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Female student leaders: An examination of transformational leadership, athletics, and self-esteem

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ABSTRACT

The present investigation examined differences between NCAA Division I female athletes and non-athletes concerning self-esteem and transformational leadership traits. Participants were 635 women who completed an online survey including the Student Leadership Practices Inventory and Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale. A logistic regression analysis predicted athlete status from self-esteem and the leadership scales *Model the Way* and *Enable Others to Act*. Latent profile analysis revealed three distinct leadership and self-esteem profiles; differences in the profiles emerged among athlete and non-athlete groups. Female athletes are more likely than non-athletes to be categorized into profiles reporting higher levels of self-esteem and leadership characteristics. This paper adds to the growing literature on female athletes who are leaders.

Emerging adulthood, often coinciding with university attendance, represents a period in which individuals develop traits that transfer to adulthood (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). Leadership is a trait cited as integral for success (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016) and optimal to introduce in the college period (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). Longitudinal data shows students who participate in collegiate leadership programs demonstrate growth in multicultural awareness, civic responsibility, and career-specific competencies (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Posner, 2009). In athletes, leadership development programs improve performance, communication, satisfaction, and motivational climate (Duguay, Loughead, & Munroe-Chandler, 2016; Voight, 2012). The present investigation will examine the extent to which NCAA student-athlete status relates to certain leadership qualities.

Previous research has debated whether or not organized athletics builds desirable psychosocial characteristics (Aries, McCarthey, Salovey, & Banaji, 2004). Leadership qualities are anecdotally cited as important for athletes, but there is little research concerning athlete leadership (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016; Fransen, Vanbeselaere, De Cuyper, Vande Broek, & Boen, 2014). Much of the existing literature examining leadership in athletics focuses on the leadership of coaches, but rarely student-athlete leaders (Crozier, Loughead, & Munroe-Chandler, 2013). Other studies investigate team captains, but ascertain that captains are not considered the sole leaders on their respective teams (e.g., Fransen et al., 2014). Thus, leadership characteristics in collegiate athletes is an area of study that requires further development (Crozier et al., 2013).

The literature linking athletic participation to leadership traits is inconsistent. Among 3000 university students, student-athletes showed higher levels of interpersonal skills and leadership abilities (Ryan, 1989). Pascarella and Smart (1991) found similar results, in which athletics was positively associated with leadership. However, in a more recent sample of 141 MBA students, there were no differences in leadership among those involved in organized sport and those uninvolved (Extejt & Smith, 2009). Other studies have indicated mere athletic team participation may not increase leadership traits across a playing season (Grandzol, Perlis, & Draina, 2010). Although it is unclear if athletic participation is linked to leadership development, collegiate athletics does provide unique opportunities for all players to assume leadership roles (Loughead, Hardy, & Eys, 2006).

Collegiate co-curricular group experiences offer more than formal leadership roles; they may foster the development of both transformational and transactional leadership skills (Rosenbusch & Townsend, 2004). The transactional leadership style tends to emphasize a clear chain of command; the leaders, comparative to managers, introduce rewards in exchange for followers' efforts and cooperation with leader requests (Gomes, 2014; Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Arguably more effective, the transformational leadership style is used to increase follower interest and motivation for the benefit of the group beyond personal self-interest (Bass, 1998). Transformational leaders are exceptional in their use of a variety of leadership behaviors, rendering them more effective than other types of leaders (Bass, 1998; Gomes, 2014). Ultimately, these leaders influence the group so members are given the tools necessary to become leaders themselves (Gomes,

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Table 1
Frequencies of sport type among athlete participants.

Sport type	*n*	Percentage
Basketball	8	4%
Cross country and track	58	29%
Fencing	1	0.5%
Field hockey	7	3.5%
Golf	5	2.5%
Gymnastics	5	2.5%
Rifle	1	0.5%
Rowing	2	1%
Skiing	1	0.5%
Soccer	28	14%
Softball	30	15%
Swimming/diving	19	9.5%
Synchronized skating	7	3.5%
Tennis	8	4%
Volleyball	20	10%

Note. Only 200 of the 235 athletes indicated their respective sport.

2014; Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Although many different leadership styles apart from the aforementioned traits exist (Northouse, 2003), not all styles are optimal for the college environment (Posner, 2004). Therefore, transformational leadership traits will be the focus of the current study.

Posner and Kouzes (1988) developed the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (SLPI) as a measure of transformational leadership specifically tailored for college students. The SLPI has been used in several college student populations, such as Greek-affiliated students, residence assistants, orientation advisers, and members within certain academic areas of study (Posner, 2004). In residence assistants, fraternity, and sorority members, scores in SLPI subscales positively correlated to leadership qualities and were responsible for 80% of the variance in leadership effectiveness (Posner & Brodsky, 1992, 1993, 1994).

Transformational leadership is a multidimensional construct (Connaughton, Lawrence, & Ruben, 2003) and must be reflected as such through measurement. The SLPI measures transformational leadership among five key qualities; *Model the Way* (i.e., setting an example while setting standards for excellence), *Inspire a Shared Vision* (i.e., creating a vision for the future of a group and encouraging others to join in the vision), *Challenge the Process* (i.e., using innovation to improve a group), *Enable Others to Act* (i.e., through mutual respect, fostering collaboration), and *Encourage the Heart* (i.e., recognizing contributions). Each of these qualities was developed through content analyses of traits used by effective leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 1987).

The SLPI has been used in NCAA Division III athletes to examine leadership traits across a playing season (e.g., Grandzol et al., 2010), but has not yet been used to examine leadership qualities in NCAA Division I student-athletes as compared to non-athlete students. Differences among divisions have been found with regards to leadership preferences (Beam, 2001). Given that Division I athletes typically receive more funding and resources (NCAA, 2015), Division I athletes may have more opportunities to develop leadership qualities. Moreover, Division III athletes sampled in Grandzol et al. (2010) were students enrolled in private institutions, which may have different leadership initiatives, programs, and student makeup than the public university sample utilized in the current study.

Not only is there a lack of research concerning leadership characteristics in student-athletes, but female leaders specifically. Traditionally, sport leadership has a dominant masculine identity (Burton, 2015). Title IX has been effective in providing females more opportunities to participate in sport, but females evidence fewer formal leadership positions in athletics (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). The year after Title IX was enacted, 90% of female teams had female coaches, whereas in 2014, only 43.4% of female teams had female coaches, and 97% of men's teams were coached by men (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Females often cite fewer leadership opportunities and being viewed differently than male leaders as barriers to leadership development (Davis, 2007). Because males typically hold coaching positions and current research tends to focus on coach leaders, this exacerbates the lack of research regarding female leaders in sport.

1. Self-esteem

Having confidence in oneself has been endorsed as a characteristic of transformational leaders (Davis, 2007). Self-esteem is consistently defined as the extent to which an individual values oneself (Rosenberg, 1965). Athletic participation provides opportunities to learn skills, make social connections, and increase sport competence (Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2007). These factors may be associated with increased self-esteem (Can, 2014).

Research concerning the relationship between athlete status and self-esteem is mixed. Early literature indicated an unclear relationship between self-esteem and athletic participation; specifically, athletic participation related to high self-esteem in male athletes, but low self-esteem in both female athletes and non-athletes (Mau, 1995). A more recent study of 227 university students found student-athletes had higher levels of self-esteem than non-athletes (Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2009). This finding was supported by Hudd (2000) in that athletes had higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of perceived stress. However, this particular investigation defined an athlete as an individual who engages in exercise for one hour daily, which is likely quite different from student-athletes participating in intercollegiate athletics. These inconsistent results may likely be attributed to differences in the definition of the athlete and mixed gendered samples. The present investigation will improve on the literature through focus on female college students and refining athlete status to NCAA Division I student-athletes.

It is still unknown as to whether athletes have a distinct profile apart from non-athletes concerning transformational leadership traits and self-esteem. Most researchers use a variable-centered approach to determine relationships between constructs; this is advantageous in some scenarios, but can neglect how outcome variables differ among subgroups of participants (Pastor, Barron, Miller, & Davis, 2007). The current study will use Latent Profile Analysis to examine how

Table 2
Independent *t*-tests comparing student-athletes and non-athletes on the SLPI.

	Overall sample ($n = 635$)	Athlete		Non-athlete			
	M(*SD*)	*n*	*M*(*SD*)	*n*	*M*(*SD*)	*t*-test	Cohen's *d*
SLPI-challenge	22.01(4.12)	170	22.37(4.08)	370	21.83(4.13)	$t(538) = 1.40, p = 0.17$	0.13
SLPI-encourage	23.22(4.09)	171	23.77(4.03)	366	22.96(4.10)	$t(535) = 2.15, p = 0.03$	0.20
SLPI-model	22.43(3.89)	173	23.03(3.73)	371	22.15(3.95)	$t(542) = 2.47, p = 0.01$	0.23
SLPI-enable	23.59(3.37)	172	23.59(3.08)	364	23.58(3.50)	$t(534) = 0.03, p = 0.97$	0.00
SLPI-inspire	22.16(4.26)	170	22.63(4.27)	367	21.94(4.25)	$t(535) = 1.74, p = 0.08$	0.16
Self-esteem total	20.84(5.20)	194	21.64(5.33)	398	20.43(5.11)	$t(590) = 2.67, p = 0.01$	0.23

Note. M = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; SLPI = Student Leadership Practices Inventory.