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**Why Age Matters: Aged Gender in the Identity Work of Female Youth Athletes**  
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**Intro:** Functioning as our “social skin in social space,” clothing enables both the expression of pre-existing identities and the construction of new ones (Pomerantz 2008:18). Age and gender are important components of identity, and their intersection contributes to the varied nature of femininity. Through my research on female youth soccer players, I examine the relationship of sports clothing to the girls’ identity work, specifically in regards to their experience as aged and gendered subjects.

In this paper I ask the following questions: 1) How might the clothing practices and preferences of nine- to thirteen-year old female soccer players reflect their presently held identities, and how do the girls choose or modify sports clothing in order to facilitate identity construction? 2) How and why does age matter when considering the girls’ gender identity, or their performance of femininity?

Considering the increasing popularity of girls’ soccer (Markovits and Hellerman 2004; Messner 2009), my work is both timely and relevant. Moreover, such research is called for in light of the much-discussed increased purchasing power of girls nine to thirteen years old – the age at which many girls are working to gain stable identities and create a sense of self (Corsaro 1997; Harris 2004a, 2004b; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2005),

**Theoretical Overview:** Applying West and Zimmerman’s (1987) framework, gender is largely regarded as a product of social work and as something we “do” rather than something we “have”. Consequently, femininity for instance, is not fixed, but rather is contextual and varied. Age is one factor that contributes to femininity’s fluidity; however, while our chronological age is determined, how we enact our age is flexible just like gender (Howard 2000; Moore 2001;

Thorne 1993). In fact, taking on gendered behaviors and identities is an important way that children try to position themselves as mature (Malcolm 2003). Girls may, for instance, be teen-oriented “little women” or child-oriented “big girls” (Moore 2001; Thorne 1993). Similarly, adolescent girls such as those Williams (2002) describes, “try on” gender by actively resisting, experimenting with, and practicing gender, or the behaviors of mature femininity in particular. The field of girl’s studies developed out of such an interest in the intersections between age and gender, specifically the experiences of female youth. Much attention in this field is given to issues of style, consumption, and identity, with scholars particularly emphasizing girls’ agentic use of clothing as a symbolic resource of identity (Bettis and Adams 2005; Coulter 2005; Malik 2005). While there is an abundance of writing on girls’ identity work and consumption practices in school, at home, or even online, similar research in a sports context is lacking.

The research that does exist on female athletes’ style and identity work tends to focus on older (high school and college) athletes and their negotiation of the so-called female/athlete “paradox” or “conflict” (Krane et al. 2004; Messner 1988; Ross and Shiner 2008). Negotiation strategies include the apologetic defense (overemphasis of stereotypically feminine behavior and downplay of aggression and toughness), the *reformed* apologetic defense (no downplay of “masculine” qualities), or resistance to looking “girly” in the athletic sphere. Though these studies are useful, their failure to consider factors such as age while instead implying that female athletes’ clothing behavior is primarily responsive to a conflict between gender and athletic identities is inherently limiting. Nancy Malcolm (2003) addresses this issue, arguing that the displays of exaggerated femininity she witnessed among young softball players (12 and 13 year olds especially) could be better explained by their age than a need to make up for their athletic participation.

With its focus on age, an often ignored factor of identity within research on gender and sports, as well as its attention to an understudied age group, my work contributes important insights to research on girls' (and more specifically, girls in sports) style choices and identity negotiations.

**Methods:** This project is based on research conducted in June and July of 2008 at three youth soccer camps in Santa Barbara County. Each of these camps was co-ed and five days long, though two were half-day camps while one was an overnight camp. While there was plenty of diversity among campers in regards to skill, experience, and degree of involvement, there was considerably less socioeconomic and racial diversity. The population of Santa Barbara accounts for this relative homogeneity, as does the fact that in general, youth soccer participants in the U.S. are mostly white, middle-class, and live in suburban areas (Fields 2005; Messner 2009). Along with observations at each of the camps, I also interviewed 18 girls, all between the ages of nine to thirteen.

**Analysis:** The following examples illustrate why age matters when making sense of these girls' experiences and identity work as young female soccer players and their relationship with sports clothing.

AGED GENDER AND ATHLETICISM: THE PINK GOALIE JERSEY Thirteen of the 18 girls interviewed wore pink in some way at least once during their week at camp – a few revealed that it was their favorite color, but most did not call any attention to it. In contrast, a few others held quite negative connotations about the color, and rejected it for their soccer clothes.

Rebekah (age 11) was one camper who expressed wariness about pink, specifically in regards to a pink and black goalie jersey I had shown her. When I encouraged her to explain why, she answered:

It's just like, *when I'm playing soccer* I try not to like be *too* girly, 'cause it just seems not that much of a (laughs) threat or anything [...] you don't want to seem like (in a high pitched voice) "oh my gosh I broke a nail," you know, "oh my gosh I'm gonna start crying." (emphasis added)

This statement suggests that for Rebekah, pink equals girly, equals unthreatening or unintimidating, equals weak – none of which are especially desirable qualities for a soccer player, at least from her perspective. Brittany, who felt similarly to Rebekah, remarked, "like if I'm wearing a pink [jersey] and all this like girly stuff, it's kinda like "oh she sucks, so just go...easy on her." Such rejection of "girliness" by female athletes is not uncommon, and I would argue that it largely springs from the devaluation of femininity typical of the gender regime of sport (Connell 1987; Messner 1988). However, I will suggest that in this case age is an important factor at play as well. Because it was generally 11 and 12 year olds who rejected pink and other "girly" behavior, I argue that maintaining femininity is less of a priority for them than it is for girls 13 and older, and that girls at this age may instead be more concerned with establishing their identities as soccer players.

In contrast to those who rejected pink, Amelie (age 13) embraced it and was in fact the only girl who clearly expressed the reformed apologetic defense. Amelie liked the pink and black goalie jersey, saying "I would like that, 'cause it makes you feel like '*I'm a girl, I know what I'm doing' ... it shows who you are*". For Amelie, wearing pink would be a way to prove her femininity while simultaneously demonstrating her athletic skills.

As girls like Amelie enter adolescence they start to experience more pressure to conform to norms of conventional femininity and may also become more aware of the potential "paradox" of being a female athlete. I actually observed a number of teenage girls at one of the camps wearing hot pink pre-wrap headbands or putting hot-pink shoelaces in their cleats. While such fashion flare and so-called "girliness" would most likely be scorned among some of the younger

campers, among the teens it was instead recognized as an indication of love for and commitment to the sport. While Chantel (age 13) was not personally invested in being stylish on the field, she acknowledged the efforts of her more fashion conscious campmates, her age and older:

Girls who love the socks and love the- like picking out all the right stuff for the soccer, then you know they *really* play, they *really* love to do it, and they like to look (laughs) stylish for it too. So I'm like, "ohh, that's cute!"

Considering that hot pink connotes post-feminist sexuality, independence, and fun (Koller 2008) (especially on mature female bodies), it may be less threatening to the teens' identities as soccer players than a pink jersey would be for an eleven year old, for instance. The older girls (generally 13 and up), in other words, have less to lose by reclaiming pink and showing attention to dress; even if they risk the chance of losing credibility as a player, they gain the valued qualities associated with a fun and sexualized femininity.

#### AGED GENDER OVERSHADOWS ATHLETIC PARTICIPATION: "GIRLS" AND

"TEENAGERS" The previous examples illustrate how age can be an important factor in understanding girls' experiences as female soccer players, and how that experience is manifest in their clothing practices and preferences. The cases that I will now discuss once again highlight the intersection between age and gender, so much so that here their sports participation seems considerably less important.

Maia and Michelle (both age 11), for instance, categorize styles they observed at camp according to the age of the camper.

Michelle: Um, some people, like the girls usually they're more wearing loose clothing, and the teenagers of course they're wearing tighter things. You know? (laughs) But I'm kind of in the middle, I don't really like loose stuff so...

Maia: I don't like loose stuff or tight stuff so I like, yeah, I'm like in the middle with her.

Positioning themselves in the space between "girls" and "teenagers," "loose clothing" and "tighter things," these girls have picked up on the distinct clothing behaviors of the two age

groups. On the cusp of adolescence, they have found a balance between the modest and less body-revealing clothing of childhood, and the tighter, shorter clothing of teens. In fact, earlier in the interview Maia affirmed that it would not be good to play soccer wearing “*really really* short shorts like the teenagers (laughs).”

In contrast to Maia and Michelle’s seeming acceptance of their “in-between” status and corresponding clothing choices, the following incident illustrates how clothing modification can be undertaken in order to achieve more “mature” results.

After getting her camp t-shirt, Katy (age 10) cinched her shirt up on the side with a hair tie so that her stomach was showing, saying that she could “make it look a little cuter.” Makenzie (age 9) and Charlotte (age 9) similarly cinched their shirts, though keeping their stomachs covered, and Charlotte told Katy that she looked like a teenager “who thinks she’s really pretty.” Katy responded, “Three more years,” until she would be a teenager. Makenzie begrudgingly added, “Four more years.”

We have here another example of girls negotiating what appears to be a highly gendered understanding of age, though in the latter case the result is a rather exaggerated (and sexualized) version of teenage femininity.

While an emphasis on the contextual nature of identities is significant (Bettis and Adams 2005; Hall 1996; Hall et al. 1999), these examples indicate that at times age supersedes athletic participation in shaping gendered behaviors. Though the girls are clearly negotiating their performance of femininity, such negotiation seems less tied to their athletic participation than it does their intermediary status as “tweens”. The shirt-tying incident for instance, like Malcolm (2003) argues, shows how sport may just happen to be the site for their reach for maturity and “trying on” of gender (Williams 2002).

**Conclusion:** “Part of a cultural process involving social activity, identity work, and the negotiation of agency” (Nayak and Kehily 2008:128), consumption, or clothing behavior in this case, is an ideal entry point for an examination of these identity processes. My analysis of the

clothing preferences and practices of young female soccer players sheds light on their negotiations of identity and in particular highlights the relevance that age has to their experiences as soccer players and in achieving femininity. The experience of females in sports is not singular; as I have shown, the age of participants affects how femininity and athleticism are negotiated. Moreover, attention to age in this context reveals that its connection with girls' accomplishment of femininity is at times more beneficial to understanding their behavior than is their athletic participation. As I have highlighted, when "thinking gender," age is important to keep close in mind.

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