

Influence of the Volleyball Uniform on Female College  
Athletes' Self Perceived Physical Appearance

By

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## **Abstract**

Female college athletes have always struggled with meeting the cultural norms of femininity and still performing as an elite athlete. Being strong and powerful comes with some aesthetic gains that not all females report being comfortable with. In this qualitative study, the researcher examines the experience of the female athletes in relation to the revealing volleyball uniform. This study also explores the relationship between how the athlete's self perceived physical appearance is affected in the sport as well as outside of competition. A previous study on Division I female volleyball athletes revealed a negative correlation between the uniform and the athletes' perceived physical self. This research replicates the previous study's methodology and design to find if there is a difference or similarity between Division I and Division II female college volleyball athletes' self perceived physical appearance. The results showed that Division II athletes may not perceive the same amount of pressure that Division I athletes do to conform to the feminine norms in sport.

*Keywords:* female collegiate athletes, body image, Division I, Division II, objectification, intercollegiate sports, revealing uniforms, self perceived physical appearance

MA Program: Kinesiology  
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## **Influence of the Volleyball Uniform on Female College Athletes' Self Perceived Physical Appearance**

The 1972 passage of Title IX, a federal law prohibiting sex and gender discrimination in educational institutions receiving federal financial support, led to a dramatic increase in the number of girls and women participating in high school and college sports (Coakley, 2008). As female sports participation has risen, female college athletes are becoming a more popular topic of research by scholars. Compared to organized, competitive, high school and college sports for males, female athletics is a newer phenomenon that is still in its developmental and growing stages in terms of its own identity, independent of the male influence (Grundy & Rader, 2015). Masculinity vs. Femininity is at the forefront of this research, but why is the research focus of the evaluation of male vs. female when it comes to sport? Compared to males, female athletes are more openly sexualized and objectified in and out of competition rather than being judged on pure skill and performance (Szymanski et al., 2010). Since female athletes are judged and evaluated differently than male athletes, with more attention to physical appearance, is it not safe to expect that the female athlete may experience strong connections to negative body image? Body image is very broad in definition and can encompass many varying dimensions. In this study, body image will be defined as the athlete's self perceived physical appearance.

With what is known about the objectification of females in athletic competition, this study looks deeper into the revealing volleyball uniform and its impact on Division II female college athletes' self perception of their physical appearance. A previous study by

Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, Bodey, Middendorf and Martin (2012) on Division I female, college volleyball players found a positive correlation, or more negative, between body image and the standard issue volleyball uniform (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). It is proposed that the same correlations will not be found when this study is duplicated because of a multitude of different variables: region, environmental differences, leadership on the team, and social influences. Steinfeldt et al. interviewed collegiate volleyball players competing at a Division I college on the East Coast. The expectations and pressures to perform at the Division I level are high. The East Coast has always excelled at women's volleyball and the leadership on the team would need to reflect this expectation for excellence in performance as well as overall standards regarding academics, public self presentation, representative of the institution, and media interaction . In comparison, this study focused on athletes from Northern California in Division II, whose slogan emphasizes its ability to provide a better balance between athletics and academics. Moreover, the participants in this study compete on a team with a lower expectation of athletic ability as compared to the Division I athletes, as well as the leadership on the team being more focused around hard work and team compatibility. Because of these differences, it is anticipated that female athletes in this study will have a different self-perception about their physical appearance and relationship with the their sports' uniform.

In 1964, volleyball was introduced into the olympics for the first time. From the sixties, there have been many changes to the volleyball uniform, the most notable change being the shorts for both men and women. As with other sports such as baseball and

softball, the female volleyball uniform differs from the male uniform. Despite playing the same sport, men's shorts are much longer in length, more similar to soccer uniforms. Tops worn can vary just like the women's, ranging from short sleeved, long sleeved or even tank tops. The main variance between the genders' uniforms is the length and fit of the shorts. Women's shorts are skin tight and end just below the buttock area. Men's are longer and more loosely fitting, ending just above the knee. To sum up, the female uniform is shorter and tighter than the male uniform, making it more revealing. These shorter and tighter shorts are known as spandex and an example can be seen in Figure 2, which displays a typical college female volleyball uniform. Figure 1 displays what a typical college male volleyball uniform is. See images below.



*Image 1. Typical College Male Volleyball Uniform*



*Image 2. Typical College Female Volleyball Uniform*

Steinfeldt et al. (2012) was the first of study to examine volleyball athletes specifically as related to body image and their uniform. This study revealed many new ideas on body image, but the main question that it addressed was about the athletes' experiences in the volleyball uniform. The Division I volleyball athletes experienced more discomfort than comfort in the uniform and continued to express feelings of "objectification" from the crowd at games due to the revealing nature of their uniforms. In the interviews they expressed their feelings of pressure to "look the part" of what a volleyball player should and if they felt their bodies did not fit that ideal, they expressed feelings of inadequacy.

One of the goals in replicating this study was to evaluate how the different collegiate athletic divisions in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) may play into how much pressure the female athletes perceives. For example, it's logical to

think that a Division I athlete will feel more pressure to perform at a higher level than a Division II athlete due to the demands of competition. There is limited research exploring this potential difference in pressure experienced, however this may prove to be a factor that influences the relationship between athletes' self perceptions of their physical appearances and their sport's uniform. Another reason to replicate the study is that region can play a big role in social pressures (Sutor & Carter, 1999). This could be a contributing factor as well into why Division II volleyball players may not feel the same amount of social pressures to conform in their volleyball uniforms.

Many pieces of research in the past have shown how much the coach and teammates can influence a team's dynamics. This was not a factor mentioned much in the previous study but could be another difference of influence for the athletes' body image. Studying Division II athletes will reveal many new and interesting findings regarding female athletes' self-perceived physical appearance that were not found or as closely examined with Division I athletes.

## Review of Literature

### College Female Athletes

Much of the scholarly community has recognized the exclusion of the female athlete from much of the research on sports and athletics. Therefore, we still have limited information on the experiences and meaning female athletes have about competitive intercollegiate athletics. Researchers have begun to be more interested in how athletes perceive their body, specifically female athletes. College female athletes can be defined as any female participating in competitive sports for their university. Krane et al.'s, (2001) study interviewed many college athletes and avid exercisers. Among the athletes and avid exercisers there seemed to be no difference of self perceived external pressures to conform to the cultural norms of femininity. While each female expressed pride or some level of satisfaction with their well trained and highly functioning bodies, they all also described some form of body dissatisfaction (Krane et al., 2001). Krane and her fellow researchers attributed this to the social comparison context or the cultural ideals that females have of their bodies. When only comparing themselves to the sport or thinking of their bodies as highly functioning athletic “machines,” most reported feelings of satisfaction. Whereas, when female athletes compared their physical appearance to non-athletic females, the athletes voiced concerns about their body size and shape.

In a different study by Varnes, Stellefson, Janelle, Dorman, Dodd, V., and Miller (2013), the researchers found that even though females involved with athletics seemed to increase their positive body image, athletic participation did not make as big of a difference for females involved in more traditionally “feminine” sports (e.g., gymnastics,

figure skating) and athletes' competing at higher levels such as NCAA Division I. These females still reported greater levels of body dissatisfaction and feelings of inadequacy when it came to body ideals in their sport. One factor that contributed to increased pressure, such as being on a Division I team compared to a Division II team, might raise the athletes' insecurities about their bodies, supports this new angle of research presented in this study.

Many factors can contribute to why female athletes have conflicted views of their body. Those factors can be just as much internal as they are external (Denny et al., 2009). Coaches, parents, friends and fellow athletes all can contribute to building that self-perceived physical appearance, separate from their performance capabilities (Coppola et al., 2014). Also published in 2014, Homan and Tylka's study looked at the relationship between exercise frequency and positive body image. Competitive athletes' frequency of exercise is higher than the norm, paralleling Homan and Tylka's conclusion. What they found was that an increased amount of exercise was positively related to an increase in positive body image. Conversely, Homan and Tylka also found that, "high levels of appearance based exercise motivation weakened these relationships (2014)." Thus, this could lead us to believe then that if female athletes remain more focused on performance and functionality over aesthetics, they could simultaneously see an increase in positive body image.

### **Uniforms in Female Sports**

The amount of appearance based pressure placed on women in their day-to-day lives can not be quantified. Pressure comes from multiple sources such as

social media where body shaming females is prevalent. Magazines where models who are over a size six are considered “plus size” and in a world where the female body is overly sexualized in commercials, on TV and billboards, adds up to a lot of constant triggers for women to conform. Female athletes are not above this objectification, so it would make sense that when placed in small, revealing uniforms such as the volleyball uniform, scrutiny about their bodies would increase. Steinfeldt et al.’s, (2012) study focused on the volleyball uniform and how it affected the athletes’ body image. The researchers in this study focused on qualitative data based on the athlete's beliefs about their body as it related to sport and as it related to cultural norms. The women in this study reported feeling satisfied with their bodies as athletes, but also an increased amount of pressure to conform to mainstream feminine norms when compared to their peers who weren’t athletes. They expressed feelings of being “masculine in comparison” to their smaller, more petite friends (Steinfeldt et al., 2012). When discussing their bodies in relation to their uniforms, many of them reported feeling uncomfortable because of how revealing the outfits are. One athlete reported,

“I wasn’t thinking as much about the game as I should have been. I was thinking about, you know, what I looked like and what people were thinking about me instead of focusing on what I need to be doing for the game, or what I should be mentally preparing for the game. I would be worried, pulling my spandex down so I wasn’t falling out of them. Or pulling my jersey down so people wouldn’t see my stomach or my hips. It would take away from my concentration definitely.”

This was only one athletes’ rendition of feelings of self consciousness in the revealing volleyball uniforms. (Steinfeldt et al, 2012, p.15)

The common excuse for the design and cut of the volleyball uniform design is usually “functionality.” Many coaches, athletes, and parents involved with volleyball

explain that you are able to dive better, move on the net better and not worry about getting caught on anything. Aspects of this may be true, but if they are said to improve performance why are males not expected to wear a similar uniform? Feather, Ford and Herr (1996) examined female college basketball uniforms and how they affected the athletes' body image. Their study revealed that women felt more comfortable overall in the bigger, less revealing uniform. As the athlete's weight increased, so did their dissatisfaction in the uniforms. The body shape that expressed the most satisfaction with the uniforms were the ectomorphs, i.e. persons with a lean and delicate body build. Although males and female take part in competitive interscholastic and intercollegiate basketball, many still view basketball as a more stereotypically masculine sport versus volleyball. Because it is perceived as more masculine, Feather, Ford, and Herr believe this may be why the basketball uniform remains the same for both genders, male and female. Feather, Ford and Herr (1996) state that, "Uniforms contribute to gender role definition. Sports such as tennis, golf, and ice skating that emphasize skill, grace and beauty are considered to be more feminine and have greater social approval for women. Basketball, track, baseball and football, which emphasize strength, body contact, aggressiveness and endurance, have less social approval for women." Now in the last twenty years, we may speculate that these norms have changed or grown. However, as true as that may be, these stereotypes remain in some form and often pressure female athletes to be feminine and to avoid being overly masculine (Fink, 2015).

## **Femininity vs. Muscularity**

The theme of femininity versus masculinity runs deep in most studies about female athletes. Under most social contexts, being a female in sport is contradictory to feminine norms where being fragile, dainty, and small are seen as a “strengths” or assets. Over the years it has grown to be more and more accepted as the participation of women in sport has become increasingly common (Czyz, Szmajke, Kruger, & Kübler, 2016; Bibel, 2012) . However, being both a woman and a strong athlete are not always accepted as coexisting characteristics. Krane et al. (2004) researched the following question: “How do female athletes negotiate and reconcile the social expectations surrounding femininity with athleticism?” Their study revealed that many of the female collegiate athletes felt marginalized and were perceived as being different from other woman. The athletes also, however, conveyed that they were proud of their strong, muscular bodies and stated that they felt empowered even beyond the context of sport (Krane et al., 2004). Steinfeldt et al.’s study (2012) revealed similar findings about conflicting body image for the female athletes. One of the athletes in this study stated that

“I definitely feel like I’m a lot bigger because we’re working out so much and because we’re lifting weights all the time. I definitely feel like we have bigger bodies compared to women who don’t, which can be a little, you know, makes me a little self conscious because I feel like a man sometimes because you’re just building so much muscle and constantly working out and then you see the little petite women who are a lot smaller. So I guess it could make me feel a little more on the manly side.” (p.18)

This athlete’s experience mirrors the ideas in many of the athletes’ perception of their bodies in relation to sport. Although masculinity has been given a negative connotation to

females in sport, some women saw it as empowering to be stronger, faster and maybe bigger, but the majority saw it as a downfall.

### **NCAA Division I vs Division II**

Not much research has been published on Division II athletes compared to Division I. This study on Division II female athletes would be helpful in conjunction with Steinfeldt et al's research on Division I athletes. Previous studies have found that a higher stress environment like Division I, where athletes may receive larger scholarships and receive significant media coverage, could be the main contributor to higher levels of body dissatisfaction, or simply higher levels of pressure to conform to a variety of perceived feminine stereotypes. The 2013 study from Varnes et al. concluded that with higher levels of competition like Division I, body image concerns increased. In 2011, a study was conducted using both Division I and Division III female collegiate athletes (Kato, Jevan, & Culpepper, 2011). In this study it was found that a significantly higher percentage of Division I athletes were in the subclinical eating disorder range in comparison to the Division III athletes. Additionally, this study discovered that when asked directly about their overall appearance, more Division III than Division I athletes reported being very to somewhat dissatisfied with their appearance. The results from this study display conflicting outcomes; while the athletes competing at a higher level reported higher levels of disordered eating, the Division III athletes reported higher body dissatisfaction. Because of this continued conflict of research findings when comparing athletes, this study looks to further investigate, and possibly resolving, these contradictory data.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were members of the a NCAA Division II Women's Volleyball Team on the Western Coast of the United States. Thirteen female athletes agreed to participate in this study. All females interviewed for this study were required to wear the uniform in practices as well as in games. Participants reported playing volleyball for five years or more with the average being 9.3 years. The age range of participants was between 18 - 21 years old with the average age being 19.8. No participants were asked to report their height or weight.

<b>Class Status</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Volleyball Position</b>	<b>Years Played</b>
Sophomore	20	Setter	8 years
Senior	21	Defensive Specialist	10 years
Freshman	18	Setter	6 years
Freshman	18	Defensive Specialist	10 years
Junior	20	Outside Hitter	10 years
Sophomore	19	Libero	11 years
Senior	21	Middle Blocker	10 years
Junior	20	Defensive Specialist	10 years
Sophomore	20	Right Side Hitter	6 years
Freshman	18	Outside Hitter	6 years
Senior	21	Outside Hitter	10 years
Senior	21	Setter	10 years

Senior	21	Middle Blocker	10 years
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*Table 1. List of study participants*

## **Procedure**

Research was conducted in accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards. The methods used in this study attempted to replicate key components used by Steinfeldt et al., (2012) for the sole purpose of keeping the two studies as closely related to each other as possible in order to compare Division I and Division II female athletes. Steinfeldt et al. acknowledged the limitations in their study as will this research; however many of the procedures of the study remained the same for the sake of comparison. Steinfeldt et al., (2012) constructed a series of ten questions that they felt would give the most conclusive look into female athletes' self perceived physical appearance. The questions used were gathered from short informal interviews with athletic trainers, coaches, and other peer athletes. For this study, I conducted all the interviews with the athletes. All participants signed an informed consent form, notifying them they would be subjects of research and would remain anonymous. The athletes then sat for interviews. These interviews took an average of ten minutes per participant. All questions were opened ended, giving the options for simple yes or no answers or the ability to elaborate if they so choose.

	Interview Protocol
Question #1	Please explain how you feel about your body, as it relates to you as an athlete on the court.
Questions #2	Please explain how you feel about your body, as it relates to you as a woman outside of sport.

Question #3	Explain how being an athlete contributes to how you feel about your body as a woman in society, particularly in comparison to women who don't play sports.
Question #4	We are interested in understanding how you think you look in your uniform, so please explain how your uniform contributes to how you feel about your body. Do you like how you look in your uniform?
Questions #5	Have you ever felt like you needed to do anything to change your body in order to look better in your uniform in front of other people? Please explain.
Question #6	Explain how comfortable you feel in your uniform performing in front of an audience of spectators.
Question #7	What were your early impressions of the uniform, and how did that impact your decision to play volleyball?
Question #8	Explain how you think that your uniform helps or hinders how you perform on the court.
Question #9	Explain how the way your teammates and competitors look in their uniform impact how you feel about your body (and perform). Please feel free to include whether impressions/comments by teammates or competitors impact how you feel about your body.
Question #10	Is there anything else you can add that might help me to better understand anything we've discussed so far?

*Table 2. Interview Protocol*

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were audibly recorded and transcribed by the researcher. After the transcription of all interviews, the data was carefully analyzed and coded. As in Steinfeldt et al., (2012) this study relied on consensual qualitative research (CQR) methods to analyze data. CQR's core components include open-ended questions (typically interviews), multiple judges throughout the data analysis process, consensus to arrive at judgments about the meaning of data, and employing domains, core concepts, and cross-analysis during data analysis (Hill et al., 2005). After I

completed the initial reading to identify broad domains, I reviewed the domains to break down interview data into core ideas. After I developed my core ideas, a second reader coded the interview data, to either confirm, eliminate, or modify core ideas. Utilizing the established core ideas, I re-read the transcripts to uncover themes. The second reader also analyzed the data for themes and concurred with the themes identified by me.

Although both readers were aware of the domains from Steinfeldt et al. (2012), they attempted to analyze the interviews without predetermined domains, core ideas, or themes. The Steinfeldt et al. study categorized their data into four specific domains: domain one = expectations of volleyball body/uniform; domain two = uniform distraction/affirmation; domain three = perceptions of others comments; and domain four = social comparison.

## Results

In this study on Division II women's volleyball team, four dominant themes emerged. These themes are labeled (a) *feminine expectations* (b) *compare without compete* (c) *the spandex complex* and (d) *strong is female*.

### Feminine Expectations

This first theme addresses how the volleyball players consistently expressed their understanding of their bodies in relation to being a woman or the social norms that they hear and see about femininity. Some expressed feelings of loving their bodies and loving their curves, or in contrast, some reported feeling uncomfortable in their bodies or feeling self conscious or inadequate. Ten out of the thirteen females reported only positively about their bodies, liking that they are athletic and strong. As one eighteen-year old athlete stated,

*...the better I know my body as a woman, the more comfortable I get with myself, but like the more time I put into my body, the more I workout the more confident I am, I don't know how to explain it but you know what I mean haha.*

This athlete did not disassociate being feminine with being an athlete. They were one in the same to her and by being an athlete she is learning more about her body and in essence learning more about being a woman.

Theme: Feminine Expectations	Year and Age
I'm very comfortable in my body, I like my body and I like how I feel as a woman.	Sophomore, 20 years old
I think for the most part I'm pretty confident in my body, I've always been slightly taller than average and it's always been an insecurity, but for the most part, volleyball and playing sports and using my body in a	Sophomore, 19 years old

way that gives me an advantage makes me feel good about myself.	
I guess being an athlete I've always felt taller and stronger than people who don't play sports in general obviously, in terms of being attractive, since I was always taller and stronger than the guys when I was younger that was kind of an issue but now it doesn't matter as much to me and I care more about how I perform.	Junior, 21 years old

*Table 3. Feminine Expectations*

Several of the athletes reported feeling out of place growing up, but eventually discovered a place that normalized (and valued) their bodies - sports. However, as the quotes above demonstrate, despite coming to view their bodies positively, the female athletes are aware of and feel measured against standard gender expectations of femininity, This where being smaller, shorter and more petite are seen as good qualities.

Interestingly, a few interviewees mentioned feeling out of place because of their tallness as well as their physical strength, which were seen as a masculine trait. When younger, possessing these more “masculine” traits was seen as a downfall by the athletes. However, upon finding sports, volleyball in specific, the women discovered that their physiques had a place to fit in. Since volleyball values height, e.g. in 2016, Division II women's volleyball the average height was 5'10" with 34% at 5'9" or less and 12% at 6'1" or taller (HS Athlete Guide, 2016), the female athletes shared that being taller made them feel like a woman and powerful even though their physical appearance was different from social norms.

### Compare without Compete

The “compare without compete” theme emerged with nearly every athlete (with the exception of two). This theme overlaps somewhat with the previous theme, “feminine expectations”. Eleven women reported some awareness of others’ bodies, but almost immediately noted that they were not jealous or offended by not looking like the other person. This was a theme that emerged frequently in relation to question nine. One athlete reported,

*Well I see that we are all wearing the same kind of uniform maybe like different sizes but were all kinda equal because we are wearing the same thing so I don't think like, “oh this girls looks better in my jersey” it's like no we are all coming out to do the same thing we are all wearing the same thing and here is a team and I look over and look at the opponents jerseys but it doesn't really impact me in any way, I don't think of it that way.*

While this athlete can recognize that someone else might look good in the uniform, it does not have to bring her morale down.

Theme: Compare without Compete	Year and Age
I don't really look much into that because I'm pretty confident in my body. I definitely do notice that seeing people who don't play sports are a lot less muscular. I don't really look into it as anything bad or anything but I notice myself being stronger than most people.	Junior, 20 years old
I guess when you see your teammates it's natural to compare your body to theirs but it's never affected me in a super negative way even though I might be like “oh I wish I looked like her” or something but i've never been super self conscious of it like I don't wanna be out here or something.	Sophomore, 19 years old
Um sometimes I feel a little bit self conscious of my stomach area like I know it should or could be flatter but it's never affect how I've played or me not wanting to play or anything. We all have things we wish we could change about ourselves but I mean it's never affected how I think	Sophomore, 19 years old

of myself. It doesn't over take me in a way, like, that I don't want to put the uniform on or play or anything.	
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*Table 4. Compare without Compete*

Comparison of women has always been a piece of how mainstream ideas of femininity have been enforced and sport is not an exception to this. Nonetheless, the female athletes provide perfect examples of compare without compete. They acknowledge or recognize beauty in someone else without letting it become a negative reflection on her own self perceived physical appearance by focusing on their purpose on the court as opposed to their appearance.

“Compare without compete” also speaks to the fact that the female athletes in this study were not just comparing themselves to other peers on the court, but just to that basic ideal femininity that they have in their head. The participants’ statements of “should or could” correlated to the pressure to conform to gender expectations - and that pressure does not exist in a vacuum. Whether adherence to feminine norms serves as driving or motivating force for these athletes, the concern about conforming remains present in their minds. Even in an accepting space like sports, the athletes still express concern or awareness that they “should” look like as a woman.

### **The Spandex Complex**

“The spandex complex” theme speaks to the tensions the female athletes experience around their volleyball uniform. On one hand, they state how the uniform aids their athletic performance; on the other, they express some self consciousness given the uniform’s tight fit and short shorts. The spandex complex theme was seen frequently in answers of the participants with eight out of thirteen girls reporting that

the spandex might help improve their volleyball performance. In the first two responses in the table below, the participants' response to the uniform being helpful or not when it comes to performance (question 8), exemplifies the athletes' views on the functionality of the uniform.

Theme: The Spandex Complex	Year and Age
I think it helps how we perform on the court because it's easy to move in because everything is tight but like still moveable and breathable. Like if we were in basketball shorts it would probably be a little harder cause those are a little more restricting I think.	Senior, 21 years old
I think that if anything the uniforms are designed to help you play the sport better, just like in swimming you wear a cap to help you swim faster I think that just wearing tighter uniforms that doesn't have any loose fabrics that may get in the way or weigh you down or anything may irritate you so it's tighter to your body. And maybe it helps you go faster and it is a very contact sport and moving around tons and sweating tons so wearing less material may help to so you're not overheating yourself.	Junior, 20 years old
Um, I think that playing in any other uniform would have a negative affect because I like that our uniforms that they are tight and short spandex because you don't feel them and I feel like it makes me play better but same thing I feel like if I'm being watched I feel differently about it like diving for a ball and I feel like my butt's gonna hang out of my spandex or something like that so again it just depends if someone's watching or not.	Freshman, 18 years old

*Table 5. The Spandex Complex*

The third athlete's experience with her uniform ties both into "the spandex complex" as well as "compare without compete." As the athlete stated, playing in anything other than spandex would be more difficult or not as effective as the current volleyball uniform. However, she also shared that despite the efficiency of spandex,

diving on the floor in them makes her nervous about revealing her body to the spectators for fear of exposing herself to the spectators' gaze. Like other interviewees, this athlete noted that the presence of someone watching her perform on the court, impacted her comfort with certain actions critical to success in the sport, e.g. diving after a ball.

### **Strong is Female**

The theme of this section, "strong is female" was something I saw/heard heavily throughout all thirteen females interviews. Even if athletes mentioned insecurities about the bodies or their bodies in uniform, they always expressed their positive correlations between physical strength and being a woman/feminine. One 21 year old participant said, "I think that my body shows that I'm an athlete, I think that I'm proud of that, that my athletic participation contributes to my overall health and my physical appearance." This pride that she mentions directly links being a female athlete and feeling proud of the body she has. This athlete did not feel the need to decipher between what is female and what is strong, they were one in the same to her. Similar sentiments came from the participants and in response to all ten questions.

Theme: Strong is Female	Year & Age
Being an athlete makes me feel very different in society because I feel like people look at me differently and it helps me have more confidence because people, I feel like people put more confidence in me cause it's like, "well she's an athlete like she's in better shape.	Freshman, 18 years old
...or it definitely gives people a different look at me which helps me be more confident especially compared to other girls that don't play sports I feel like people see them as less capable of doing physical activity	

I feel more beautiful and confident when I'm stronger.	Senior, 21 years old
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*Table 6. Strong is Female*

The athletes commented that just by being intercollegiate athletes, people held them to a higher standard of physical performance both on and off the court. Their physical strength and fitness gave the female athletes confidence in other areas of life and served as a source of pride. Being strong and being feminine didn't come across as two independently functioning mechanisms.

In fact, becoming stronger was a goal mentioned by several athletes. In part, to improve athletic performance, but also because of how they felt when they were stronger. For these female athletes, strong does not equal masculine, and therefore, they don't express concerns about building their strength and becoming less feminine. Responding to question 1, "Please explain how you feel about your body as it relates to being an athlete on the court," the participants often mentioned their goal of becoming stronger.

Theme: Strong is Female	Year and Age
I would like to be stronger, I know that, always stronger, but other than that though that's the only thing I just wanna be stronger.	Freshman, 18 years old
I would like to be stronger, I know that, always stronger, but other than that though that's the only thing I just wanna be stronger. I love how my body looks, feels and performs when I'm strong.	Freshman, 18 years old

*Table 7. Athletes' Feelings about Their Bodies*

## Discussion

The results of this study are enlightening in an area that is not studied much, females in NCAA Division II intercollegiate sports. One of the main things to highlight in the discussion of these findings is how they are relatively different to the original study by Steinfeldt et al. (2012). Steinfeldt et al.'s conclusion was much more organized around the mostly negative body image in relationship to the volleyball uniform. The reports of most females in the 2012 study were centered more around the negativity and pressures to look a certain way.

There could be many reasons for these differences between the two studies, but one that seems to be the most obvious would be the difference between Division I and Division II athletes. The pressures that are placed on the Division I athletes with most games being broadcasted live, to the larger fan base and more spectators. This addition alone could significantly raise the participants feeling of pressure for their bodies to look a specific way in the uniforms. In the results of the Steinfeldt study the researchers stated, "the results of this study suggest not only that players perceptions about their uniforms influence their body image but also that these form fitting spandex uniforms affect volleyball players performance on the court. Participants described the amount of time they dedicated to adjusting their spandex and worrying about how they looked in these revealing uniforms" (2012, p.21). This same pressure was not mentioned by the Division II female volleyball players in this study. Three players reported feelings of discomfort in relation to the uniform, but it

seemed to come more from a place of make or fit, not because of the revealing nature of the uniform.

Another way that the studies are different; in 2012 there was seemingly a lot of mention about spectators heckling and harassing the athletes about their bodies. Whether it was making fun negatively or drawing sexualized attention to them, there was no mention of this type of spectator behavior from the female athletes in the current study. One reason for this could be that in the last six years, there have been rule changes on heckling in intercollegiate athletics. It is far less tolerated now at college sporting events, especially when the crowd is smaller and easier to maintain, like the Division II university where this study was carried out. This change could have dramatically limited the amount of heckling happening at the games and therefore the athletes reported less of it in this study.

In the Steinfeldt et al. (2012) study, they mention that there is a deep correlation between female volleyball players self reports and another study done on waitresses at a Hooters restaurant of them both being sexually objectifying environments (SOE). They draw the correlation by stating that the first two criteria for SOE are met in female sports where the power base is inhabited mostly by men such as the coaches and athletic trainers and that the environment of sport is still heavily associated with masculine traits like individualism, competitiveness, and aggressiveness. This was not a finding from the current study. None of the thirteen female athletes reported feeling objectified or overly sexualized by the uniform or by the constructs of the sport. This could again be drawn back to the point that Division

I sports demand is so much higher than Division II. The stakes are higher and the opportunities are bigger in Division I sports than in Division II. This could be a possible reason for why the original study showed such a greater amount of pressure and stress when related to the female body and the need to conform to social norms.

The current study revealed a much more positive overall perception of self from the athletes. They reported overall to be more confident and comfortable in their skin than the participants from 2012 did. This women's team also seemed to state much more about health and fitness in relation to strength and sport. They were forthcoming on topics like exercise and fitness being a priority over physical appearance. Many females reported caring much more about performance, training, gaining strength and improving their skills, more than changing their appearance. This was not a theme seen in the original study. A couple participants mentioned feeling good as an athlete in relationship to the sport but that outside of that athletic context, they struggled with feeling good enough. One athlete from Steinfeldt study (2012) said that she felt "like a man" because of how muscular she was and that she wished she looked more like the other women she saw who did not participate in sports, much thinner and smaller all around. This did not stand out in the current study. In the current study, more participants reported the desire to be strong and the want to place performance over aesthetics.

### **Limitations**

There are a few limitations when it comes to this study. The wording of some questions could be perceived to be slightly leading or biased in the way they were

phrased. In efforts to keep the study as close to the previous for comparison purposes, the questions were not rephrased.

Another possible limitation of this study was that I, as the researcher, have a professional relationship with eight out of thirteen of the participants. I worked as the strength and conditioning coach for the women's volleyball team for two off- seasons. In this time I got to know a few of them and they got to see and learn my style of coaching and training. This could have influenced them to hold back on anxieties or insecurities that they may feel, but did not want to be forthcoming about. The fact that I was asking them the questions may have kept some of them from being as transparent or may have swayed some to give an answer that they thought I would like or appreciate.

The last limitation was that the room where the interviews took place was not kept as quiet as desired. This could have been distracting or caused more pressure to be quick and give faster answers rather than being fully thought out.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion to this study done on a Division II women's volleyball team in the western United States, as female sports participation has risen, female college athletes are becoming a more popular topic of research by scholars. Compared to organized, competitive, high school and college sports for males, female athletics is a newer phenomenon that is still in its developmental and growing stages in terms of its own identity, independent of the male influence (Grundy & Rader, 2015). Compared to males, female athletes are more openly sexualized and objectified in and out of

competition rather than being judged on pure skill and performance (Szymanski et al., 2010). This study on collegiate women helped to shine more light on females in research and give a voice to women in sports.

Learning what women's self perceived physical appearance is in relationship to the volleyball uniform in this study helped see that there is possibly less pressure on Division II athletes than there is on Division I female athletes to conform to social norms of femininity. It's probable that these female athletes did not feel the pressure to conform due to many reasons but one constant seemed to be that the women as a team were very focused on performance more than aesthetics. They reported many times being proud of their strong bodies as well as being happy with being seen as an athlete.

Future research needs to be done to continue to push the boundaries on what female "norms" are in sports. More research needs to focus on women as their own beings and less on comparing them to masculinity as the standard. Female sports should carry their own standards and continue to push the social constraints. The more we compare apples to oranges the more we can find differences. Women are not just "little men" playing sports. Women have a completely different set of strengths and weaknesses, completely different genetic makeups and completely different ways of managing the tasks at hand. More research should be done to highlight women in sports not just so that more men can learn, advocate and support their female counterparts, but so that more young female athletes can see more women come

before them, learn from their successes and help teach the next generation how to do better.

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