track coach and Phil Knight, a former college track athlete at the university. Nike went on to expand into other sports and endorse professional athletes such as Michael Jordan and Mia Hamm. Nike has an entire team of athletes whom they endorse as well as professional teams and leagues. Nike recently inked an 8-year deal to become the apparel sponsor of the National Basketball Association, a contract that once belonged to their competitor Adidas. Adidas had the NBA contract for 11 years before Nike took it over but did not even make an attempt to win back the NBA deal against Nike. Nike has, for a long time, been the top brand for basketball shoes with their partner companies Converse and Jordan (Rovell, 2015). Nike is more than an athletic brand; its shoes and clothing are sought after for fashion as well as function. Nike is one of the most recognizable brands in the world and one of the most valuable brands in sport (Ozanian, 2016). Nike's mission statement in the header of their corporate website claims that their goal is to bring innovation to every athlete in the world, making the claim that

anyone with a body is an athlete. Nike's aim is not to make their clothing exclusive to elite athletes, they aim to appeal to everyone.

Reebok claims to be an "American inspired international brand" on their company website. Reebok began as a small family owned company in England and is responsible for the first spiked running shoe. Reebok emphasizes the need for innovation and to strive for progress and takes pride in being one of the first running shoe innovators. This company strives to provide everyone with the opportunity to be the athlete that they want to be (Reebok 2017). Reebok is also a brand about inclusion. Reebok's self branding says it's dedicated to helping people stay in shape through having fun, growing a community where fitness and fun go hand in hand in part through the groups that Reebok has partnered with. Reebok has partnerships with Crossfit as the sole sponsor and outfitter for the Crossfit Games, Spartan Races, the Ultimate Fighting Championship, Les Mills and the Ranger Races. In addition to the corporate partnerships, Reebok also has "created a Global Corporate Citizenship platform with a purpose for the brand that will help underprivileged, underserved youth around the world fulfill their potential and live healthy, active lives" (Nike, 2017). Reebok encourages people to "be more human" - meaning to embrace the journey it takes to become better. Reebok embraces the scars and missteps and looks to them as steps in the direction of progress rather than setbacks. The company states its goal as not setting the standard of perfection but rather of constantly striving to better.

Past studies suggest that athletic advertising has increased its use of athletic females and has broadened acceptable female gender roles, but it would be valuable to know how much that motivation has impacted gatekeepers who place women in these ads

and also how members of the target audience are perceiving the change. In their mission statements, each of these brands make it clear that they want to appeal to athletes. This study evaluates what each brand is doing in their portrayals of real female athletes; industry experts give insight on the trends when seeking out models and even what some of the limitations are when crafting the brand's image through advertisements and media; and female athletes share their unique insight on whether these ads score – or miss.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Objectification Theory and Body Image

Not all is equal in portrayal of women in advertising. Scholars Xuemei Bian and Kai-Yu Wang (2015) studied the effect of changing the model from a size zero to anything above. In their research, they acknowledge that in today's society an American size zero is the modeling and advertising industry standard, but having such lean women featured on the pages of magazines has been linked with some serious social and body image issues for women. They actually found that showing average-sized models might help sell more product, with the key variable being the self-esteem of the individual female customer. Advertisers have taken note of the negative impact and some have begun to change from size zero models to average-sized models. According to Bian and Wang, "the majority of marketing practitioners are still very cautious and slow in replacing SM (small models) with AM (average models) due to being unsure about how well consumers may respond" (Bian and Wang, 2015, p. 1185). This is because using small models has been successful in the past, however there is a large amount of literature and research about the negative effects of having only size zero models represented in advertising and media. This has acted as a catalyst for brands to migrate from exclusively small models to incorporating average sized models as well. In their experiment, the researchers found that consumer attitudes varied based upon the self-esteem of the participant, "high self-esteem women show little effect after viewing either category of images" (Bian and Wang, 2015, p. 1185). The theory of consumer attitudes from this research can be applied to the field of athlete advertising. This study intends to capture

the reactions of athletic females' feelings and observations of athletic apparel advertisements.

The media has the ability to influence the masses opinions of what the ideal body type, or body image actually is. Although traditionally visual content is utilized when studying media portrayals of body image body image theory has even been used in studies where music is the subject of the study. Past research has suggested that exposure to objectification in music can have a negative impact on young consumers of music, affecting body satisfaction (Anderson, Craig, Flynn and Holody. 2016). The Objectification Theory suggests that female bodies are held to a "standard" put into place by sociocultural norms and achieving this standard can and has caused mental and physical illnesses (Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. 1997). The idea if the "perfect body type" is constructed by the influences of media. All forms of media can create the full image of what the ideal body is, through socialization and observation of sexual objectification the ideal body image is understood. "Sexual objectification experiences (which literally dehumanize people by reducing them to objects) promote internalization of sociocultural standards of attractiveness that is, the belief that one needs to be conventionally physically attractive (e.g., thin) to be valued"(Velez, L., Breslow, S., Brewster, M. E., Cox, R. J., & Foster. p.499. 2016). Furthermore objectification theory suggests that through a life-time of experience of being reduced down to a sexual object, women learn to treat themselves as objects and actually achieve satisfaction through being evaluated by their body type (Moradi & Ping Huang. 2008). Essentially women experience and observe sexual objectification and then begin to objectify themselves because it has been established as the expectation, women who are unable to reach a level

of body satisfaction with their own bodies experience higher levels of stress and anxiety which leads to depression, eating disorders and even sexual dysfunction. “In modern society there is a growing concern with body aesthetics. The concern is a result of the imposition by the media of a stereotyped body image that corresponds to an unreal appearance” (Olivera, Olivera, Goncalves, Valentim-Silva, Fernandes & Fernandes, p.45. 2017). Past research suggests that women whom participate in sports are more aware of their body types and have higher rates of body dissatisfaction, especially when the sport has a emphasis on body type. Female gymnasts, dancers, figure skaters, and synchronized swimmers have a higher rate of disordered eating and even admittedly have a fear of getting fat (Olivera et al. 2017). This fear stems from the will to meet the standards of their sport as well as the standards of society. The standard of the ideal body is created through the environment that these athletes are in, and also shapes their image of what body image is ideal and even what their standard of beauty is.

Women in Media

Women in advertising and entertainment are often discussed as being overly sexualized, selling the female form rather than selling the product itself. Additionally the traditional model is typically a very tall slender woman. This makes it difficult for a sporting brand to create advertisements for a strong, athletic, but also feminine ideal that other women could not only relate to but also want to be. Kristen Blair, author of the study, *Selling The Self: Women And The Feminine Seduction Of Advertising*, wrote, “advertising often uses female seduction to sell products to consumers. By reducing women to objects of visual pleasure, advertisers reinforce the concept of the woman as mere appearance.” (Blair, 1994). This was one of the common perceptions of females that

the Nike Women's advertisement campaign chose to break the mold on. In her study, Blair uses beauty product advertisements as an example of beautiful women being used in ads for beauty products as a method of attracting consumers and to create the need for their products. Women feel the need to meet the standards of femininity and body image in an effort to achieve what they consider to be success based upon what they see in advertisements, according to Blair's research. The manners in which women are seen in television, social media, and advertising has an effect on how women carry themselves in their daily life. It influences the way they dress and the manner in which women portray themselves in their own personal media.

Contemporary research results have only proven the fact that media is a major influencer of how a society behaves. A study involving adolescent boys who viewed three different portrayals of women (athletic, sexy athletes, and sexy models) discovered how males view women in media. The women portrayed as being engaged in athletic activity garnered much more focus on the athletic performance and much less on their bodies than the other two portrayals (Daniels & Wartena, 2011). Even an audience of women responds differently to how women are portrayed in imagery. When female athletes are shown engaged in athletic activity, women in the audience are less likely to report body image inadequacies (Daniels, 2009). Daniels and Wartena's study scratched the surface of how women view images of women in sport, but this study took it a step farther in an effort to understand how women athletes actually want to be portrayed. The study conducted by Daniels and Wartena did not isolate female athletes, just males and females. It has been proven in past studies that females in sport and females not involved in sports or athletics react differently to images of women in athletic advertisements

(Taylor, 2017). According to “Who is Looking at Whom? A Look at How Sex is Used in Magazine Advertisements,” advertising creates a salience of opinion amongst a society, because it not only exposes people to the product but also has the ability to condition audiences (Monk-Turner, et al. 2008). The article, in *Gender Studies*, examined magazine advertisements to determine if sex was being used to sell products, which is one of the most common assumptions in gender-related advertising research. The authors found that, though the majority of advertisements examined for the purpose of the study were not using sex to sell the product, but advertisements aimed at males almost always used sex (Monk-Turner, et al. 2008). Additionally, women were most often the subjects of sexual objectification. In Monk-Turner’s research it was determined that advertisements for female athletes would not objectify or sexualize the women featured in the content. This is because the advertisements were created for the purpose of their female customers, not to attract males. In advertisements directed toward male audiences women are most frequently displayed as feminine, beautiful and maternal (Monk-Turner, et al. 2008, p.180) furthermore the authors add that beauty is most commonly displayed as white and slim. This study found that whether the product was being marketed to a male, female, young child or older adult, light-skinned thin females were most frequently the subjects. It is not only sex that sells but also pure femininity, which can be beauty, being subordinate to males, motherhood, or by using sex.

Post-Title IX Era Women in Athletics

In 1972, Congress modified legislation regulating higher education to equalize access to education for women; this package of laws became known as “Title IX” and, among other things, expanded women’s college athletics (Valentin, 1997). Prior to the

signing of Title IX, women were not offered the same educational opportunities as men purely based on their gender (Rose, 2015 p.158). Deondra Rose acknowledges that Title IX expanded far more opportunities for women beyond sport stating that Title IX “represents one of the most transformative trends in recent American history” (Rose, 2015, p. 157) it also transformed the presence of females in media along the way. Title IX caused a dramatic increase in women receiving an education, and ultimately this eventually lead to a smaller gap in pay between men and women in the working world. Title IX can be credited as a revolution that led to men and women being viewed more as equals. This impression has even had an impact in the world of sport, and can be noticed in athletic entertainment and advertising. This led to women not only being accepted in sport but also to them being more involved in sport.

Although there are more women shown by the media participating in sports and athletics than ever before, the representation of female athletes in media still falls short of males (Ottaway, 2016). There is a great deal of research that suggests they are not being equally shown as athletes and that this is in part due to the fact that the world of sports journalism has yet to update their reporting to fall into line with Title IX (Hanson, 2012 p. 14). Amanda Ottaway cites a *Sports Illustrated* contributor, Andy Benoit, who stated in 2015 on his personal Twitter account that women in sports are not even worth watching. Benoit was asserting that women’s sports are not in the media because women’s sports are not as entertaining as men’s sports and this is why there is less media attention on female athletes. Media has come a long way since pre-Title IX days, but women athletics are still not portrayed equally to male athletics.

Charlene Weaving suggests that the manner that most women in sport are portrayed in media is problematic because of how much women athletics are sexualized by the mass media which, in a way, actually dehumanizes the women featured. Weaving analyzed 50 years of female athlete representation in the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* as well as the absence of women in regular issues of the publication for her research “Examining 50 Years of ‘Beautiful’ in Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue.” Weaving discovered that not only are women hardly ever featured on the cover for non-swimsuit issues, but when they are featured in the magazine at all it is not for their athletic achievements but rather for their bodies. Rather than being featured in action the women are frequently in string bikinis or less and in sexually suggestive poses, sometimes even with props that have no relevance to the athlete or their sport (Weaving, 2016). An example of females being dehumanized in the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* referenced by Weaving in her research was the cover of the 50th anniversary edition. The cover photo is literally only a woman’s body; the head is cropped out of the shot and the focus of the photo is on the model’s chest. “Because the model is headless, this epitomizes interchangeability and a body object framing” (Weaving, p 385, 2016.). Additionally, she suggests that female athletes such as Lindsay Vonn are actually Photo-shopped to look less muscular and more feminine. Treating female athletes as sex objects and not as powerful leaders in their sport suggests that beauty is more important than athletic achievement.

Recently the CrossFit (CF) community has made an impression as a brand that empowers women to be strong but still acknowledges them as women. In the sport of CF, women are encouraged to lift heavy weights and are not discouraged from gaining

muscle mass even though it means losing a feminine or slender figure. Researchers Washington and Economides, however, make the claim that this sport still focuses on female competitor's beauty and bodies over their performance, citing CF athlete Camille Leblanc-Bazinet as an example. Although she is one of the top competitors in the games she is more frequently discussed as a beautiful woman frequently showing up on lists for being the "hottest or sexiest" (Washington and Economides, 2016). Although the sport CF encourages women to feel strong it also still emphasizes females as sexy objects in sports bras and little shorts. This study evaluated the way women are discussed in the sport and criticized the fact that they are still being objectified.

"Silence, Sports Bras, And Wrestling Porn: Women in Televised Sports News And Highlights Shows," examined both quality and quantity of women televised on three major networks. This expanded upon past research that had come to the conclusion that women in sport were still missing in the early 90's. In 1999-2000 there was a spike in women in sport on television because to the success of the U.S. Women's soccer team at the World Cup. However, this was short lived and sports television returned to being overwhelmingly male. These researchers found that the quality of reports on women's sports and female athletes "were fairly brief, the occasional more in-depth women's sports story was often a gag feature or a story on a marginal, but visually entertaining, pseudosport" (Messner, Duncan and Cooky, p 41, 2003). Women were shown and discussed more often as Lakers Girls than basketball players and the world of sports commentary was found to be male dominated. Despite the success of U.S. women's soccer and three decades after Title IX, sexualized images of women in advertisements have increased over the past decade. "...pornography websites on the internet increased

1,800 % between 1998 and 2004; even in mainstream advertisements, women are shown with a ‘pornified’ sexuality” (Kim and Sagas, p 126, 2014). Furthermore, this article states that women in sport are only accepted if they manage to remain heterosexually attractive. This study used a content analysis of photographs in *Sports Illustrated* and examined photographs of the subject’s body position, hand placement, facial expression and the location of the photo shoot. This study compares models with female athletes in these issues to determine whether female athletes are equally sexualized. Findings concluded that female athletes are extremely sexualized and objectified by the media in a manner similar to how female fashion models are. However, in the article’s discussion it is mentioned that female athletes have been selected for the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* for the purposes of their athletic physique but also make the point that turning these female athletes into objects has actually taken away from their athletic achievements by simply objectifying them.

The article “Living The Paradox: Female Athletes Negotiate Femininity And Muscularity” explains that “active women and girls face an intriguing paradox: Western culture emphasizes a feminine ideal body and demeanor that contrasts with an athletic body and demeanor” (Krane, et al. p 328, 2004). Researchers acknowledge that different bodies are assigned differential “values” in comparison to the “ideal feminine body” which is created by social constructs within a society. In this study, the researchers’ goal was to uncover how female athletes negotiate and reconcile the social expectations of femininity with their muscularity and athleticism. The method used in this study was two focus groups: one made up of female college athletes, similar to the research methods used in this research. They discovered that the female athletes in this study all felt that

they were not representations of “femininity” because they: Grunt, belch, make noises, and because of their body structures (Krane, et al. 2004). The women of this focus group claimed that they are self-conscious about their muscles, and that they feel pressure to become demure when around men in an effort to become less masculine. This research concludes that women in sport believe it is necessary to lead two lives due to concern of being overly masculine, however this research was performed in 2004. The study conducted for this research investigated whether this line of thought is still consistent with women in sport 13 years later. In the book, *Femininity and the Physically Active Woman*, the author argues that masculinity and femininity are coexisting and each a part of a healthy woman’s life. Just as the women in the focus group stated they felt societal pressure to fit a mold Choi claims that there is a “uniform shape” for women in western culture (Choi, 2000, p 63). Choi’s explains that many women have decided to not partake in sport for fear of being too masculine. It is possible that female athletes, in an effort to not be portrayed as masculine in media, actually prefer to be sexualized. These inquiries were discussed in the focus group.

Sophia Bratu suggests that, although women are often objectified in advertising and media, it may not be as disrespectful as most research suggests. She found that some women choose to be displayed as such in order to feel empowered. According to Bratu, “The body is portrayed in advertising as the primary source of women’s capital. Possession of a ‘sexy body’ is presented as women’s key source of identity.” (Bratu, S. 2013, p.168). In her study, she examines the shift from women simply being objectified in order to become attractive for men, to women presenting themselves in a sexual manner because they find it empowering. According to Bratu, women are more

frequently choosing to become sexualized because the “sex body” as Bratu refers to it, is a key commodity in advertising and the possession of the sex body is presented as a key source to a woman’s identity. (Bratu, S. 2013 p.170). Bratu suggests that young educated women often not only accept the objectification of the female form but they also will continue to purchase products even if an advertisement is viewed as offensive. Bratu asserts that women have embraced midriff exposure as a manner of choosing to narcissistically show off their bodies not for the male gaze but to fulfill their own ego. Bratu’s idea is that some women work to get their bodies to a certain standard to use their bodies as a symbol of empowerment. This same display of the hard work and labor that they have put in can be applied to women in athletic advertisements because the midriff is an area commonly exposed in athletic women’s clothing advertisements. If being a female athlete is inherently a paradox, as suggested by “Living The Paradox: Female Athletes Negotiate Femininity And Muscularity,” it is possible that some women hold on to being sexualized in order to feel like a woman, even if they have a muscular frame. The majority of research suggests that using women in advertisements as sex objects is always negative and disrespectful toward women. Bratu takes an alternative approach suggesting that there are women who believe that being sexualized is a form of empowerment, and would rather be sexualized for their fit bodies than viewed as a sweaty athlete.

Brand-Related Studies

The Canadian based athletic apparel company Lululemon originated as a women’s yoga apparel company but in recent years has expanded into running, recreational working out at the gym, swimming, biking, and men’s-wear as well.

Although the company has seen success it has suffered public relations blunders as well. *The Journal of Critical Incidents* published an article cataloging the series of blunders titled “Lululemon Athletica and a Series of Bad Marketing Decisions.” The article mentions the company selling bags with improper phrases, false promises with products, a company-related murder, as well as the degeneration of quality in the product. In 2013, a former employee of Lululemon made public accusations that the company intentionally discouraged larger women from purchasing their products and Chip Wilson, founder and CEO, claimed in an interview that “some women’s bodies just don’t work for us” (Thomas and Peters, 2015 p. 104). Wilson also made claims that the pants were sheer because women were wearing too small of a size, but also that they do not make larger pants because the cost to make them is too high because of the high quality of the pants. This gave Lululemon an air of superiority and caused some consumers to boycott the brand altogether. Although Chip Wilson was forced to resign, the company’s reputation has suffered and is viewed by many as a fat-shaming exclusive brand.

However, Lululemon has still been able to reach success expanding internationally and is still popular among various athlete groups, spanning from yogi’s to crossfitters to tennis players and even people just seeking comfort. The athletic clothing company has reached success because it projects the image of the importance of living a life of discipline and self-care (Lavrence & Lozanski, 2014). The fact that Lululemon is a company founded for the purpose of making functional and fashionable yoga clothing also had the principles of yoga deeply rooted within the company’s brand image. The manifesto of Lululemon, which was printed onto the company shopping bags, was their only form of advertising early on. The brand also uses “stealth advertising” described as

“approaching established yoga teachers and athletes to become ‘ambassadors’ by wearing Lululemon clothing and using related gear while teaching classes in communities in which Lululemon is opening up new stores. The walls in Lululemon stores feature large-scale images and biographical information about some of these local ‘ambassadors’—decked out, of course, in their Lululemon clothing” (Lavrence & Lozanski, 2014, p. 77). Rather than publishing print advertisements, Lululemon relies on these community leaders as testimonials to their brand. The researchers also collected information about the brand’s culture by observing how the employees acted in the store settings at various locations as well as the store set up and brand portrayal online. They noticed that most stores have the same open space set up and that the company is very focused on improving one’s self as well as self-care, however the authors of this article claim it is contradictory. Lululemon is a high-end brand with a high-end price point of \$98.00 per pair of pants while reportedly striving to also promote simplicity and humility.

The athletic apparel maven Nike has often been credited for using strong and empowered women as opposed to using seduction to sell clothing. In Cole and Hribar’s study on celebrity feminism, they write about the formation of the company, its early success, and its early failures in the female market. One of Nike Women’s earliest advertisements featured the well-known tri-athlete training with the voice over saying Nike’s well-known motto “just do it.” The misstep in the advertisement was the last phrase at the end that stated “And it wouldn’t hurt if you quit eating like a pig” (Cole and Hribar, 1995). It was after this advertisement that the sporting brand hired an all-female team to create the advertisements for Nike Women’s. The new team of advertisers created more expensive print advertisements that were a page long in an effort to paint a

full picture and tell a story. One of the early Nike advertisements discussed in this study featured a black and white image of a young girl accompanied with a narrative. The narrative made claims about the young girl wanting to be a boy, wanting to do “boy things” and essentially making the point that running like a girl is not a bad thing if women do not think of “running like a girl” as such (Cole and Hribar, 1995). This study lastly makes the claim that Nike Women’s success was based upon the fact that Nike has “positioned itself as a celebrity zone of popular feminism” (Cole and Hribar, 1995). The brand chose to sell more than women’s athletic commodities; it commoditized feminism and female empowerment. Nike’s brand continued to progress and move from being female empowerment-centric to simply focusing on an athlete being an athlete, taking gender almost entirely out of the advertisement. Rather than featuring long stories and poems about being a strong woman, most advertisements offer a mix of genders, types of athletes and ethnicities. Importantly, this strategy would not have taken root without it showing success for Nike; the Women’s Training line is one of the fastest growing divisions at Nike (SEC, 2015).

In the article, *The Gender of Branding: Early Nike Women’s Advertising a Feminist Antenarrative*, Jean M. Grow researches the developmental years of the sporting apparel giant Nike’s sub brand. Grow explains that the Nike Women’s brand has developed its own image by creating stories of empowerment and a sense of community among female athletes. Grow interviewed the people behind the advertisements to gain an understanding of how gender affected the advertising campaign ideas of Nike Women’s. From 1990-1997 Nike Women’s utilized a creative team from an advertising agency to create advertisements that challenged the social constructs of females in sports

and athletics (Grow, 2008, p. 312). Over the years, the brand progressed from simply featuring women to women who work out to strong female athletes. The Nike Women's brand faced financial struggles as well as struggles finding who they wanted to portray, and Grow chronicles each step of the process advertisement by advertisement. There was an obvious shift in the manner which Nike Women's advertised to women; it went from using words to connect to the ideal feminine woman who is a mother, sister, wife, or significant other and began to simply target people who will use the product. The Grow study informed the methods employed in this research.

The other two brands that are being examined do not have much existing research on them, however, according to the Jolyn Corporate Representatives handbook, the brand's primary form of advertising is done through social media. Jolyn sells its product through local representatives rather than through traditional retail stores, and each of the brand representatives have their own territory and each territory has their Instagram account. According to the Instagram section of the Corporate Rep Handbook the representatives have a series of hashtags that they can use for the photos, the most popular being #TwoPrintTuesdays, but more importantly the brand encourages its representatives to use photos that Jolyn customers post when they tag or hashtag the brand on social media. This is because Jolyn wants their brand to be both "fun" and "real" (Jolyn p19, 2017). Jolyn makes an effort to repost all kinds of body types in their Instagram because they do not want to create an "exclusive" brand, According to Jolyn they want to be viewed as accessible for all bodies and all ages.

III. METHODS

This study involved a mix of interviews, focus groups and content analysis and approach portrayals of women at the source – via interviews with decisions makers about how women are portrayed in athletic wear ads – and at the receiver, with focus groups discussing that portrayal.

Focus groups are a well-established and unique methodology, in use for nearly a century (Bogardus, 1926). They offer a unique opportunity to combine the benefits of interviews with the social interaction of a group setting and can be a dynamic way to capture a prevailing attitude among an audience of people who share some characteristics (Hollander, 2004; Krueger & Casey, 2000). They offer an ideal setting for quickly and richly testing perceptions of a particular message, especially when visuals are involved, and have been employed as methods in the area of portrayals of women in media (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, Kauer, 2004). Female college athletes were enrolled in focus groups, where they were exposed to an evolution of athletic ads over time showing women evolving from sexy models to performance athletes (See Appendix B).

Interviews were employed by previous scholars in this area and interview questions used here were modeled after that work (Grow, 2008) (See Appendix A).

This study was interested in learning more about how changes over time affect perceptions and portrayals of women in athletic wear ads. Toward that end, the present study is interested in the following:

RQ1: How are the brands evolving to try to reach their targeted audience in these female athletes?

RQ2: Do female athletes feel that they are objectified or sexualized in the content produced by athletic brands?

RQ3: Do female athletes want to be objectified to feel more feminine?

Interviews

The first method of research to be implemented in this study was interviews with two people who are responsible for creating the content, the industry leaders, in the athletic apparel advertising business. The industry leaders included members of modeling organizations and athletic apparel marketers. Dave Weiss, the owner of Sports and Lifestyle Unlimited Modeling Agency (SLU) was interviewed to not only gain a perspective of what kind of women these companies are using but also to gain a historical perspective of the modeling side of athletic advertising. Weiss worked in the athletic modeling industry as a model himself but is currently the president and cofounder of the modeling agency Sports and Lifestyle Unlimited. Sports and Lifestyle Unlimited (SLU) is an agency that generally stays away from the super thin or “wafer-like” models, as described by Weiss, and rather seeks out talent that has athletic skill as well as physical beauty. SLU also has worked with Nike, Lululemon and a number of other athletic brands and can draw conclusions as to that these brands have in common and what they tend to do differently in their advertisements. A representative of different company, who wished to remain anonymous, was interviewed to understand the purpose behind their marketing strategies of sharing their consumers’ content and interacting personally with the women who use their brand. The executives and athletic marketing leaders are responsible for the content that is produced by these brands, so speaking with them provided insight from an industry perspective. That also helped explain how these

advertisers are thinking when they create advertisements, revealing the intention of advertisements and information as to how these advertisers think women want to be spoken to. Much previous research has examined the results of the work of these executives as well as how consumers react to their advertisements, but little actually asked the advertisers and executives in the athletic advertising industry what their intention is with these advertisements. This information gives determine who the target audience is and also give insight to how the thought leaders believe the industry has changed or progressed and provide an explanation for why this shift has happened. These interviews were conducted by phone in September and October; for IRB-approved questions, see Appendix A.

The next step in this research was to gather a series of advertisements from the brands Jolyn, Lululemon, Nike and Reebok. Three of the brands (Lululemon, Nike and Reebok) were used in this study because not only are each of these brands known internationally but each of them also has both male and female lines of clothing. The brand Jolyn was selected because it as a brand that is for women's athletic apparel and swimming alone, it is important to bring in a brand that has no stake in the men's market because it may affect the advertising and content created and promoted by the brand. For this particular portion of the research, the content gathered was collected from the companies' primary Instagram accounts. Previous work on the history of Nike Women's advertising campaigns from the 1970's through 2016, found that athletic women reacted differently from non-athletic women when seeing images that might be viewed as objectifying. For example, the women athletes were not affected as negatively by women working out shirtless in sports bras; the lack of shirts was seen as a negative and

objectifying by the non-athlete group. Although the athletes agreed with the notion that not all women feel comfortable working out without their shirts on, they did not see working out in a sports bra as a method of sexualizing the women featured in ads but rather as a practical way to advertise the product (Taylor, 2017). Substantial differences emerged between athletic and non-athletic women in the exploratory focus groups and based on that, and the findings of Bian and Wang about the role of self-esteem (2015), this study focused on athletic women. The same focus group setting from the formative study was replicated in this study to determine whether female athletes relate to the women in the content produced by these four major athletic brands. By studying different groups of athletes it can also be determines whether the different types of athletes have the same opinions about the content that is being pulled from the Instagram accounts of Jolyn, Lululemon, Nike and Reebok.

Focus Groups

In advance of the focus groups, on September 14, 2017 at 6:00 p.m., the seven most recent Instagram posts from each of the brands were viewed and captured. In each case, the post was opened so as to show both the image and the accompanying message – along with audience interaction with that post. This was replicated across the four brands, on the same day and time, so as to eliminate any researcher bias and to capture a fair representation of the brands’ self-portrayal on Instagram.

The focus groups were designed to maximize honesty in responses and to isolate differences by diverse sports and participants. Three college women’s teams participated in the focus groups: A basketball team of five women, on October 5; a synchronized swimming team of 18 women on October 7; and a golf team of 13 women, on October

24. In each case, athletes were interviewed with their teammates, rather than mixing the teams to be in focus groups together, to make it easier to distinguish if there is salience of opinion amongst women within the same sport and to take advantage of their familiarity and comfort in discussion. It is possible that the environment that each team plays in and the uniforms they practice and compete in can have an effect on what these female athletes view as sexualized.

Each group was first asked what words they think of when they hear the name of each brand: Jolyn, Lululemon, Nike, and Reebok. This helped establish a benchmark as to what consumers instinctively thought of when hearing the brand names, a representation of what image the brand has already established. Participants were then asked which of these brands best represents women like them as female athletes and which they feel they relate to the least and why; they were then shown advertisements gathered from the brand and asked what words come to mind after seeing the persona created by the advertisements. Then focus group participants were shown a variety of content created by each of these brands that is published to their social media, after which participants were once again asked to explain whom they feel the brand is targeting through their social marketing campaigns. After viewing content and advertisements, the members of the focus group were asked if their attitudes about any of these brands had changed or whether their feelings about that brand had evolved, and why. The members of the focus group were not asked to read captions or to comment on any particular part of the Instagram posts. This was done to allow each participant to observe the content the way that they do when actually scrolling through Instagram themselves.

The focus group was pivotal to this research because it provided insight as to how closely aligned the brand's intended image is with the actual reception by a key audience. A unique contribution of this study design is the before/after approach to interpreting the message, from its inception by company decision makers to its reception by members of the audience.

IV. RESULTS

Interviews

The first of two interviews was with Davis Weiss, owner of Sports Lifestyle Unlimited Modeling Agency (SLU), a modeling agency that employs sports and lifestyle models. During his time in the industry, Weiss admits that he has seen a shift in what is traditionally considered to be “beautiful.” When what Weiss referred to as the “fitness phenomena” took off, brands made the switch from wanting a traditional model to being more concerned with the model’s athletic capabilities, because it is vital for the model to actually have the ability to perform properly for the desired photograph. Weiss explained that sometimes the models have to be able to dunk a basketball 15-20 times in order for the photographer to get a photo that is acceptable for an advertisement; therefore the model has to be an athlete who can endure that sort of work.

The typical female model at SLU is about 5’ 7” to 5’ 9” tall and usually wears between sizes 4 and 6 in clothing because this is typically what brands are searching for. However, Weiss mentioned that they also have plus-sized models who are incredibly talented athletes and even some gymnasts who would be considered short for a model. But when a brand requests a model who can perform several backflips, SLU has the talent to fulfill these needs. Additionally, because SLU is an agency that was created to fulfill the market for healthy and natural models, they will actually turn down talent (models) looking for representation if they are as thin as a traditional model.

One of the more recent “looks” that is beginning to gain popularity with SLU is what Weiss referred to as the *urban look*. This look, he explained, is more androgynous-looking women and models with tattoos and piercings. This is, in part, due to the fact that

society has altered or even expanded its own definition of beauty, but also because brands are making a bigger effort to be more inclusive. Throughout the interview with Weiss, he often mentioned the fact that beauty is being “redefined” and that this has created even more opportunity for his agency. Weiss mentions that he believes that the brand Nike has been a major influence on the modeling industry and was one of the earliest to use real-life athletes in their advertisements rather than the traditional model. He acknowledges that Nike, as a whole, is a large company with numerous divisions and it is hard to generalize about it as one entity. But he did acknowledge that Nike makes having inclusive and diverse advertisements a priority. Weiss believes this is, in part, due to the fact that the company has such a diverse consumer base and therefore their advertisements should represent that. (When browsing through the Instagram feed of Nike Women’s official page, it is clear that they make having all types of women represented in their advertisements a priority.)

During his 25 years in this industry, Weiss admits that he has had to constantly make business adaptations and alterations to keep up with societal changes. One of the changes that he has noticed is the transformation of the female athletic model. As a former athlete, former athletic model and current manager of modeling talent himself, he has seen the female athlete become a more accepted member of society and says that the fact that fitness has become a higher priority for American society has in turn expanded its definition of beauty to encompass muscular and powerful women. Furthermore, he adds that weight is no longer as associated with beauty and has been replaced with looking healthy and natural.

When asked about how SLU models feel about being a model as well as an athlete, Weiss acknowledged that though most “understand that it is a part of the business” but also that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, while others still wish to be recognized for more than simply their physical beauty. One of his female athletes in particular, who is one of the most successful at SLU because of her physical beauty, has made a point of stating that she has actual athletic skills that she would like to have recognized and even makes efforts to play down her own beauty so that people will look past that and recognize her hard work in her athletic career. To wrap up his interview, Weiss also commented on the male modeling industry, stating, “men in this industry have not changed much at all. The traditional male model and a sport and fitness model are very similar, and if you were to go back 15, 20, or 25 years there would not be much difference at all.”

A second interview with an expert in the fashion industry, who asked to not be identified but is the current artistic director for an athletic clothing brand and has been working in fashion for years, revealed a lot about the struggles of finding models and the changes she has seen while working in the industry. Currently this participant plays a role in crafting one company’s Instagram messages, finding and booking models, and handling the overall artistic direction of the brand itself.

When asked what sort of look she searches for in a model she said that she just wants a “real girl.” When booking a photo shoot in Miami recently, one of the greatest challenges was finding a Miami-based model who looks like the average woman because that is who wears the brand. Most of the Florida-based models are swimsuit models with what she called “babe-a-licious bod’s.” For this particular shoot, she made the call to go

with a fashion model who, even though she was very thin, had the “girl next door look.” In her current role, she is doing what she can to keep the brand from “getting too sexy.” This expert believes there are enough brands using the sexy woman strategy and though she says she is aware the brand’s social media could gain hundreds and thousands of followers if they would just give in and sexualize their models, she insists on keeping it fun and relatable. The social media account is geared towards women and if the social media were sexualized, most of the followers would likely be male. She looks into the impression statistics to ensure that the posts she crafts are hitting their target audience and she said she applies these statistics to adapt future posts as well.

This expert began her career in fashion in the 1990’s, also known as the “supermodel era,” a time when every woman in fashion magazines had to be extremely thin. She reports that she has seen changes in models since then, speaking positively on the new laws established by the French government that state models must be of a healthy weight and cleared by a doctor, and the fact that major modeling agencies such as Wilhelmina have added a new category, *lifestyle model*, to their agencies to fulfill requests for models who look like the average person. This artistic director wants to be able to find models who are in-between the traditional model and the plus-sized model. This particular void poses the biggest challenge because she wants this brand to be as authentic as possible, which is why they will often turn to real athletes. In a recent photo shoot she worked with an Olympic athlete and said she fell in love with the energy that was brought to the shoot. She says there are many benefits to working with athletes, one being that they are used to taking direction, but also that athletes are used to waking up early for practices and always show up to a shoot on time and ready to go. For action

photo shoots, working with a real athlete is ideal. In fact, she says when doing arduous shoots, like shooting for the website, where the model is dressed in the apparel up against a white background for extended periods, it is “hard to work” with someone who is not disciplined and a professional. However, it is likely that this gap between thin and plus size will not be around much longer. The industry expert said that the growth in *athleisure* - wearing athletic clothing for fashion - as well as society placing more of an emphasis on being healthy and working out, has caused the fashion industry to respond by using healthy and fit models. She expects the growing demand for realistic expectations to make it is likely that the industry will respond to this as well.

The interviews answered the research question on how have the brands evolved to accommodate their audiences. According to the two experts interviewed it is not just the industry experts that have evolved but rather the fashion industry as a whole. Each of the experts have worked within the fashion industry for at least 20 years and have observed the models get healthier. Both the modeling agent and the artistic director agreed that this is likely due to societal changes, in their expert opinions. As society has progressed to a place where health is a priority the “standard of beauty” as Weiss referred to it has shifted to fit. Being extremely thin is no longer the desired look because it is an unhealthy look to be achieved by most body types. Additionally the artistic director mentioned that she often searches for a realistic looking model, one who the fans of their brand can actually relate to.

Focus Groups

Throughout the series of focus groups conducted for the purpose of this study, one of the unintended discoveries was that each group of athletes thinks of athletic clothing

slightly differently. The three different women's athletic teams interviewed for this study were; Women's Basketball, Women's Synchronized Swimming, and Women's Golf. For the most part, each group had very similar opinions on the advertisements. To understand and capture any preconceived perceptions about each brand, participants were asked to fill out a short survey which gave insight to their experience with Jolyn, Lululemon, Nike and Reebok. This questionnaire revealed that the basketball and golf teams were not aware of the brand Jolyn, the golf and synchro team were very big fans of the brand Lululemon, and that the basketball's most favorite brand was Nike. Most of the teams did not have too strong feelings about Reebok other than to say that it is old school, dated, or for an older crowd.

Basketball Team

For the basketball team the most well-known brand was Nike. This is because, as basketball players, they reported that they've always trained and played in Nike gear. A few of the five members of this focus group follow Nike on Instagram and two follow Lululemon. When asked what kinds of words come to mind when they hear the name of Nike, prior to showing them the Instagram images, most either said "powerful," "real athlete," "hard core training" or even listed off professional basketball players who are sponsored by the brand. For all other brands the general understanding was that they are more for fashion or for "looking cute" or even "mom yoga" as opposed to training and competing. When shown the series of images from Nike's Instagram page, though, their opinions altered. Most of the women in the focus group were disappointed by the poses that the models were in, and said they would prefer if they were more athletic, adding, "that's what they do with the guys" and another player commented, "why do they think

we all need to be half dressed? No one here has a shirt!” One player even mentioned that she wants to see a “sweaty pain face, the kind of face I made in practice this morning.” In the seven images collected, there was only one action shot of two people on a run but to the basketball team this still was not “athletic enough.” The image that the team struggled with the most was of a group of women dressed in leggings and sports bras posed with one another. The basketball team found this image to be too sexy. Members of the group all agreed that they would rather see Nike athletes than a group of female models posing in Nike clothing. When looking at the brand Reebok the overall opinion was, they were surprised by how much they actually liked the photos. Two of the images from the account - one of the pop artist Ariana Grande and the other of the all-female pop singing group 5th Harmony – were thought to be out of place or “random,” but in general, the basketball team was pleasantly surprised by the fact that Reebok made an effort to show women using their athletic skills. For the basketball team the focus group was their first time being exposed to the brand Jolyn. The majority of the group had a hard time “imagining doing anything athletic in a swimsuit” but appreciated that there was actual use of athletic-looking females. They thought that the account overall looked fun, even laughing at some of the images of women in roller-skates and swim suits. Additionally, the basketball players all agreed that even though the women in these advertisements were all in swimsuits, they did not feel that any of the photos were overtly sexy. For the brand Lululemon, most of the focus group members were able to identify Lululemon as a yoga brand, but all but one had little knowledge of the brand. When looking at the images they used words associated with yoga; “Zen,” “earthy,” “calm,” and “relaxed.” The basketball players also made a point to acknowledge that, although the women used in

Lululemon advertisements do not have shirts on, they do not feel that they are being objectified at all, even calling attention to the fact that each of the brands have photos that feature a woman in a bra and leggings with her face cut off. All of the basketball players agreed that the Lululemon Instagram posts were the least objectifying. The basketball team members did appreciate that Lululemon features the clothing being used for athletic activities, such as yoga and jogging, but also commented it was not appealing to the “hard core training” that they could relate to more easily. For research question two, are the brands objectifying the female athletes, the basketball team’s response was a yes for some brands and a no for others. They were surprised by how sexy some of Nike’s images were but equally surprised by how Reebok was more athletic than Nike. The basketball players overall could not relate to Jolyn or even to Lululemon because the accounts were directed at swimmers and yogi’s. The basketball players did not believe that sexualizing or objectifying a woman makes her more feminine and did not feel that it could be taken as a positive.

Synchronized Swimming Team

During the synchronized swimming (synchro) focus group there were actually a lot of similar opinions as far as which advertisements were liked and disliked, but not for the same reasons. Overall, the synchro team was familiar with each of the brands, but according to the pre-focus group survey, they had the most familiarity with Lululemon and Nike. Additionally, when asked what words come to mind for Nike, most said “Just Do It,” similar to what the basketball players most associated with brand. Interestingly, the synchro team members paid much closer attention to the body type of each of the women in the advertisements and took time to read the captions and discuss them; the

basketball players completely ignored the captions and focused on the photos. After viewing the Instagram of Nike, the synchro team members also had similar favorite and least favorite photos, but for varying reasons. The two least favorite were two images featuring a group of women with varying ethnicities and body types, which were called “random,” and “out of place” by the synchro focus group. One even asked whether the point of the post was to support some sort of pride event, and another commented that “no one works out in hoops” (hoop earrings). The synchro team overall did not feel offended by the sexiness of Nike’s advertisements, and did not comment at all on the women posing without shirts on.

The swimmers’ favorite photograph was of two people running together, in part because “the girl is beating the guy - I like that!” The basketball team did not notice this particular detail when they were viewing the Instagram feed, but did acknowledge that this one was the most athletic portrayal of a woman out of the 28 images. When the content from Reebok’s feed began to be passed around, one swimmer exclaimed “hell yeah Reebok!” and another stated that she is going to begin purchasing from this brand. In their pre-focus group surveys, most wrote that they viewed Reebok as either CrossFit or as “old school.” When looking at the content created by the brand, however, the swimmers responded very positively, saying that the women in this feed seemed as if they were “ready to crush some goals” and others in the group spoke about how much they loved the captions and Reebok’s official hashtag #bemorehuman. Overall the group liked the real women using the clothing for athletic purposes, showing the athletic female form but not in an objectifying manner and showing women in action. Although there were photos of celebrities in Reebok gear, this did not bother the team. They reported

viewing that as creating a diverse account in an effort to reach both fashion and leisure audiences. Even the photo with the female pop group bothered the synchro team less than the Nike photos and, when asked why they said the body language of the Reebok picture was more casual and less sexual than the multi-woman Nike image, they said it was because the women were not “all over each other.” When asked specifically about how Reebok uses the female form they simply responded “I like it” and that they “have real athletes, not models.” When wrapping up the focus group discussion of Reebok, one of the participants mentioned that they now intend to follow Reebok on Instagram.

During the Jolyn discussion the team overall said that they believed that Jolyn was half leisure and half fitness. They liked the newsfeed overall, and how happy, fun and colorful the content is. Although every advertisement is a woman in a swimsuit, the overall feeling that the swimmers get of Jolyn, based on the brand’s Instagram content, was that they are fun and not going for sexy. Some of the members of the swim team are from Europe, and they said that they are not used to seeing women away from the beach in swimsuits. However, a Brazilian swimmer and the few from California said that, to them, women in the city in a swimsuit is normal. These particular comments show that region affects how people view the advertisements, and perhaps the fact that the company is based out of California has an effect on the perception of the advertisement.

Additionally, swimmers commented on the fact that the brand tends to repost images that they are tagged in on social media and they like this because it shows that real people use the clothing, not just athletes; therefore, there is a good range of body types in the brand’s content. The team said that they found this brand to be overall the least athletic, but also

the most visually appealing because of use of color and the fact that in nearly all of the shots “the bodies are in action.”

Before even looking at the Lululemon Instagram content, multiple swimmers confessed that they “had Lulu bias.” It is important to acknowledge that on the pre-focus group surveys, most of the participants wrote “love” as a word that comes to mind when they hear the Lululemon’s name. The first few words expressed when the girls were looking at the images, again, were “calm,” “Zen,” “natural,” and “yoga-ish.” The synchro team thought that Lululemon’s content was spot-on for yogis, who they believe is the target audience. In contrast to how the basketball team felt, the synchronized swimming focus group actually said that they believed this brand’s content was athletic. Each of the teams happened to compare the Nike faceless woman advertisement to Lululemon posts, and each of the teams felt that the Lululemon one was not at all objectifying. Synchro team members commented that the Lululemon one was “not just showing boobs” and they like that the second photo of a woman in a sports bra was of a woman holding hands with someone, and that the caption was about friendship and teamwork. Additionally, one participant said that she liked that the woman’s eyes were not in the photo because the look on her face could have made it “more Victoria’s Secret.” Two themes within the synchro team focus group was that they like action shots and that the captions and hashtags matter. During the final discussion, members of the team said that they do not like to be necessarily sexualized “but they like to know that they look good.” Another member said that she believes that being a woman athlete is different than being a male, unable to use the words to describe exactly why but that she believes there are different body standards. She said, however, “it’s getting better in society.” One member brought

up the *Sports Illustrated Body Issue* stating that “the men are always athletic and women are always posed. Where is the sweat dripping?” and another asked, “Where is the hard work we see with the men?” When asked if they believed that when women were posed in an effort to keep them more feminine, research question number 3, they did say they believed the statement was true but unnecessary. “I hear a lot when a woman looks strong, people say she looks manly, and I don’t think that should be the case. A woman can be athletic and still look hot.” The synchro team focused in on the exact words that they like to be called and all agreed that they do not mind hearing that they are muscular, they know that they have strong bodies which they work hard for, but also mentioned that certain words like “big” are dependent upon how the individual associates the words themselves.

Golf

The women’s golf team seemed to have the most varying opinion among themselves, out of all three focus groups conducted. Although surprised by the lack of action photos from Nike, they had no issues with using a celebrity to advertise, and the group consensus was that none of the photos in any of the four Instagram accounts were objectifying at all. The golf team had the widest variety of body types on the team; one athlete is so small that she claimed she has a hard time finding athletic apparel small enough to fit, and several others whom expressed complaints about difficulties finding sports bras large enough, or skirts that will accommodate wider hips.

The women golfers actually had a few distinct opinions within the group. When it came to the Nike Instagram account all of the women agreed that the posts of just the shoes, and of the woman in a sports bra and leggings posed with her face cut out of the

frame, were “traditional Nike ads.” Team members actually loved the two photos that both basketball and synchro hated, the photos of women posing in a group dressed in sports bras and leggings. They commented on the diversity of Nike’s selection of models and did not find the poses to be sexual at all, however one of the older team members mentioned, “You wont see us or our teammates doing this, though.” One teammate, the only one on the team from Europe, said that she had expected to see more athletes, and another commented that she likes to see that the clothing is realistic so she would be willing to buy the product. After finishing up the discussion of Nike, the participants were asked if Nike fell into their previous impression of the brand, and every one of the members of the group said no. However they did not think that it was a negative. The golfers believed that Nike was using their platform as a worldwide athletic brand to promote diversity of body types, and actually saw overall Nike’s use of their social media as a positive.

Similar to the synchro team, the women’s golfers were fans of the authenticity or Reebok’s advertising. One even said “I actually expected to see this from Nike, not Reebok.” Most of the team, prior to viewing Reebok’s social media, thought of the brand as “retro fashion” rather than for actually working out in; another claimed she only thinks of Reebok as something her mom would wear. Although the golfers liked the realistic photos of women working out and found the content, overall, to be motivating to “get into the gym,” they did refer back to the fact that Nike had a larger variety of body shapes, and that this was something Reebok was missing.

Prior to this study none of these athletes had heard of Jolyn clothing, but team participants responded very positively to the content from the Instagram feed. They said

that, overall, the account looked like something fun and something they would like to follow. To the golfers, Jolyn did not look like it was only an athletic brand. They observed that, though some of the images had very athletic women, others were of “regular people” (non-athletes) and said they were actually fans of the diversity in the types of photos used in the account. The words used to describe Jolyn by the golf focus group were, “fun,” “cute,” “down to earth” and “relatable,” even though the participants were not swimmers.

Prior to even looking at the images, members of the golf team were discussing how much they love Lululemon’s skirts for golfing in. Most wrote that they think of this brand as expensive on their pre-focus group discussion surveys, but they overall think positively of this brand. When looking at the content posted by Lululemon the participants said that it was exactly what they all thought Lululemon would be, “very yoga and very positive” claimed one of the participants as all the others nodded in agreement. The women’s golf team liked that Lululemon looked true to their brand. They claimed the account looked like a Pinterest board, which they viewed as a positive. Lululemon is a brand that primarily appeals to women, as does the website Pinterest.

The golfers did not take issue with any of the posts being sexist or objectifying or for how they treated the women in the posts at all. In fact, only one member of the golf team felt that professional sports objectify women. The oldest member of this particular group, the one member who is in a graduate program, spoke on how the skirts for women golfers “get shorter every year” which according to her is an obvious objectification of the female form, but the others in the group did not seem to have any problem with shorter skirts; one even commented that she hems hers to be shorter. The primary focus

of the golfers was body diversity in the social media accounts rather than the portrayal of women in sport.

The focus groups were conducted to answer research questions two and three in regards to objectification of women in advertisements. Research question two asks if the participants believed that the athletic brands used in this research were objectifying the women in their content, and the answers varied. The basketball team and the synchro team did feel that Nike did make some of their advertisements too sexy, and that Nike was disappointingly un-athletic. The basketball team seemed to desire the most intensity and the most action out of all three groups. The basketball players were dissatisfied by the lack of “pain face” as one member phrased it. This team more than any other compared themselves to male athletes because they wanted to be portrayed as just as athletic as the men are in male athletic apparel advertisements. The synchronized swimmers agreed with the basketball team’s point that athletic apparel advertisements should portray women athletes. The synchro team stated that not every woman featured in an athletic advertisement has to be a professional athlete, but that they would prefer it be a woman who actually works out. Each of these teams desired authenticity in the advertisements rather than big hoop earrings and make up. Where the synchro team diverted for the other two teams was in reading the captions. No other team took the time to look at the captions and hashtags used but this impacted how this team interpreted the photos. In fact the brands Lululemon and Nike had very similar photos used where the female featured was in a sports bra and leggings with her face cut off, however slight variances in body positioning and the caption itself made the synchro team interpret the images differently. The synchro and golf teams each spend a lot of time discussing the

body types of the women in the images. The synchro team was fixated on wanting fit bodies for fitness advertisements, even of the bodies are of all shapes and sizes having muscle was an important aspect to them. The golf team however did not care for having a fit body as much as they desired a wide array of body types. Both the basketball and the synchro teams were disappointed by the Nike Instagram content because of how, in their opinions, un-athletic the content was. The golf team however praised Nike for using so many different body types, one of the golfers who claims to have difficulties finding bras to fit even admitted she would prefer to see the large women because it shows her that Nike creates bras for women who are her size or larger.

V. DISCUSSION

This research found that both the athletic advertising industry and female athletes are aware of and willing to admit that a positive change has occurred in the realm of athletic advertising. In both interviews the experts admitted that during their time in the industry the body standard and the beauty standards for female models have changed. Women are now a little fuller and the extremely lean look is no longer what most companies are looking for. In fact the second interview revealed that some companies are actually searching for women who know how to pose for a camera but who look more like their average consumer as opposed to a high fashion bombshell. Both methods of research found that both athletes and industry experts agree that the changes are fueled by society altering their perception of femininity. The overall consensus of the female athletes, as one synchronized swimmer stated, is “getting better in society, it’s gotten better, but we still are not there yet.” While acknowledging that females are actually now often portrayed as athletes, participants think they are still, at times, too glamorous or even too thin. For the industry experts who have been involved in athletic clothing advertising for years, the transformation of the female athletic model has been one of the largest changes in the industry. The “ideal” male model has had little to no change in the past few decades, however the female model has undergone multiple transformations. In its current phase, the desired look is of a healthy woman because this is what American society increasingly appreciates as beauty. There is still a lack of average body models - between thin and plus size - but according to industry experts, the growing demand will fill this void soon.

One of the overarching themes amongst all of the women's teams was that they wanted "action" in the photos posted because it provides authenticity. The posed photos seemed to get the worst feedback because they came off as inauthentic. Importantly, this is a study revealed that there isn't a monolithic female athlete. Female athletes in different areas had contrasting opinions about the exact same images. The golf team did not have any issues with the posed photos and did not feel that intensity was necessary to advertise to an athlete, but still would like some action. The basketball team seemed to want the most athletic portrayals in the photos – which they viewed as authenticity – out of all three groups interviewed, and this is perhaps due to the nature of their sport. Synchronized swimming is an artistic sport where the athletes are judged based on how they look while also performing very physically challenging routines in the water. To a synchronized swimmer, the aesthetic is a very important aspect of the sport and the training, therefore when women were smiling through their workouts in the photography used by the brands, it did not seem to bother this team as much. Golf is another sport where how the athlete looks is important. Though golf is not judged, there are dress code requirements and a part of the sport is keeping one's composure and looking professional. In basketball, there are dress codes for professional players to follow while entering the arena, but other than that, it is the most aggressive head-to-head sport out of the three interviewed. Research question two asked if the participants feel that athletic brands are objectifying the women in the advertisements. The answer to this question varied amongst groups, basketball and synchronized swimmers alike believe that some of the brands did and that some did not. Additionally, the golf team did not feel that any of the women in any of the advertisements were objectified at all and even do not feel that

female athletes are objectified in media. The synchro team admitted that they believe women are less objectified than they used to be, but are still sometimes sexualized and the basketball team felt that women are often objectified in an effort to sell product. The one thing that every athletic team had in common was the desire for a realistic portrayal even though group had a slightly varying opinion of what a “real athlete” is.

For future studies, it would be interesting to study the nature of practice and training for each of the sports interviewed to better understand the reasoning of the opinions developed by the athletes. All three sports had slightly varying points of view; it would be useful for marketers to understand why these athletes had slightly varying opinions and to study an even more diverse collection of sports. Elucidating the varying opinions from diverse athletic teams wasn't the goal of this research – the expectation was that female athletes would be more in agreement with each other than non-athlete females, and that seems to be largely true. But from a marketing perspective, the nuance identified here could be very valuable to brand marketers interested in, for example, pitching Reebok to basketball players or Jolyn to synchronized swimmers. This could not only add to the understanding of the results but also enrich the understanding of how to better target the different kinds of athletes that these brands are after in their advertisements.

Overall, the only team that was aware of Jolyn Clothing Company prior to being exposed to the brand during the focus group was the synchronized swimming team, likely because they were the only athletes who train in swimsuits on a regular basis. The basketball team even mentioned that they could not imagine trying to do anything athletic in a swimsuit, and therefore had a hard time viewing a swimsuit brand as an athletic

clothing company. However, according to the swimmers, Jolyn does an excellent job of representing all different sorts of female athletes in their images, while still incorporating the “fun” aspect that the brand is known for. Overall, swimmers enjoyed the “look” of the account and the bright color palette. Although Jolyn did not necessarily embody being “an athlete,” it still comes off as active. Even the golfers appreciated that the account used a range of women who appeared to be very athletic rather than what one of the athletes recognized as “recreationally athletic.”

When it came to the discussion of Reebok and Nike, each of these brands surprised the athletes in opposite ways. Though Reebok is associated with the CrossFit Games as the official sponsor, most of the women claimed to view Reebok as a “retro fashion brand” rather than as a brand for real athletes. After looking at the Instagram feed, though, all of the athletes said that their opinion of Reebok had changed. The basketball team still wanted more intensity and the golf team, more body diversity, but overall, most described Reebok’s feed as a positive surprise in their targeting of female athletes. Nike, on the other hand, was a shock to the female athletes because they expected more athleticism out of the brand. The basketball team made the point that the men’s Nike accounts involve a lot of action, sweat and real professional athletes who endorse the brand, but the women’s account was lacking real professional athletes. The Nike account, though diverse in body types used, did use only traditional models, which was a turnoff to many of the athletes. This, combined with the lack of action shots, was the reason most of the study participants – especially the basketball players – did not like the content pulled from Nike.

To the participants of each sport, Lululemon's content was largely on point with their expectations. Golfers were actually surprised to see a mix of athletic and yoga posts, but overall Lululemon didn't surprise them. Lululemon is a yoga-first brand that also has clothing lines for training and running, but the account as a whole was viewed as "Zen, calming and relaxing" by the athletes. Athletes from two of the teams, synchronized swimming and golf, even mentioned that the colors used in Lululemon's Instagram images are calming, and fit the mold of what one would expect for the brand.

One of the factors that affected how the women participating in this study viewed the women used in the accounts was the size of the participant herself. This was not one of the items asked in the data collection and was not predicted to be a factor, but it did come up often. Women who were larger than the average athlete seemed to appreciate body diversity more than the smaller women; additionally some of the slimmer participants even commented negatively on the use of larger women in advertising because they were "not athletic." The sport that the athletes came from factored into how the participants responded to the content used in this study, and even how they view society treats a female athlete.

When participants were asked if they believe that being sexualized helps for them to feel more feminine, research question three, the team that had the most to say on it was the synchronized swimming team. The synchronized swimming team spoke on body type a lot, but also objectification of their bodies. They discussed the fact that female athletes are still expected to be slim and beautiful and even admitted that, at times, they believe that being sexualized makes them feel more feminine. The basketball team felt more strongly about wanting more hardcore training incorporated into the social media

accounts. This is where the golf team really varied from the other two teams. The women golfers did not bring up objectification at all, and when asked about how each of the brands used the women in their content, none of them seemed to have any issues with women's faces being cut off, or even with the women appearing in a sports bra without a shirt more often than being fully clothed. During the golf focus group, when asked if they feel that female athletes are objectified at all, one golfer said, not at all. She commented, "Come on guys, skirts get shorter every year." But the rest of her teammates disagreed. Overall the two sports with the more rigorous training desired more athleticism in the content geared towards female athletes, because they said this would be more relatable to them.

As far as the terms to be used to describe athletic women, the synchro team and the basketball teams actually really liked to hear words such as toned, strong, athletic, and powerful. They actually admitted that simply being recognized as beautiful or recognized as pretty is nearly insulting when it is in relation to their sport. The women on these teams felt that they should be recognized for their skills as an athlete, just as a man would be, and place their beauty second. The synchro team did however express that there are certain words that they would not like to be recognized as in relation to their bodies including; big, muscular, and even masculine which they claimed is at times associated with being an athletic female.

Athletes and industry experts alike agree, there has been progress in the models used in advertisements, but they also agree that there is still a ways to go in order to be authentic in their advertising. Each of the industry professionals strongly believe that the change in the fashion modeling industry came from a societal change, an important,

bottom-up, demand-driven change. Society has grown away from believing that a woman's beauty can be determined by her waist size, and due to this change in beauty standards, the average model has changed to fit the new standard of beauty, which seems to be – increasingly - a healthy, happy, athletic woman.

APPENDIX SECTION

Interview questions

1. Are advertisements featuring attractive, athletic women intended to get women to buy the product or to increase sales to men through objectifying women?
2. Do the women in the ad report feeling objectified? Are they intended to be objectified or not? Do viewers feel that females are objectified in the ads? Do viewers say they want to be the women in the advertisement?
3. Do women aspire to reach the level of fitness that fitness models are at?
4. Do women choose to post their own bodies all over social media? Would they if they looked at the fitness model? Would it be in an effort to show off to men or women or purely because she is proud of her body?
5. When looking at fitness advertisement which is more important, the apparel or the model? Why?
6. Is sex being used to sell product? Is the product really what is being advertised? How necessary is it to focus on the product is the model more important?
7. Are there groups that feel isolated by the choice of model or message?
8. Are women in athletic advertisements sexualized or being used to empower women? Is it working for the female audience? Do women want to hold onto their femininity still? Do they care?
9. Are women's athletic advertisements "breaking the mold?"
10. Do women want to feel beautiful or athletic? Are they mutually exclusive or can you be both? Is femininity in ads important to woman? If an athlete looks pretty do you like her more?

1. What words come to mind when you hear each of the following brands (if you have never heard of one or more of these you may say so)
 - a. Jolyn
 - b. Reebok
 - c. Nike
 - d. Lululemon

2. Which of the following brands do you feel that you relate to the most?
(Please rank in order of least to most)
 - a. Jolyn
 - b. Reebok
 - c. Nike
 - d. Lululemon

3. Do you follow any of these clothing brands on social media, which brands?

Discussion of images:

Images were shown in the order Nike, Reebok, Jolyn and last Lululemon

1. How do you feel about (BRAND)?
2. When looking at the collection of images from (BRAND) do they fall into line with what your impression of the brand is?
 - a. If it is different, how so?
3. Who do you think (BRAND) is targeting with these images?
 - a. Describe the person you believe this brand is trying to appeal to?
 - b. Do you think they are targeting women like YOU?
4. What do you think when (BRAND) showcases the female form?
 - a. Do you find it to be objectifying or empowering?
5. So what do you think of being objectified?
 - a. Good? Bad? Attractive?
6. After looking at these ads do you feel/ view these brands differently.
7. The advertising industry is often criticized for its' portrayal of women and for over sexualizing them. Do you believe that the athletic advertising industry is objectifying the women in their advertisements?

Images are the first 7 images at 6:00 on September 14th 2017

Figure 1. Images From Nike Women Account

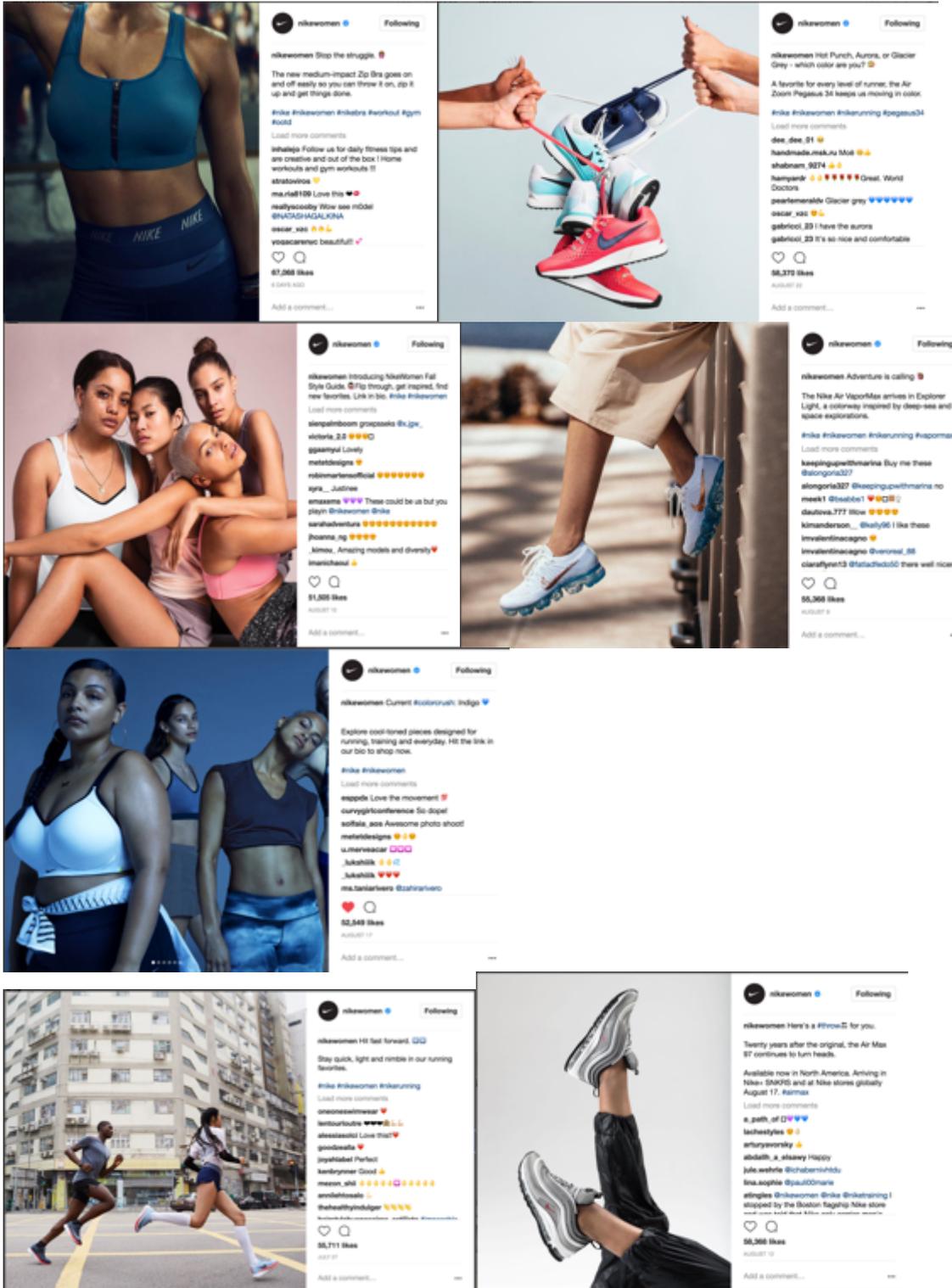


Figure 3. Images From Lululemon Athletica Account

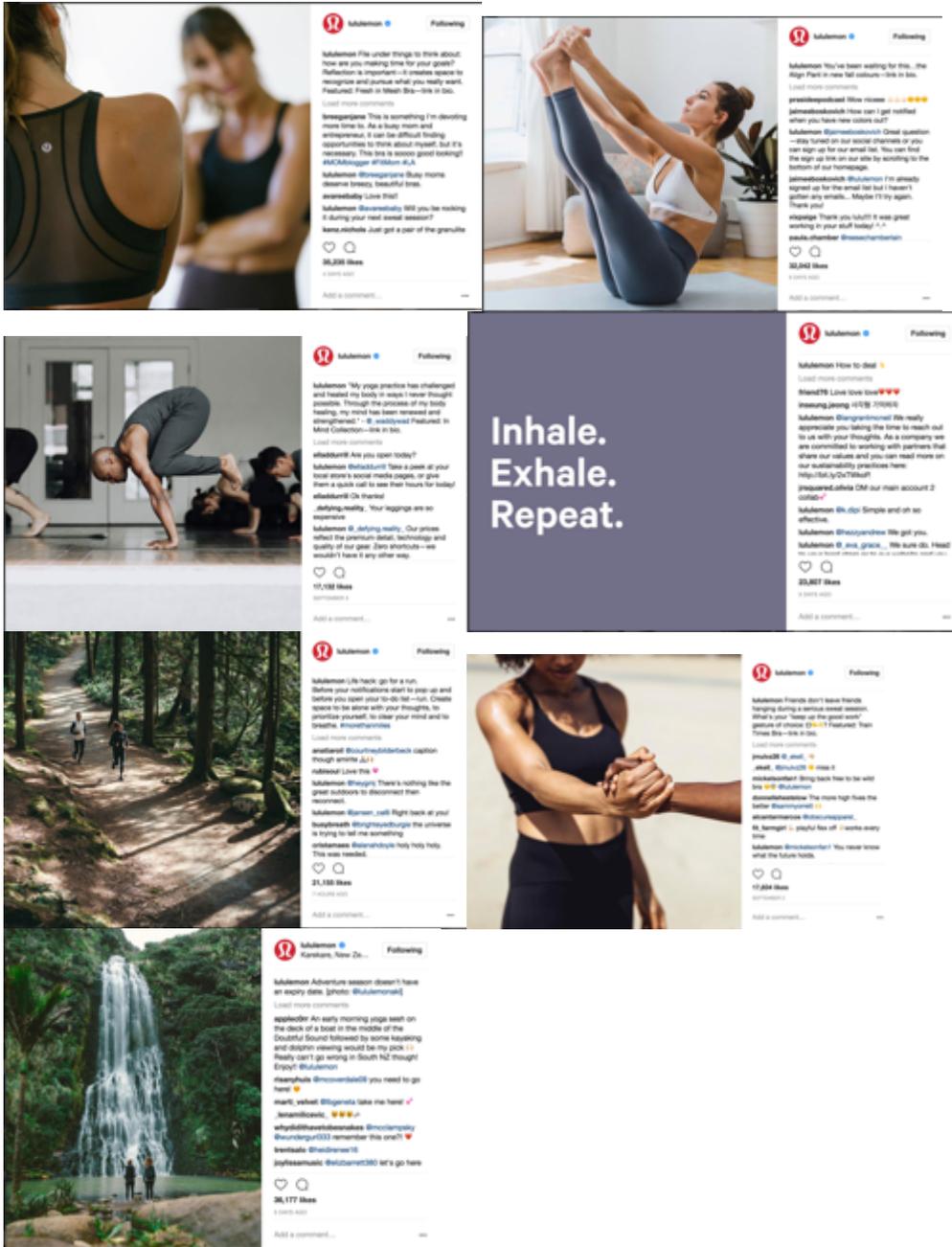
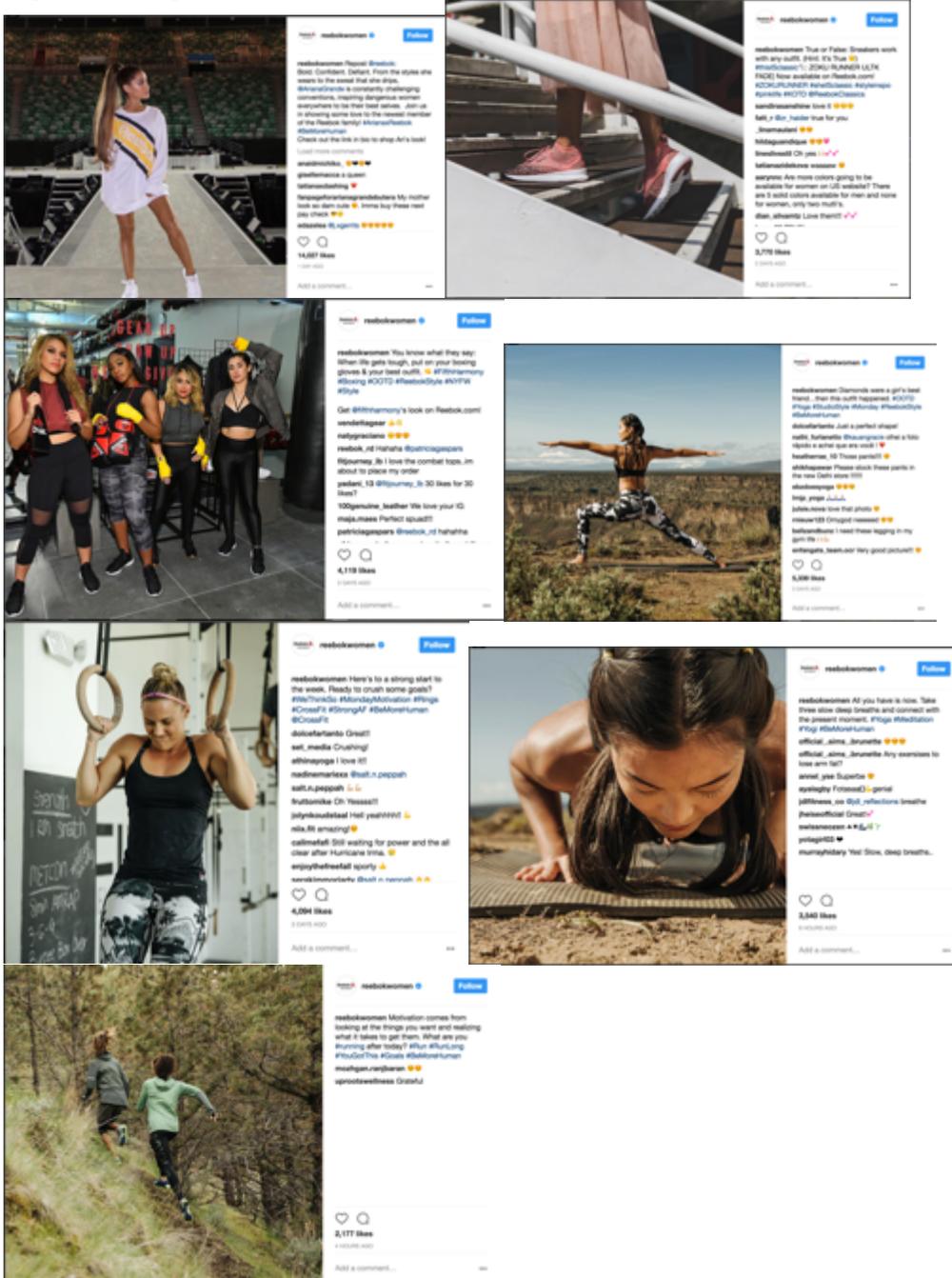


Figure 4. Images from Reebok Womens Account



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