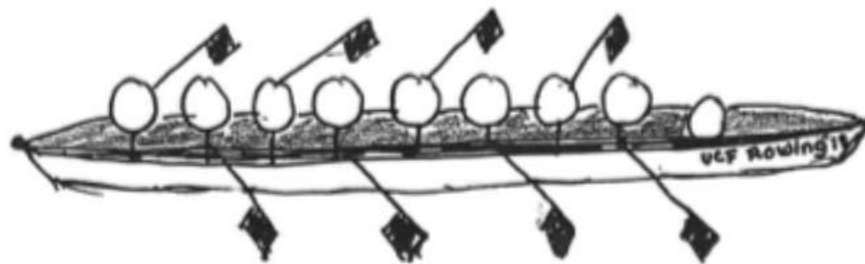


**‘Where Are the Female  
Athletes?’: An Investigation  
of College Student Perceptions  
of Gender Representation in the  
Media**

Maria Yim

As a student-athlete at the University of Central Florida, I am very familiar with the conversation of women in sports. Because I am both female and an athlete and this affects me personally, I felt that I could contribute a unique and genuine study to this long-discussed academic conversation.



I began this semester with this question in mind: how are female athletes portrayed in the media, and how does that affect young girls' participation in sports? Gender inequality in sports is a very broad topic that encompasses much more than I could hope to address in a single research study. Because I faced limited time and resources, I narrowed my research to focus specifically on the question,

## how are female athletes represented in sports media?

According to Dayna B. Daniels, "Investigating the variety of roles for women in [sports media] may tell us a great deal about the struggles that women athletes face today" (2005, p. 33). The way that female athletes are portrayed in the media directly reflects the lack of respect and opportunities that they face in comparison to male athletes.

From my own research I discovered that most people are not familiar with female athletes, even if they are actively involved in sports themselves. Thus, I came to the conclusion that **the immediate issue isn't how female athletes are portrayed in the media, it is that they are rarely represented.** This project will demonstrate my path of research as I searched for new knowledge to contribute to this conversation.

- 1** First, I will show academic articles that give evidence to the unequal treatment between male and female athletes and address the quality of the media coverage that female athletes do receive.
- 2** Next, I will continue this research with the methods and results of three separate studies that I conducted at the University of Central Florida.
- 3** Finally, I will identify key facts and evidence from my research and propose future opportunities to continue the conversation.

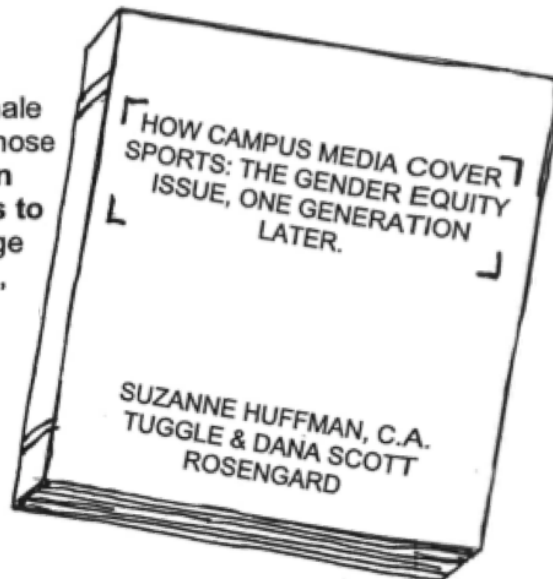
To find an answer to my question, I began researching articles about  
women in sports.

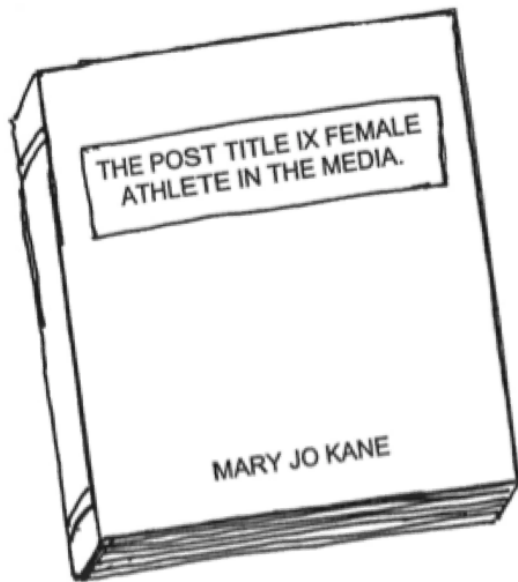


"The central purpose of the study was to examine post-Title IX high school basketball players' perceptions of female athleticism" (Shakib & Dunbar 358).

"Shakib and Dunbar found that **high school students viewed girls' basketball as 'less than' boys' basketball** and that girls' basketball had lower social value, even though the girls' team ranked higher than the boys' team at this particular school" (Cooky 260).

"College newspapers covered male athletes and events in 72.7% of those stories, and **college television devoted 81.5% of those stories to males**, though 41% of all college athletes are female" (Huffman, Tuggle, & Rosengard 482).

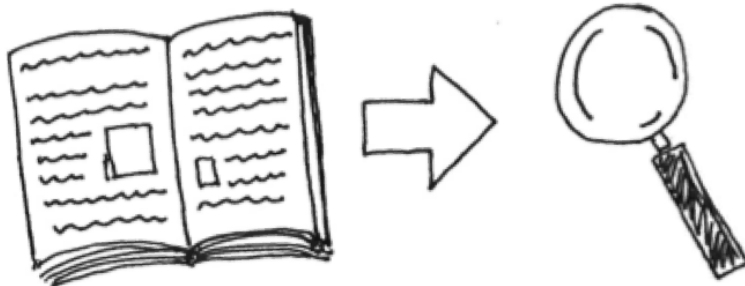




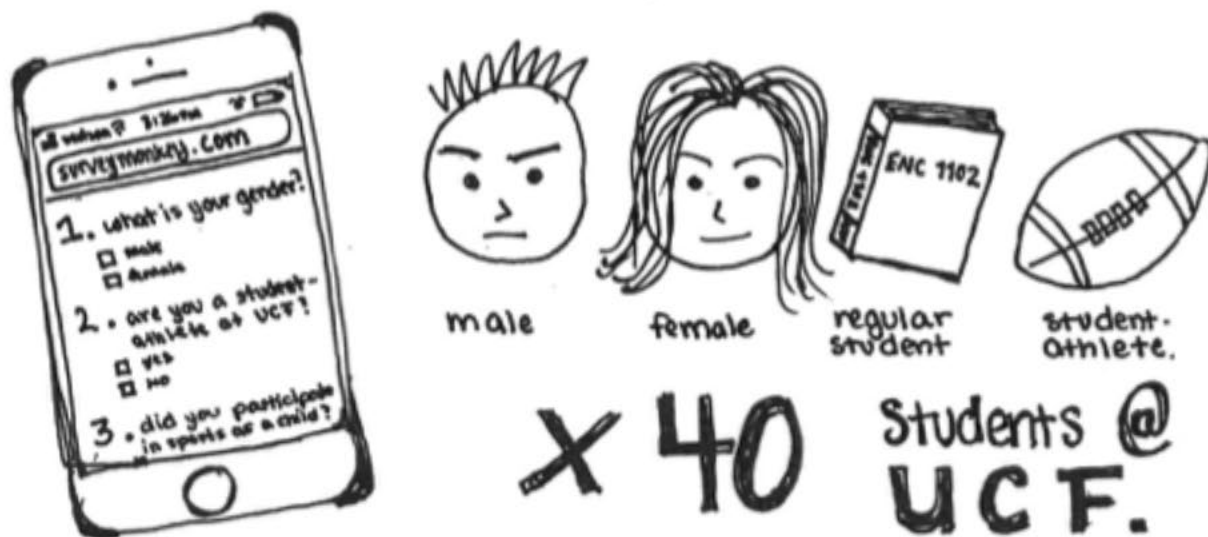
"There are two important themes that run throughout the mass media literature on female sport involvement. The first is that female sporting events and **female athletes are grossly underreported and thus underrepresented** throughout all mass media. In many cases, this underrepresentation is so severe that it creates the impression that females are primarily absent from the sporting scene. The second major theme is that even when young girls and women are portrayed in the media, they are often presented in traditionally stereotypic ways" (Kane 59).

search "women in sports"

As I read these articles, a few studies caught my attention. **These studies would eventually guide my own research.** I wanted to discover if those findings were still true today, and if they were relevant among the students at the University of Central Florida.



I conducted a survey with UCF students to determine three things: How familiar they are with female athletes, how popular women's sports are among UCF students, and how female athletes are portrayed in the media.



I also conducted an interview with a fellow student-athlete, Amy. As discussed in Shakib and Dunbar's study of high school basketball players, basketball is a sport that sheds light on the unequal treatment, opportunities, and popularity between men's and women's teams and/or players. I chose to interview Amy because I knew that she previously played basketball, and I wondered how her experiences would compare to Shakib and Dunbar's research.

Here is what I found out:



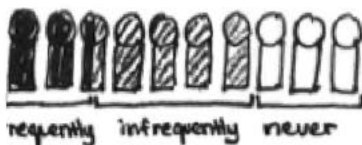


"DO YOU BELIEVE THAT MALE AND FEMALE ATHLETES ARE REPRESENTED EQUALLY IN THE MEDIA?"

**100%** ☒ **NO,**  
MALE ATHLETES RECEIVE MORE REPRESENTATION

"HOW OFTEN DO YOU ATTEND..."

WOMEN'S vs MEN'S SPORTING EVENTS?



**SURVEY RESPONDENTS**

**95%** Participated in sports as a child. (most popular sport = basketball)



MARIA Y,  
Interviewer

Have you ever felt uncomfortable or unaccepted playing sports, because you are a girl?

YES. In high school I would play with a lot of guys in my class. Even though we were friends, they would give me a ton of crap about being a girl playing basketball.

Basketball appears to be a male-dominated sport. Do you feel that you received the same opportunities and support as the boys who also played basketball?

I would say less. The boys' basketball games were a lot more popular. The only time that the girls' games were more popular was after the regular season when the boys' team was not playing.

Did you have any athlete role models when you were young? Did you look up to any famous athletes?

Are there any female athletes that you look up to now?

Do you think that it is important to have role models in sports?



AMY V, UCF  
Student-Athlete

I always really looked up to my cousin, Ashley, who played softball here at UCF. I also really liked Dwight Howard, who played for the Orlando Magic when I was younger.

I'm still not very familiar with any professional female athletes, other than Serena Williams.

Absolutely. If we choose someone great as our mentor (and role model), eventually we might become great ourselves.

Though the results from the survey and interview confirmed my suspicions, I still felt that I was missing a piece of potential research, and was not contributing new evidence or knowledge to the conversation. I had previously intended to perform a content analysis with popular sports media sources; however, I could not even find enough content about female athletes to analyze! I didn't think that a content analysis would be possible with the limited time and content until I read the study of campus media performed by Huffman, Tuggle, and Rosengard.



Upon reading *How Campus Media Cover Sports*, I was inspired by their research, and realized that while looking at ESPN and NCAA, I was missing the perfect research opportunity that was right in front of me!

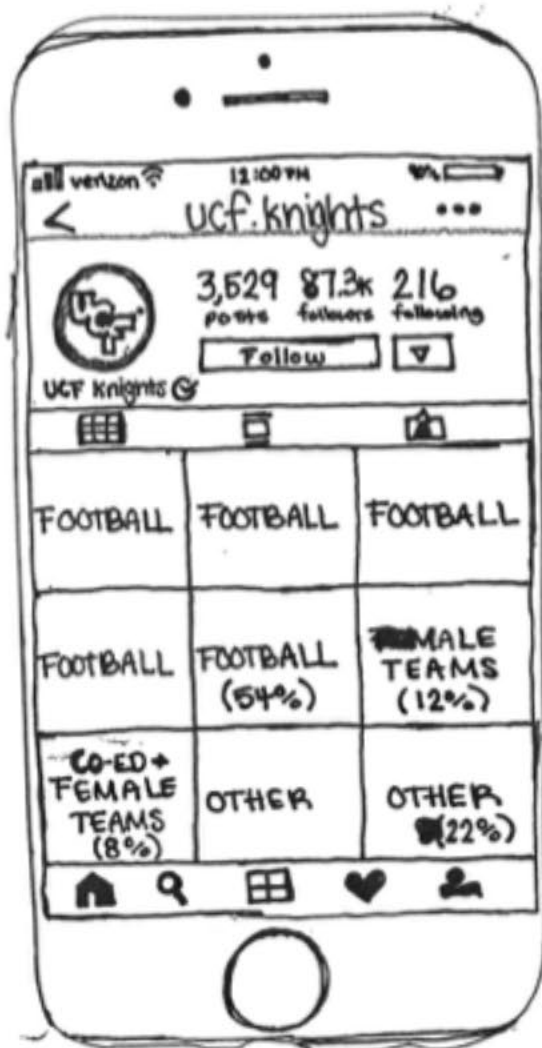
I chose to analyze the UCF Knights Instagram page. This account is responsible for promoting all of the official athletic teams at the university, and it is the most popular social media platform of UCF. I recorded every photo posted in 2018 (from January 1<sup>st</sup> – November 30<sup>th</sup>) and categorized them by athletic team.

Here are the results:



# @ucf.knights

The official Instagram of UCF Athletics. ✕




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371 total posts

248 posts promoting male teams  
(202 posts about football)

29 posts about female teams

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There were more posts about **ESPN College Gameday** than about any sport outside of football or baseball.

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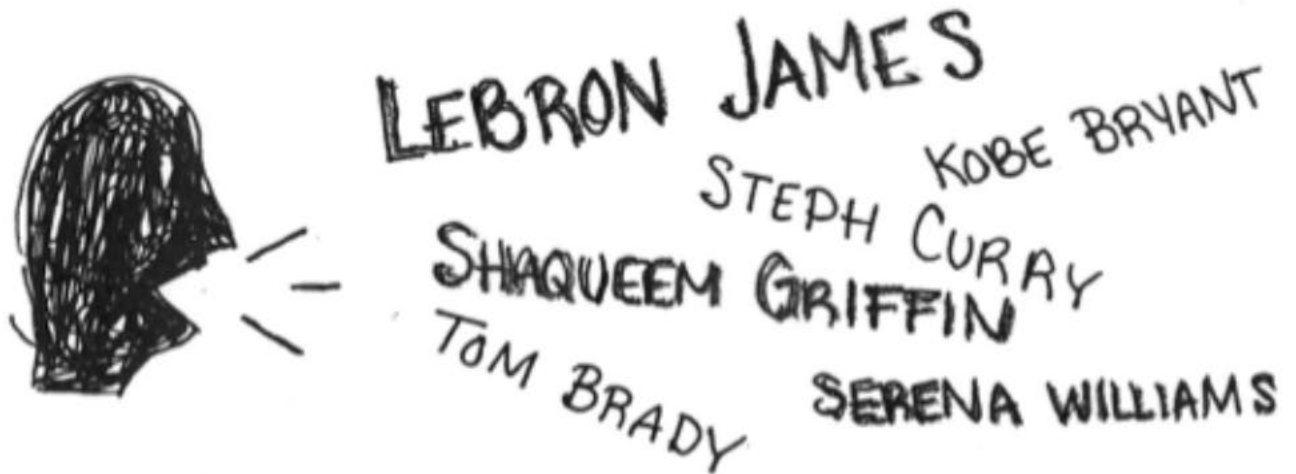


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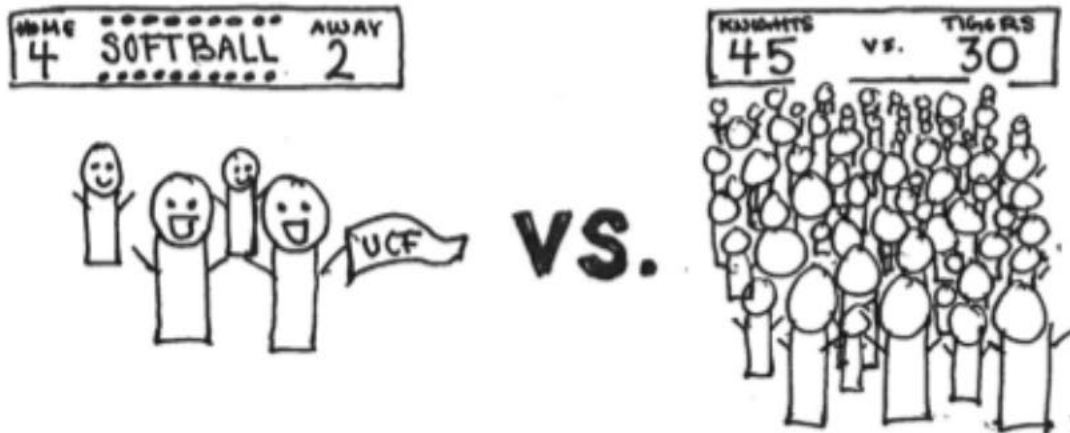
The **volleyball** team won 24 consecutive matches and broke multiple school records, yet was only featured in **5 posts**.

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After reviewing the results of the survey, interview, and content analysis,  
5 key points became clear:



Most people (even those who play sports)  
are not familiar with female athletes.



Women's sports appear to be less popular and do not  
receive the same support as men's sports.



□ FEMALE ATHLET  
■ MALE ATHLETE

**Female athletes only receive a small fraction of media coverage compared to male athletes.**



**Even when women's teams are equally successful as (or more successful than) men's teams, they do not receive equal coverage.**

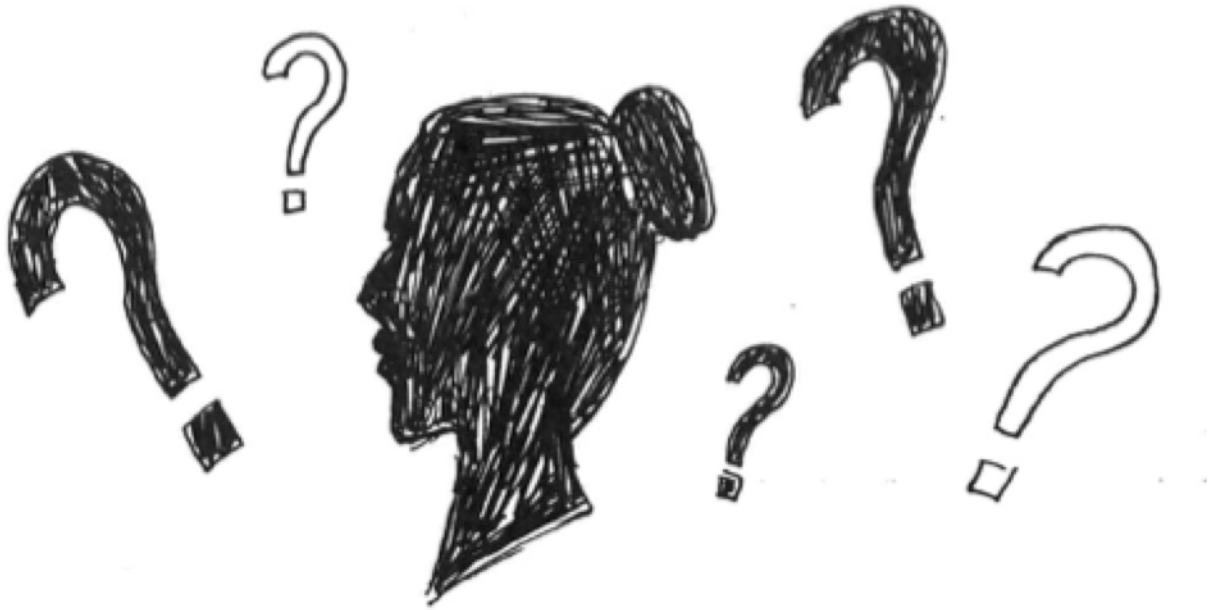


**Unequal media coverage is not only a large-scale issue; it is just as relevant in smaller, local sports media coverage.**

At the conclusion of my research, I began to wonder if my research question should not have asked *how* female athletes are portrayed, but instead asked *where are the female athletes?* The reality is, they are everywhere! Women *are* active participants in sports, and they are achieving an equal amount of success as male athletes. However, many people do not recognize female athletes and are not even aware of this.

I was shocked at how little survey respondents knew about female athletes.

I admit that I too was only familiar with a few female athletes (mostly famous Olympians) prior to beginning this research project. It is no wonder that people don't know who those women are since they will rarely see them recognized in the media.



My own local research only scratched the surface of this global conversation. With more time and more resources, greater research could be conducted and even stronger statistics and results would be discovered. I think that future research questions should address not only how often female athletes are represented in the media, but also how they are actually portrayed.

## Q & A

Q: How are the words, stereotypes, and descriptions of women in sports different than those of men?

Q: Are male and female athletes portrayed with an equal level of respect?

Q: Are women's sports actually less popular or enjoyable?

Q: What other factors could lead to the drastic statistics regarding attendance and support for male versus female sporting events?

Those are all questions that I kept returning to throughout my research process, and there are many more questions waiting to be asked. However, when looking into the immediate future, I do not believe that the most important step moving forward in this conversation will be to conduct more research. First, we must make an effort to raise awareness of the inequality between men and women in sports, and actively work to increase representation of female athletes and balance the scales.



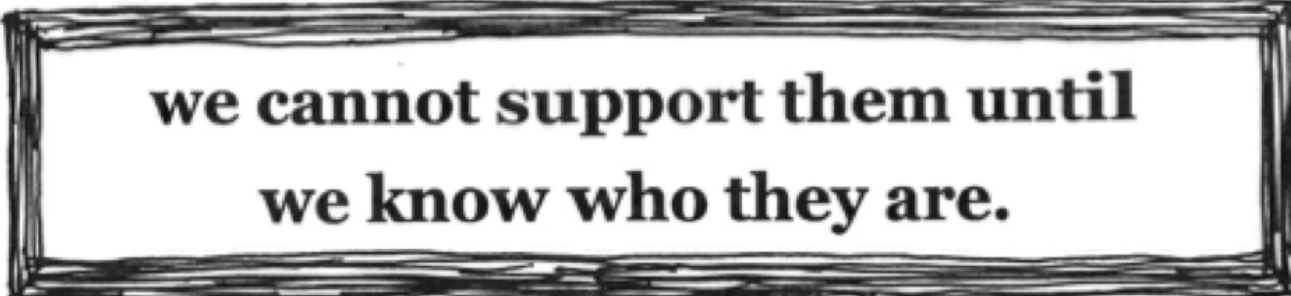
How female athletes are portrayed in the media is only a small part of a much larger conversation. There are many things that must happen in order to reach gender equality in sports, including equal pay, an equal level of respect when speaking to (or about) female and male athletes, and equal opportunities for young girls and boys to participate in sports. No one thing can single-handedly solve this issue; however, the media is perhaps the most powerful and influential tool in today's society, and we cannot solve gender inequality without first addressing equality in the media.

Every day women and men compete at the highest level of their sports, breaking world records and accomplishing incredible feats, but only rarely will you see the face of a female athlete not overshadowed by the crowd of male athletes.



**Female athletes are not only under-represented, they almost don't exist in the world of sports media.**

Until the media begins to promote women in sports and give them the recognition that they have earned, we will not reach gender equality in athletics. Female athletes deserve to be heard, seen, and recognized, but



**we cannot support them until we know who they are.**



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### **Maria Yim**

Maria Yim is a junior at UCF studying Hospitality Management. She loves watching and playing sports, and is proud to represent UCF as a member of the Women's Rowing team. After graduation she plans to pursue a career in either hotel management or sports business management.