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INEQUALITY

**Fighting for Racial Equality in a World of Gender Inequality:  
A Critical Discourse Analysis of Online Newspapers' Coverage of Professional Athletes and  
Social Justice in 2020**

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#BlackLivesMatter

### **Abstract**

This honors thesis investigates whether the social justice activities undertaken by professional female athletes during the recent reawakening of the Black Lives Matter movement were reported upon differently than those of professional male athletes. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, the thesis explores how the language and layout of sports stories in major national online newspapers during the summer of 2020 differently framed professional male and female athletes and their responses to three highly publicized incidents of violence against African Americans – the murder of George Floyd, the killing of Breonna Taylor, and the shooting of Jacob Blake. This discourse analysis reveals the habitual ways that newspapers, as a reflection of society, reinforce gender norms (*i.e.*, male dominance) in their coverage of professional athletes' participation in Black Lives Matter protests. The thesis details numerous practices employed by sports journalists that denigrate the efforts of female athletes – even on subjects that fall outside the boundaries of game play – including framing, textual layout and silencing. These findings are significant because they illustrate that even while striving for social justice and equality, female voices go unheard and sports media represent female athletes as lesser than their male counterparts.

## Introduction

Sports is often considered a bubble – a space immune from confronting larger societal issues. Just as Laura Ingraham once told Los Angeles Laker LeBron James to shut up and dribble, athletes are often regarded solely as entertainers. However, during the summer of 2020, professional athletes used their platforms to stand up and speak out against racial injustice after the murder of George Floyd, the killing of Breonna Taylor, and the shooting of Jacob Blake. Professional athletes in America began to protest, boycott, and even walk off basketball courts. And while many athletes were quarantined during the COVID-19 pandemic, it became apparent that this racial reckoning within the world of sports directly reflected changing attitudes in society at large. However, while many athletes – regardless of their race or the sport they played – were demanding racial justice, journalists covering these athletes reflected another injustice that remains silently visible within sports: gender inequality. Unfortunately, the sports world continues to be a microcosm of a larger societal power imbalance; sports media’s gendered discourses, amplification of male voices and disparate coverage of female athletes reflects the dominance that male athletes, and men more generally, continue to have in American society. History has shown that the media favor men as the voices of social movements, thus allowing them to become the spokespersons for social causes through the continuous practice of discursive male dominance. The protests that resulted from the recent murder of George Floyd, the homicide of Breonna Taylor, as well as the killings of other innocent people of color in the past decade, along with the shooting of Jacob Blake, attracted significant attention from newspapers, television stations and a variety of mass media outlets. Still, the actions of (or even a single Tweet from) a professional male athlete, such as LeBron James, automatically became

newsworthy, sometimes garnering nearly as much attention as the instances of police brutality they were decrying.

This thesis explores whether sports media's disproportionate and dissimilar coverage of professional *female* athletes extends to instances where these athletes spoke out against social injustice in the recently reawakened Black Lives Matter movement. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper investigates how the language and placement of sports stories in online newspapers during the summer of 2020 differently framed the actions of professional male and female athletes in response to these highly publicized incidents of violence against African Americans. This approach allows us to explore whose voices are heard and unheard, and how sports journalists translate and spread their messages.

### *Why Sports?*

Like other institutions, the world of sports is a microcosm of society (Frey & Eitzen, 1991). Because it is viewed through a mediated lens – whether it be on television, radio, or in written articles – sports is one of the most visible and exaggerated societal microcosms. Sports coverage is a space where even mundane and everyday occurrences are amplified and considered newsworthy. According to Summers & Morgan (2008), the “constant demand and supply of information” by sports media breeds “heroes, villains, celebrities and superstars” (p. 176). Sports media play an important role in creating *sports celebrities* who become deified, worshiped and idolized by their fans; as such, their thoughts and actions are always deemed newsworthy (Summers & Morgan, 2008). For instance, if a sports celebrity Tweets something about supporting the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, it immediately becomes news. If a sports celebrity kneels or protests during a performance of the national anthem, it is automatically newsworthy because of the cultural emphasis sports media place on athletes. Because actions

that take place within the sporting realm are visible and noteworthy, they provide important insights into what is happening more generally in our society. Thus, a microcosmic bubble, like sports, serves as an ideal space to investigate gender inequality.

### *Why Gender?*

According to Duncan & Hasbrook (1998, as cited in Bernstein, 2002), *perhaps more than any other social institution*, sports perpetuates male superiority and female inferiority.

Historically, coverage of female sports often trivialized women's efforts by implying they were not suited to sport because they were weak, incapable or inferior, and that the sports in which they participated were not *true* sports (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1998, as cited in Bernstein, 2002).

While women have made substantial advances in some competitive and professional high-performance spectator sports (Bernstein, 2002), gender inequality within professional American sports remains pervasive – both on and off the field of play. The sports industry is itself manifestly unequal. According to *Forbes*, the top WNBA salary in 2018 was \$117,500, compared to \$37.4 million in the NBA (Abrams, 2018). Even though it generated more revenue than the men's national team in each of the past 6 years, and even after winning the 2019 World Cup, the United States Women's National Soccer Team (USWNT) is still engaged in an aggressive legal battle for equal pay (Abrams, 2018). Unfortunately, sports media stories continue to widen the gender disparity. According to the Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport (2014), "women's sports receive only 4% of all sport media coverage." Schmidt (2016) found that only "3 percent of newspaper sports stories are about women's sports teams and 5 percent are regarding female athletes alone" (p. 276). A 25-year study conducted by the University of Southern California's Center for Feminist Research found that local TV sports broadcasts dedicated only 3.2% of their sports coverage to women's sports; by contrast, one

outlet spent 55 seconds of its three minutes of sports content talking about a stray dog that had walked into an MLB stadium without mentioning the then-ongoing NCAAW basketball tournament (Cooky et al., 2015). A 2018 study conducted among UK residents to understand why audiences do not watch women's sports found that the main reason was due to a "lack of TV and media coverage," followed by "prefer to watch men" (Insure4sport, 2018).

Audience preferences for watching male athletes are built upon hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity that define sports as a predominantly male space (Messner, 1988). However, there is nothing that inherently renders sports a male domain: there is no biological predilection for male athletes to be better than female athletes, nor any biological preference to watch men, rather than women, play basketball. According to Judith Butler (1999), gender is neither innate nor biological, but rather a constructed, repeated performance that becomes hegemonic. Nowhere are gender performances and hegemony more prominent than in organized sports. Messner (1988) notes that "organized sport has been a crucial arena of struggle over basic conceptions of masculinity and femininity" (p. 199). Even when writing, reporting, or broadcasting about the performance of female athletes, sports journalists all too frequently reinforce male dominance. In fact, when women compete in "male-defined sport, the sports media can employ statistics as objective measures of performance" that pits female athletes' achievements against the default athletes – men (Messner, 1988, p. 206). The unequal coverage of female sports reifies the hegemonic masculine preferences for athletes,<sup>1</sup> thus further confirming the establishment of sports as a male-dominated space (Burstyn, 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> According to Messner (1988), "Since sport has been a primary arena of ideological legitimation for male superiority, it is crucial to examine the frameworks of meaning that the sports media have employed to portray the emergence of the female athlete" (p. 205).

In addition to their limited coverage of female athletics, sports media also reinforce male dominance within sports by framing female athletes differently from the way they typically describe their male counterparts. Cooky et al. (2015) found “a stark contrast between the exciting, amplified delivery of stories about men’s sports and the often dull, matter-of-fact delivery of women’s sports stories” (p. 261). Especially in print media, scholars find a consistent pattern: While male athletes are often portrayed as tough, “female athletes are often described as overly feminine, rather than heroic or physically powerful” (Shaller, 2006, p. 51). According to Knight & Giuliano (2001), “[M]en are readily portrayed by the media as athletes first because being an athlete is consistent with the traditional male role” (p. 219). On the other hand, “for women, being an athlete contradicts the conventional female role, and thus media coverage emphasizes other aspects of their femaleness” (Knight & Giuliano, 2001, p. 219). This devaluation of female athletes is nothing new. Historical analyses of newspaper coverage of female athletes have found that the print media often failed to highlight the accomplishments of female athletes and tended to trivialize their athleticism (Vincent, 2004, & Lansbury, 2001, as cited in Cooky et al., 2010). Cambridge University Press (2016) analyzed the language used by the media during the 2016 Olympics to describe athletes and found significant discursive discrepancies. This study revealed that the words most commonly associated with female athletes were “‘aged,’ ‘older,’ ‘pregnant,’ ‘married’ or ‘un-married,’” whereas the top word combinations for men in sports were more likely to be adjectives like “‘fastest,’ ‘strong,’ ‘big,’ ‘real’ and ‘great’” (Cambridge University Press, 2016). The word choices for female athletes encapsulate stereotypical notions of what women should and should not be; they are rooted in beliefs of male dominance that exist in sports and in society more generally; and they continue to produce and reproduce those beliefs (Messner et al., 1993). In fact, many of these words describe



female athletes in terms of their relational value to a man. Age can serve as a proxy for measuring a woman's attractiveness to a man; age and pregnancy also reflects her fertility. These words devalue female athletes by framing their bodily capital in terms of their relationship, worth and availability to be possessed by a man; as Pierre Bourdieu put it, women are "capital-bearing objects" while men are "capital accumulating subjects" (Thorpe, 2009; Shilling, 1991). The Cambridge corpus also showed higher levels of infantilizing or traditionalist language for female athletes; they were more likely to be referred to as "girls" than were men referred to as "boys," and were twice as likely to be referred to as "ladies" compared to "gentlemen," who are most commonly referred to simply as "men." Finally, the media also tend to use what Messner et al. (1993) describe as a "hierarchy of naming" – *i.e.*, identifying male athletes by their last names and female athletes by their first names, further subordinating their existence in the male-dominated world of sports. This type of language used by sports media to describe female athletes devalues, infantilizes and subtly disempowers them.

Of course, sports media is not exclusively responsible for these gendered differences. As a product of a patriarchal society, the media is a tool that spreads and reinforces cultural beliefs – including the dominance of men – throughout societal institutions such as politics, government and religion (O'Toole, 2016). However, when it comes to sports, the mass media plays a particularly essential role because most spectators and fans experience sports through a mediated lens (Bernstein, 2002). Thus, the way the mass media, like newspapers, portrays female athletes is the way society views these women (Shaller, 2006). If journalists frame the actions, accomplishments, and voices of female athletes as less desirable, pleasurable, or important, audiences will believe that their accomplishments, actions, and voices *are* less desirable, pleasurable, and important. In addition, when repeated, journalists' dissonant discourse reifies

these gendered hierarchies, reinforces the privilege of male athletes, and detracts from female athletes' athleticism and accomplishments (Wolter, 2012). Finally, when women athletes are not mentioned or quoted, their silence becomes what Olson (1997) calls a "dangerous rhetorical tool" that limits the potential for social or political change because the marginalized group continues to go unheard and unseen (as cited in Moshin, 2018, p. 30). When female athletes are silenced, journalists reinforce the hegemonic masculine ideology that women simply do not belong in sports; thus, their voices should not be heard in this socially constructed space. While sports writers often argue that they are "simply providing what the public wants," the *symbolic annihilation* – the silencing of people through discourse or lack thereof (Trolan, 2013) – of fair coverage of female athletes' accomplishments "conveys the idea that women's sports is inferior and not as noteworthy as men's," that their actions are not as significant as those of their male counterparts, and that they do not reflect the feelings of the sporting world (Knight & Giuliano, 2001, as cited in Shaller, 2006, p. 51). Therefore, the quantity and quality of media coverage given to female athletes shapes how we view and perceive their efforts – aspects that are worth researching and critically analyzing. But before examining how athletes of different sexes are talked about, it is important to understand and appreciate the way language is used in the sporting world.

### **Literature Review**

As a reflection of society, sports acts as a powerful site for the re/production of hegemonic forms of knowledge about gender and gendered practices (Meân & Kassing, 2008). According to Shapiro (1989, as cited in Meân & Kassing, 2008), sports has significant cultural "figurability" as a representational practice. It provides a familiar and naturalized way of understanding because it is "entangled with the norms of other aspects of the social formation"

(Shapiro, 1989, as cited in Meân & Kassing, 2008, p. 72). However, it is often how we talk about sports and athletes that reinforces these dominant ideologies. Therefore, it is important to understand the crucial role language plays in creating meaning and shaping our values within society, including the world of sports.

### *Theoretical Framework – Language, Discourse & Ideology*

Everything to which we give meaning in society is negotiated and assigned through language and discourse; as Foucault (1985, as cited in Hawes, 1989) argues, we make the world *mean* through discourse. *Language ideology* is used to understand the ways we structure, group, and value people. According to Woolard & Schieffelin (1994), language ideology serves as the “mediating link between social structures and forms of talk” (p. 55). Language is fundamental when trying to understand inequality among groups or disparities in social institutions such as gender. In fact, Thurlow (2009) argues that language is its own powerful institution and is “capable of creating and recreating social realities that feel so concrete and ‘natural’” (p. 228). Language governs how we see social groups, categorize, and think of others (Thurlow, 2009); when reiterated repeatedly, it establishes regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980, as cited in Thurlow, 2009). However, it is the perception of language as a reflection of common sense that “blinds us to the *significance* of our words – their meaning and consequence” (Thurlow, 2009, p. 229). Hawes (1989) states that *language* is a “practical consciousness, a common sense” (p. 67). Thus, when we use language as an everyday discursive practice, we can create societal hierarchies that feel natural or like common sense (Mullet, 2018). According to Foucault, discourse refers to “ways of constituting knowledge, together with social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge and relations between them” (cited in Pinkus, 1996). Discourse consists of everything from talk to text to media, things that express ways of knowing,

experiencing, and valuing the world (McGregor, 2004, as cited in Mullet, 2018). Fairclough (1992, as cited in Renkema & Schubert, 2018) writes: “[D]iscourse is for me more than just language use: it is language use, whether speech or writing, seen as a type of social practice” (p. 62). Fairclough (1992) notes that “discourse contributes to the construction of systems of knowledge and belief” (p. 64). In relation to Fairclough’s definition, discourse is also a tool to exercise dominance and power.<sup>2</sup> According to van Dijk (1993), discourse and dominance fall into two dimensions: (1) the direct exercise of dominance in text and talk in specific contexts; and (2) the indirect use of discourse to influence others’ minds. Therefore, when it comes to gender, discourse is used to *construct* and reinforce gender hierarchies and as a tool to share dominant ideas about gender, thus influencing society’s perceptions and understanding about gender.

### *Gender & Discourse*

Gender is a “conceptual tool to understanding the social world as well as a theoretical construct that requires careful, sustained analysis” (Hall, 1988, p. 331). In contrast to sex or the “biological or anatomical differences between men and women,” gender is a social construct, made meaningful and salient through discourse (Cameron, 1997, p. 3). Gender is first and foremost an identity that is performed. How we act in society is not governed by the rules of our biological sex. Rather, it is gender that we perform. According to Butler (1999), “the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*” (p. 191). The performance of gender acts as a construction of meaning (Butler, 1999). Gender is performed via discursive means. According to Edley (2001, as cited in Xue, 2008), discourse refers to “a whole range of different symbolic activities, including style of dress, patterns of consumption, ways of moving, as well as talking”

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<sup>2</sup> Foucault (1981, as cited in Weedon 1997) notes that “[d]iscourse transmits and produces power” (p. 107).

(p. 55). Gender is discursively constructed and sustained (Xue, 2008). Through the repetition of discourse, gender takes on meaning and thus becomes a performance.

The performance of gender takes on a unique form within the sporting world because athletes' performances are inherently gendered. For example, according to our ideological understanding of gender, men are more athletic than women. While many believe this hierarchical understanding of gender is innate, it is actually discourse that makes it *feel* innate. According to Deborah Cameron (1997), male dominance is fabricated through discourse. Wodak (1997) also describes how feminists view language as a tool of patriarchal society to "discriminate, disregard, and incapacitate women" (p. 10). Like gender itself, discourse is an everyday performance that becomes meaningful through repetition. According to Maingueneau (1999), identities, such as gender, are embedded within discourse. Discourse is steeped in gender ideology, thus influencing us to adhere to socialized gender expectations when we talk about men and women. The repetitive nature of discourse allows it to become a habitual process in which we come to think of it as common sense to talk about men and women differently. Our words are laden with values; how we talk or do not talk about certain people, especially athletes of different genders, ascribes meaning to them. Discourse is therefore important because it not only acts as a meaning-making tool, but discursive differences are also a tool of dominance used to amplify men and silence women (Uchida, 1992). Discourse, just as much as sports itself, reflects society; gendered discourses only naturalize these pre-existing real-world divisions.

### *Media's Framing of Gender in Sports*

As the mediator between athletes and their fans, sports media play a key role in shaping our understanding of the world of sports. Traditional mass print media (*e.g.*, newspapers) engage in what scholars often refer to as *framing*. As content producers, journalists influence audiences'

perceptions by strategically choosing what elements of a news story will be presented, how they will be elaborated upon, and what will be left out of the frame (Lewis & Weaver, 2015). Framing is significant because the decisions the media make when writing about sports “determine how athletes are portrayed in the media,” including what feature of the athlete will be represented and the narrative style the message will take” (Lewis & Weaver, 2015). Journalists’ ability to choose athletes and decide how they will be described is also important in understanding the enormous influence sports media wield when covering sports.

In analyzing sports media texts, scholars have discovered other media practices that help shape and influence dominant ideologies within the sports realm. Scholars have uncovered various framing patterns when analyzing visual and written texts that reinforce the media’s ability to shape and influence dominant ideologies within sports. Tuchman (1978, 2012, as cited in Trolan, 2013) argues that female athletes have historically been, and continue to be, *symbolically annihilated* by the mass media through omission of their accomplishments, thus leaving them out of the frame and silencing them in the process. According to *critical feminist theory*, sportswomen are often underrepresented due to the existing privilege and power held by men within the media (Kane et al., 2013). In this way, sports media cultivate what Gramsci (1977, as cited in Kurtz, 1996) calls *hegemony* – *i.e.*, the ruling class maintains control over society by having its ideas established as the norm through a dynamic of coercion and consent. Consent is then secured through the “cultural leadership of the dominant grouping” (Curran, 2006, as cited in Cooky et al., 2015, p. 132). In the United States, the media operate as part of this cultural leadership, thus helping ideologies become “naturalized” and be treated as common sense (Curran, 2006, as cited in Cooky et al., 2015, p. 143). Through sports media’s framing, the public adopts a conventional ideology in which the dominant class’ (men’s) ideas become the

normative ideas. In other words, male athletes' actions are viewed as more important than those of female athletes because the media frame it as such. More specifically, traditional sports media are also guilty of reinforcing gender hierarchies in male-dominated social structures through *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell, 1987), framing sports as a site of male dominance and concomitant female subservience. When journalists choose not to talk about women's sports or female athletes, they reinforce the idea that sports are a male-only space and that men are better at sports, making them the ideal spokespersons for issues that arise in the sporting world. This construct, through which journalists frame and reinforce gender ideologies, is an important pillar for understanding the power sports media have in shaping society's understanding.

#### *Textual Layout and Making Meaning*

While many print newspapers have gravitated toward online publication, an adaptation necessitated by today's digital society, traditional media outlets continue to be responsible for the distribution of important sports stories, especially athlete-interest articles. Even though many are digital, newspapers are unique news mediums that frame narratives and reinforce power structures through the physical makeup of the paper. It is important to note that news in the daily press is "organized by the principle of relevance or importance along a dimension of decreasing prominence (van Dijk, 1988, p. 45). In other words, information at the beginning of a given news article is viewed as most important, and that which follows are lesser details. Moreover, the way in which information is laid out and presented in newspapers (whether in print or digital form) is also a type of framing, hierarchical organizing, and meaning-making that must be analyzed closely – including when dealing with ideologies of gender. Scholars have analyzed how the structural layout of news stories plays an important role in the audience's interpretation of the text.

As the first words readers see when they view newspaper stories, headlines are noteworthy text. Headlines are an example of what van Dijk (1993, as cited in Mullet, 2018) deems a persuasive structure. Because they are the first text to be read and are located above an article, headlines are markers that “monitor attention, perception and the reading process”; they also dictate hierarchical organization (van Dijk, 1988, p. 141). Headlines function as an example of structural emphasis where the choice of words within the headline can imply negative or positive value judgments, thus helping produce and maintain dominance (van Dijk, 1993, as cited in Mullet, 2018). In addition, headlines are significant because audiences will read the headline, but not necessarily the rest of the article (van Dijk, 1988). This is especially true online where titling and headlines are “click bait” created to entice online readers to select the content they believe will prove most interesting for them to read (Gavriliu, 2012). Thus, it is crucial to analyze headline text within newspapers as it marks the first area of strategic, meaningful discourse and is often preferred over reading an entire article (Carvalho, 2008).

In addition to their headlines, the layout, style, and structure within the body of newspaper articles are important sites of meaning-making. According to van Dijk (1988), newspapers deliver important content to readers through various relevance structures of the news such as ordering (leads), schematic structures (size), and corresponding layout (frequency). Highlighted phrases or images, structural organization or layout of the text, use of quoted material, high frequency or sensitizing words, grammar, voice, and linguistic devices are all important textual elements that represent power relations, social context, or a speaker’s personality (Mullet, 2018).



### **Research Questions**

This thesis investigates whether male professional athletes were covered and reported upon differently than female athletes during the reawakening of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020. The goal of this paper is to understand how sports journalists and their editors use newspapers to reinforce male dominance in sports, even on subjects that fall outside the boundaries of game play. There are three general questions that guide the analysis:

(RQ1): Do sports journalists frame and talk about individual male and female athletes differently?

(RQ2): Do sports journalists use the physical makeup of their articles to reinforce gender hierarchies?

(RQ3): Do sports journalists reinforce male dominance by silencing female athletes' actions?

### **Methodology**

The goal for this thesis was to discover the habitual and discursive ways in which newspaper media, as a reflection of society, reinforce gender norms (*i.e.*, male dominance) during their coverage of professional athletes' actions focused on achieving social justice. It does so by undertaking a textual analysis of newspaper articles reporting how professional athletes across America responded and pursued racial justice activities after the murder of George Floyd (May 25, 2020), the killing of Breonna Taylor (March 13, 2020), and the shooting of Jacob Blake (August 23, 2020). Articles from major online American newspaper outlets during the period May 25 through August 31, 2020, were collected. At the beginning of this interval, sports journalists focused on writing about athlete-interest stories because they were unable to report the results of games or matches due to the cancellation of sports amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The end date marks the week that professional sports leagues across the country boycotted their

games due to the shooting of Jacob Blake and other ongoing instances of racial injustice within the United States.<sup>3</sup> This research focused particularly upon analyzing and comparing how sports journalists wrote about and framed actions of NBA and WNBA athletes. This is because NBA and WNBA players were heavily involved in BLM protests and actions during 2020 and in prior years, and because basketball is one of the few professional sports in which men and women play the game in a similar way.

The ProQuest database was used to identify relevant newspaper articles. The following search terms were used in order to ensure that appropriate articles were being analyzed: (1) “Athletes” or “Sports” & George Floyd; (2) “Athletes” or “Sports” & Breonna Taylor; and (3) “Athletes” or “Sports” & Jacob Blake. Popular newspapers within the United States were examined, including: *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *the Los Angeles Times*, *the Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.<sup>4</sup> A corpus of 72 newspaper articles was assembled and each article/story was coded for different linguistic strategies – including words, phrases, layout of the text (headlines, leads, size, frequency, placement), use of quoted material, vocabulary, grammar, voice, and linguistic devices. These articles were also analyzed for any recurrent patterns arising from the ways in which professional leagues, teams, and athletes were mentioned. Finally, coded text was organized into three categories: (1) discursive framing and gendered language; (2) textual layout elements; and (3) silencing and omission.

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<sup>3</sup> This three-month timeframe was also chosen because it covers stories regarding athletes and their actions/reactions to these three distinct moments of police brutality directed against people of color. The choice of these three individuals was based upon the proliferation of discourse following their deaths and shooting during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact they had on re-awakening the Black Lives Matter movement and mobilizing professional athletes to speak up and act.

<sup>4</sup> These newspapers were chosen because they rank as the top newspapers by daily circulation in the United States, and therefore carry more ideological weight than more locally focused newspapers.

*Critical Discourse Analysis*

When further analyzing these textual pieces, a Critical Discourse Analysis approach was applied. Established by Wodak & Meyer (2009), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a qualitative analytical approach for critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities (as cited in Mullet, 2018). CDA examines the ways language produces and controls social phenomena while also looking at the role of language as a power resource (Willig, 2014, as cited in Mullet, 2018).<sup>5</sup> CDA deals with discourses of injustice and inequality and attempts to uncover concealed or implicit power relations (van Dijk, 1993, and Wodak & Meyer, 2009, as cited in Mullet 2018). CDA states that “discourse is socially *constitutive* as well as socially conditioned” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Therefore, discourse sustains and reproduces the status quo (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, as cited in Mullet, 2018). Consequently, this thesis analyzes how language – the choice of words, their placement, and their absence – does or does not reinforce power and male dominance within these newspaper articles reporting on professional athletes of different genders and their contributions toward ameliorating social injustice.

According to Fairclough (1992, as cited in Handayani et al., 2018), CDA explores the relationships between texts, discursive practices and events along with wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes. Fairclough developed a three-dimensional framework to understand the meaning and power behind texts; every communicative event comprises three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice. These three dimensions guide the three stages of CDA: *Description* (Text), *Interpretation* (Discursive Practice), and *Explanation* (social practice) (Fairclough, 1989, as cited in Handayani et al., 2018). During the first stage,

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<sup>5</sup> According to Renkema & Schubert (2018), “In CDA, the concepts of power and ideology are central” (p. 336).

*Description*, Fairclough calls for linguistic features such as choices in vocabulary (wording), grammar (transitivity), and text structure (thematic choice, turn-taking system) to be systematically analyzed (Handayani et al., 2018). During the *Interpretation* stage, Fairclough (1989) mandates that the text be analyzed as a discursive practice. In other words, attention should be drawn to other factors such as “speech act and intertextuality...factors that link the text to its context” (Handayani et al., 2018, p. 339). Thus, the factors that relate to how people produce and interpret the news discourse should be taken into consideration, such as the news source and reporting modes (Fairclough, 1995 as cited in Handayani et al., 2018). In the final *Explanation* stage of the discourse analysis, the production and interpretation of texts are analyzed as a social practice. Factors like ideology or power are also considered insofar as they help explain the interaction between social-cultural context and the production and consumption of texts (Handayani et al., 2018). CDA is a useful research tool because “it provides multiple points of analytic entry,” allowing us to focus on the signifiers that make up a text – including linguistic selections, juxtapositions, sequencing, and layout (Janks, 1997, p. 329). Using the CDA approach, this research investigates how athletes’ actions toward social justice and newspaper stories covering those actions were generated and ideologically shaped by relations of power, specifically regarding gender (Handayani et al., 2018).

### **Explanation of Events**

In 2020, professional sports were given a timeout due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the WNBA had not yet begun its season, the NBA was forced to halt game play “until further notice” on March 12, 2020. The NBA would not resume playing until July 31<sup>st</sup>, when 20 teams were invited to the NBA bubble at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida; all

further regular season and playoff games were played there. The WNBA began its 2020 season on July 25<sup>th</sup>, bubbled away at the IMG Academy campus in Bradenton, Florida.

During the months between the NBA stoppage and the resumption of American professional basketball, the United States experienced a different sort of virus – two racially charged police killings ignited a paroxysm of national outrage. On March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old African American EMT was shot and killed by Louisville, Kentucky, police officers during a botched raid on her apartment (Wash et al., 2020). Her homicide gained substantial news attention across America on June 23, 2020, when Louisville’s police department fired one of the officers involved in the raid. Meanwhile, on May 25, 2020, officers arrested George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, after a convenience store employee called 911 and told police that Mr. Floyd had used a counterfeit \$20 bill to buy cigarettes (Hill et al., 2020). Following Floyd’s arrest, Derek Chauvin, a White police officer, knelt on Floyd’s neck for nearly 10 minutes, rendering him unable to breathe and ultimately killing him. After Floyd’s death, Americans of all races, including athletes, mobilized in the streets to protest this murder that occurred in broad daylight and was captured by bystanders’ cell phone cameras. Throughout the month of May, athletes across the NBA were photographed at protests marching with fellow protesters. Some of the first NBA players to begin protesting included the Minnesota Timberwolves’ Karl Anthony Towns, who walked the streets of Minneapolis, and Boston Celtics guard Jaylen Brown, who drove to his hometown of Atlanta to help organize protests in that city. Tennis star Coco Gauff gave a powerful speech at a peaceful protest in her hometown of Delray Beach, Florida (Church, 2020). A wide variety of athletes took to social media to share their immediate reactions following Floyd’s death, including

LeBron James, Richard Sherman, Bradley Beal, Alex Morgan, Serena Williams, and Natasha Cloud. Protests would continue into early June.

On July 4, 2020, the NBA agreed upon a COVID-safe plan to restart games with 22 of the league's 30 teams (J. Young, 2020). NBA teams started arriving in Orlando on July 9, 2020, to begin preparing for the resumption of the 2020 season inside the Walt Disney bubble by commencing practices and scrimmage games (Marks, 2020). On July 22, 2020, NBA athletes on a variety of teams began declining to answer basketball-related questions during their post-scrimmage press conferences in order to talk about Breonna Taylor, often calling for the arrest of her killers. The Los Angeles Clippers' Paul George became the first NBA player to use his "entire postgame interview session with reporters to strictly discuss the deaths of Taylor and George Floyd and police brutality" (McMenamin, 2020).

Meanwhile, before heading to their own Florida bubble, the WNBA teams dedicated their 2020 season to social justice, making the decision to wear Breonna Taylor's name on their uniforms on July 6, 2020 (WNBA, 2020). The WNBA invited all 12 of its teams to report to the IMG Academy on July 9, 2020, to begin preparations for the 2020 season. WNBA athletes were allowed to have family live with them in the bubble. Before tipping off the 2020 WNBA season on July 25, WNBA players from the Seattle Storm and New York Liberty walked off the basketball court before the playing of the national anthem (Cohen, 2020). Both teams returned to the court after the anthem; the Liberty's Layshia Clarendon and Breanna Stewart of the Storm announced that the 2020 WNBA season would be dedicated to Breonna Taylor and to the Black Lives Matter movement (Cohen, 2020).

The NBA began its post-season in mid-August, with the first playoff game held on August 18, 2020. Five days later, Jacob Blake, a 29-year-old Black man, was shot seven times by

a White police officer in Kenosha, Wisconsin, leaving him partially paralyzed. As video of the incident began to circulate and seep into the NBA bubble, NBA players decided they would no longer play and gloss over this moment. On August 26, 2020, the Milwaukee Bucks refused to take the court for Game 5 of the first playoff round to protest the Jacob Blake shooting (Martin et al., 2020). George Hill and the Bucks later issued a televised statement about their decision to not play, ultimately prompting the league to postpone all three NBA games set for that day. That same day, the WNBA announced the postponement of all three of its August 26<sup>th</sup> games out of respect for the wishes of WNBA players who likewise could not bring themselves to play. Players from the Washington Mystics spoke on national television to explain their decision not to play, and wore t-shirts with seven bullet holes to mark the number of times Jacob Blake was shot. The Mystics were joined on the court by fellow WNBA players from the Dream, Sparks, and Lynx teams, who all kneeled in solidarity. Mystics forward Tianna Hawkins was joined by her 6-year-old son, Emanuel. That same day, game cancellations began to spread across a variety of professional sporting leagues: Three Major League Baseball games were postponed, and five Major League Soccer matches were also called off. In addition, the Western & Southern Open tennis tournament paused play after Naomi Osaka announced she was withdrawing from the competition in order to focus on fighting for racial equality (Martin et al., 2020). Coincidentally, August 26, 2020, marked the fourth anniversary of ex-National Football League quarterback Colin Kaepernick's decision to begin kneeling during performances of the national anthem (R. Young, 2020). This timeline of racially charged events provides the context within which sports media's coverage of the actions that female and male athletes undertook to achieve social justice in the summer of 2020 can be understood and analyzed.

## Analysis

### RQ1: Do sports journalists discursively frame male and female athletes differently?

#### **Media Framing of Female Athletes v. Male Athletes**

As the primary research question of this thesis, one of the key differences this paper analyzes is how female and male athletes are framed and discursively constructed. As previously noted, framing is significant because the decisions journalists make when writing about sports “determine how athletes are portrayed in the media, including what feature of the athlete will be represented and the narrative style the message will take” (Lewis & Weaver, 2015, p. 221). This paper thus seeks to uncover how language is not only used to frame athletes of different genders, but how it also contributes to reinforcing hegemonic gender ideologies.

#### *Motherhood*

One media frame that appeared frequently in this corpus, and which therefore deserves attention, is the framing of female athletes as mothers. Rather than solely talking about their performance on the court, female athletes are often framed by sports media in terms of their social positions, especially as mothers (Koivula, 1999, as cited in Killoran, 2017). According to Cooky et al. (2015), scholars have noted how professional women’s sports – unlike men’s sports – are frequently framed by sports media in ways that highlight women athletes’ role as parents and play up the theme of motherhood. While the mention of this identity might charitably be read as journalists praising female athletes for balancing their dual roles as mothers and professional basketball players (Kustok, 2010), the inclusion of these details reflects one way in which sports media “reinforces patriarchal sovereignty” by degrading female athleticism and their athletic accomplishments (Daniels, 2009, as cited in Fink, 2013, p. 335). According to Fink (2013), coverage that focuses on female athletes’ roles outside of sports, such as being “wives,



girlfriends, and mothers,” is a common practice that draws attention to the hegemonic belief that women’s off-the-court lives represent their more salient identity (p. 335). Thus, the discursive practice of including details about female athletes being mothers works to frame women as mothers first and athletes second (Giuggioli, 2013).

When analyzing this corpus, the discursive framing of professional women athletes as mothers, and other female social identities, appeared far more often than it did for male athletes. Within my article corpus, female athletes, especially WNBA players, were over 60% more likely to be talked about in the context of their parental social identity than were male athletes.<sup>6</sup> However, of greater interest is how journalists discursively framed female athletes in relation to their parental identity in contrast to their male counterparts. More specifically, journalists used sentence structure to frame WNBA players' social identity as mothers as their more salient identity by mentioning it first, before noting their status as athletes. Consider this description of Phoenix Mercury guard Bria Hartley:

Bria Hartley has been like many working mothers during the coronavirus pandemic. Her 3-year-old son, Bryson, has been right by her side at work – inside the WNBA bubble in Bradenton, Florida – and the time between practices and games has been dedicated to him.

The inclusion of her social identity as a working mother reinforces the hegemonic trope that female athletes are not solely athletes, but that they have an additional social identity (Meân & Kassing, 2008). More importantly, this introduction reinforces the ideology that women are females first and athletes second. According to Smith & Bissell (2014, as cited in Killoran, 2017), “Not only do female athletes receive less media coverage than male athletes, but in the

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<sup>6</sup> A total of eight articles in the corpus framed female athletes in relation to a feminine social identity other than their athlete identity. Five of these articles framed female athletes as mothers; the three others described female athletes as wives and daughters, and even referenced their sexuality. By contrast, only three articles in the entire corpus framed male athletes as someone other than an athlete, specifically a father.

circumstances where females are covered in the media, they are portrayed in a manner that creates the image of a woman first, and an athlete second” (p. 7). In this article, the author uses syntax and sentence structure to position Hartley’s social identity as a mother ahead of her athletic identity. In doing so, the author adopts and promulgates the popular ideology that women are lesser athletes than men because their feminine social identities are more salient.<sup>7</sup> Ordering also plays an important role in reinforcing this hegemonic female athlete complex because the above-quoted paragraph serves as this article’s lead.<sup>8</sup> According to van Dijk (1985), first sentences “express the macrostructure of the news item and can be used as expedient signals to make effective guesses about the most important information of the text” (p. 77). Thus, the ordering of this information – especially given that this motherhood framing is the first thing the public learns by reading this article – reaffirms the hegemonic ideology that female athletes are mothers first and athletes second (Abraham, 2016).

By contrast, NBA athletes' fatherly identities were rarely ever mentioned within the article corpus. If they were framed through their parental identity, they were never explicitly labeled as fathers. In addition, their parental identity *always* followed their athletic identity. To illustrate, here is an excerpt from an article discussing Utah Jazz player Joe Ingles’ entry into the bubble:

Joe Ingles, Gobert's teammate on the Jazz, found himself in a precarious position as the NBA's restart approached. Ingles has a pair of toddler twins, including an autistic son, and a pregnant wife. He had every excuse to opt out, but the team and league have conducted several informative meetings that helped ease his mind – as has his wife, Renae, a professional netball player in their native Australia.

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<sup>7</sup> According to Hanson (2012), due to popular media representations, men have become socialized to regard women as illegitimate athletes. Instead, they see them as caretakers, keepers of households, wives, and mothers. “The caretaker image stems from television and media-generated stereotypes that have formed over time through the presentation of women cleaning, cooking and taking care of the household” (Hanson, 2012, p. 15). This is important because it is media representations that help to ground these gendered ideologies and hierarchies. Media formats like newspapers continue to reinforce these problematic ideologies.

<sup>8</sup> The function and saliency of newspaper leads are discussed in greater detail later in this thesis.

This description of Ingles reinforces the ideology that, unlike women, men are athletes first and fathers second. The first sentence instantly establishes Ingles as a professional athlete by describing him as a member of an NBA team – *i.e.*, the Jazz – and, unlike the newspaper story about Bria Hartley, this article waits until its second sentence to hint at his fatherly identity.

More to the point, the author never actually uses the word “father” to describe Ingles; instead, the article refers to Ingles’ “son” and “wife,” rather than directly to him. The omission of the label “father,” as well as the use of discursive syntax to set up Ingles’ fatherly (non-athlete) identity as a secondary identifier, reinforce the idea that men are more legitimate athletes because they are athletes first and fathers second.

By contrast, in the very first sentence of the story about Bria Hartley, she is explicitly labeled as a “working mother.” The addition of the word “working” is significant because it not only makes Hartley’s parental identity visibly salient, but the addition of this adjective presents gendered expectations that reinforce hegemonic gender roles, such as the need for Hartley to always be taking care of her child because she is primarily a mother. According to Hochschild (1989) and Maddock & Parkin (1994), “women’s identity as mothers is more salient in the workplace than men’s identity as fathers” (as cited in Gordon et al., 2007, p. 195). Americans are socialized to believe that women’s primary duties are to be caretakers and being a *working* mother falls outside that norm (Swinkels et al., 2017). Indeed, “like so many gendered terms and phrases, the ubiquitous collocation of ‘working mother’ has no parallel to ‘working father’” (Gordon et al., 2007, p. 195). This is because we are socialized to believe that men’s primary identity role is not as a father. Fathers are presumed to work because they are the hegemonic financial breadwinners (Gordon et al., 2007). Thus, when society notes that men are fathers, in addition to their work, they are treated as heroic. For example, the author describes Joe Ingles as

having “every excuse to opt out” – *i.e.*, to take care of his family. This framing serves to venerate Ingles and shows him to be more than just a professional athlete – he is a dedicated father as well as a *dedicated* athlete who could have opted out, but chose not to do so. Thus, the mere fact that Ingles even contemplated forgoing the season is deemed noble. However, while men get congratulated and praised for being fathers, the role of mother is assumed when it comes to “working women”: Taking care of the family in addition to working is expected, regardless of what other identities she may possess (McCammon, 2016). Thus, women like Bria Hartley are expected to be parenting their children, even inside the WNBA bubble, while male athletes are not. By contrast, while male athletes like Joe Ingles are commended for simply ruminating about sitting out the season to take care of their children, their female counterparts in the WNBA are expected to continue taking care of their children while also being full-time professional athletes.

When it comes to athletes’ actions to advance social justice, sports journalists continue to apply a discursive parental framing that differs considerably between professional male and female athletes. For female athletes, the framing of their parental identities became a detail that distracted from their actions. By contrast, the father-framing of male athletes added to the legitimacy and sincerity of their social justice-related activities. Consider this description of the WNBA Phoenix Mercury’s Skylar Diggins-Smith.

During a mid game interview with ESPN, Phoenix Mercury guard Skylar Diggins-Smith, returning to the court for the first time since 2018 after sitting out following the birth of her son, focused the conversation on Taylor and other victims of police brutality.

This journalist’s framing of Diggins-Smith as a mother – via the mention of her maternity leave – is wholly irrelevant and distracts from the fact that she dedicated her mid-game interview to speaking about social justice. This detail also detracts from Diggins-Smith’s actions, prompting

the reader to think more about her motherly identity and potentially even question her motives or qualifications for returning to the league after giving birth. According to Kane (1996):

“Historically, participation in sport has been seen as problematic for females because of concerns ranging from fears that women's participation will harm their reproductive capacity, and thus make them unable to fulfill their ‘appropriate’ roles as wives and mothers” (p. 117). The mere mention of Diggins-Smith’s pregnancy points to the hegemonic ideology that being a woman takes away from her athleticism because she had to sit out and recover from giving birth (Freeman, 2008). This discourse frames her pregnancy as not only a form of disability, but also calls into question the propriety of her returning to play so quickly – or at all. In essence, Diggins-Smith’s motherly framing delegitimizes her athletic ability; having told readers that she had to “sit out following the birth of her child,” the author essentially frames motherhood as a physical impairment. By including this gendered detail marking Diggins-Smith as a mother first and athlete second, the journalist implicitly denigrates her choice to dedicate her precious *mid-game* interview time to a conversation about police brutality, thus framing her voice as less important because she is not solely an athlete. This again reinforces sports as a male space and occupation because men do not have to forsake a season to give birth, thus further lionizing men as the only true athletes.

Moreover, when sports journalists refer to NBA athletes’ fatherly identities, they do so in a manner that legitimizes the sincerity of their efforts through a lens of vulnerability, rather than denigrating them. Consider this description of LeBron James writing Breonna Taylor’s name on his shoes:

James often plays games with the names of his children, wife or mother written on his shoes. On Thursday he had Taylor's name on them. He has made similar gestures in the past, dating to the death of Trayvon Martin, a Black 17-year-old killed by an armed neighborhood watch volunteer near Orlando in 2012.

Here, the framing of LeBron James as a father serves to glorify his actions. This is especially true when the author mentions that James wrote Trayvon Martin's name on his basketball shoes in a manner akin to the practice he adopted with his children. By writing Trayvon Martin's name on his shoes, James can be read as a surrogate father to Trayvon while simultaneously warning that what happened to Trayvon could happen to any of his own children. James' fatherly actions amplify his social justice efforts because they appear to represent a form of heroic parenting. While this fatherly framing helps further James' image as one of sports' most dedicated social justice leaders, the motherly framing of Diggins-Smith detracts from her social justice efforts by shifting attention to her maternity leave and away from her condemnation of police brutality. Whereas James' parental actions enhance his efforts, Diggins-Smith's parental actions diminish the significance of her actions in furtherance of social justice.

The prevalent framing of female athletes as mothers, when compared to the rarity of framing male athletes as fathers, reveals a "gender asymmetry that subtly communicates ambivalence about women athletes" (Duncan & Hasbrook, 1988, as cited in Cooky et al., 2015). This phenomenon becomes especially problematic when athletes of different genders simultaneously speak and act to achieve their common social justice goals, but only the male athletes' actions are considered legitimate and representative of all athletes. According to Smith & Bissel (2014, as cited in Killoran, 2017), the continued marginalization of female athletes, especially through the framing of motherhood, continues to "support the ongoing idea that female athletes and sports are undeserving of overwhelming support and attention that male athletes receive" and ultimately renders them invisible and silenced (p. 7).

*Praising Active Male Action v. Passive Acknowledgment of Female Action*

Throughout the months of May-August 2020, male athletes in the NBA were particularly lauded for their actions pertaining to racial justice. NBA players were photographed and interviewed for taking to the streets to organize protests after the murder of George Floyd; they dedicated their press conferences to talking about the killing of Breonna Taylor and pleading for the arrest of those responsible. In August 2020, the NBA's Milwaukee Bucks catalyzed a wave of game cancellations and postponements across a variety of professional sporting leagues to protest the police shooting of Jacob Blake. At this same time, athletes in the WNBA were likewise visibly protesting and sending messages about social injustice. Before tipping off their WNBA season in the bubble, the Seattle Storm and New York Liberty had walked off the court before the national anthem was played, all of the league's players were wearing Breonna Taylor's name on the backs of their jerseys, and the Washington Mystics' players had kneeled at center court while wearing bullet-hole-designed t-shirts to commemorate and powerfully call attention to the shooting of Jacob Blake. However, what became apparent from the articles in the corpus was that, regardless of the actions they took, the NBA players' social justice actions were framed as heroic and they themselves were described as leaders and spokespersons, while the WNBA players were discursively framed as merely following the NBA's lead. This framing is yet another significant way in which journalists use language to reinforce and maintain gender hierarchies by praising male actions and downplaying those of females. Many of these articles demonstrate how the media's framing not only cements the NBA athletes' actions as the most salient, but also reinforces hegemonic masculinity by framing sports as a site of male dominance and female subservience, even with respect to issues that play out off the court.

One of the most poignant instances of this distinct gender framing occurred during the protests and cancellations of the NBA and WNBA games scheduled for August 26, 2020, three days after the shooting of Jacob Blake. The Milwaukee Bucks refused to take the court for the fifth game of the first round of NBA playoffs, and instead held a press conference about how they could not compete because it would denigrate the significance of the moment. Because the Bucks were the first to boycott their game that day, and the NBA was the first professional league to halt play as a result, the NBA's actions were described with discursive signifiers that framed these players as active heroes and leaders. Some of the descriptive phrases identified in the corpus included:

Extraordinary | bold move | significant action | leading the way again | pulsating movement | leading a peaceful protest | ignite

These words framed NBA athletes as heroic influencers who were spearheading a broader movement. Meanwhile, the WNBA's kneeling demonstration with bullet-hole shirts and their refusal to play games was described in far less aggrandizing terms. Some of the phrases that highlight this "follower, not leader" narrative include:<sup>9</sup>

**Led by the NBA** & including the WNBA, MLS | WNBA players **joined the NBA** in not playing | the WNBA **also postponed** three games on Wednesday – **following the lead of the NBA's Bucks** who chose to boycott their playoff game in protest of the shooting of Jacob Blake | the unprecedented decision to postpone the games was **quickly followed by a similar decision** by the Women's National Basketball Association | Sent a poignant message... **following a similar decision hours before by NBA players** who walked out

This language and syntax are important because they minimize and devalue the actions taken by the WNBA by identifying them as mere adjuncts to the NBA's course of conduct. Unlike their male counterparts who are described as leaders (*e.g.*, "led by the NBA," "following the lead of the NBA"), newspapers' use of non-revered language, frames female athletes as more passive

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<sup>9</sup> Boldfaced emphasis added.



reactors and male athletes as groundbreakers. This “follower” discourse surrounding WNBA athletes is also significant because it reinforces the hegemonic gender ideology that the male athletes of the NBA are the more legitimate spokespersons and that their actions are to be treated as the paradigmatic example for all athletes – regardless of gender. This active-passive framing further reinforces the notion that sports media both reflect and perpetuate male supremacy and propagate a hierarchy which privileges men’s voices and actions while marginalizing or downplaying those of women. While both are fighting for social justice, female athletes continue to experience qualitative differences and inequality in sports media coverage, even off the court (Fink, 2013). As this corpus demonstrates, the discursive framing of female athletes as followers and mothers minimizes and distracts from their social justice actions and helps further reinforce male dominance in sports. This is just one way in which online newspapers exemplify the gender inequality that occurs in sports media coverage, even concerning issues of racial justice.

RQ2: Do sports journalists use the physical makeup of their articles to reinforce gender hierarchies?

### **Article Layout and Gender Hierarchies**

#### *Headlines*

The second research question asks whether newspaper journalists use the physical makeup of their articles to reinforce gender hierarchies. As noted in the literature review, the physical structure and ordering within newspapers acts as a tangible tool for framing and as a persuasive structure for establishing social hierarchies. As the first words seen, headlines and lead sentences can be used as “expedient signals to make effective guesses about the most important information of the text” (van Dijk, 1985, p. 77). Headlines act as markers that

“monitor attention, perception and the reading process” (van Dijk, 1985, p. 141) and dictate hierarchical organization (van Dijk, 1985). Given this background, this thesis analyzed newspaper stories that included the word “Athlete” or “Sport” in the headline<sup>10</sup> (with no explicit mention of a sporting league, team, or individual athlete) by ascertaining how many times female and male athletes were mentioned to see whether they would reinforce hegemonic ideology that sports is a male-dominated space.

**Table 1: Headlines\* Featuring the Word “Athlete” or “Sports”**

<b>Amount Professional Athletes Were Mentioned</b>	<b>Percent (# of articles) <i>n</i> = 21</b>
More professional male athletes mentioned than professional female athletes (Both male and female athletes mentioned)	71.4% (15)
Only professional male athletes mentioned	19% (4)
More professional female athletes mentioned than professional male athletes (Both male and female athletes mentioned)	4.8% (1)
Only professional female athletes mentioned	0% (0)
Equal number of professional female and male athletes mentioned	4.8% (1)

\*These percentages reflect only headlines in which the word “Sport” and/or “Athlete” are mentioned in the headline; these headlines did not mention any specific sports league, team, or athlete name or gender.

<sup>10</sup> All of these were headlines of articles that mentioned George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and/or Jacob Blake in their body.

As shown in Table 1, 71.4% of the headlines that included the word “Athlete” or “Sport” mentioned more male athletes’ actions and reactions to incidents of social injustice than those of female athletes. An additional 19% of these headlines contained no mention whatsoever of any professional female athletes, teams, or leagues. By contrast, each of these headlines mentioned at least one professional *male* athlete, team, or league. According to van Dijk (1993, as cited in Mullet, 2018), headlines carry ideological weight because their choice of words strongly influences readers’ negative or positive perspectives toward the balance of the article, thus helping to produce and maintain dominance. In this case, because the overwhelming majority of these newspaper stories included either no or few mentions of professional female athletes, the headlines of these articles work to maintain the hegemonic ideology that sports is a male-dominated space. Furthermore, these headlines help to legitimize men as the default “athlete” and help sports become synonymous with the male gender. By associating the words “Athletes” and “Sports” with mostly male athletes, these headlines perform the ideological task of gender marking the words “Athlete” and “Sports.”

Gender marking is an issue commonly faced by women in sports media. The practice of “gender marking” (Messner et al., 1993) refers to “the verbal and visual presentation of male athletes and men’s sport as being the norm, while rendering female athletes and women’s competitions secondary status” (as cited in Fink, 2013, p. 333). According to the University of Cambridge (2016), “men’s sport is often considered the default” discourse because we are more inclined to explicitly refer to women’s basketball, whereas men’s basketball is just called basketball. There is no better example of gender marking than the discursive distinction between the National Basketball Association (NBA), which can be read as the unmarked, and the *Women’s* National Basketball Association (WNBA), the marked, that occurs throughout the

entirety of this corpus. However, the tool of unmarkedness – where male sports remain unmarked – “is a powerful example of the cultural assumption that sport is a male realm” (Travers, 2009, p. 83-84). This idea of unmarkedness and male default can be applied to the words “Athlete” and “Sport.” According to Cameron (1997), gender is a social construct made meaningful and salient through discourse. Gender is also a performance and, when repeated, acts as a construction of meaning (Butler, 1999). Thus, when journalists write stories about male athletes, and title those articles with supposedly neutral words like “Athlete” or “Sports,” the discursive phenomenon of male dominance is reinforced. By including seemingly gender-less words in a headline, yet only addressing male athletic performance, journalists engage in gender marking the word(s) “Athlete” and/or “Sports.” This reifies the notion that athletics are male domains, and undertakes the ideological work of fortifying gender hierarchies within sports. Men are the more legitimate athletes because they are talked about more frequently, thus marking them as the primary representation of an “Athlete” and the dominant gender that occupies the world of “Sports.”

### *Leads*

In addition to headlines, the body of a newspaper story acts as an important forum to establish gender hierarchies. The layout, style, and structure of articles are important sites of meaning-making. Van Dijk (1988) notes that newspapers deliver important content to readers through various relevance structures of the news, such as ordering (leads), while also establishing power relations and social context. Also, according to van Dijk (1988), together with headlines, the lead expresses “the major topics of the text”; both summarize the news text (p. 53). Therefore, this thesis analyzed whether newspaper leads, in addition to headlines, also contributed to reinforcing gender hierarchies through ordering and framing.

**Table 2: Lead Sentences of Articles with Headlines Featuring Sporting Words\***

<b>Gender Mentioned in Lead</b>	<b>Percent (# of articles) <i>n</i> = 24</b>
Only male athletes mentioned in the lead	75% (18)
Only female athletes mentioned in the lead	4.2% (1)
Both male and female athletes mentioned in the lead	4.2% (1)
Neither men nor women mentioned in the lead	16.6% (4)

\*“Sporting words” included: “athlete,” “sports,” “basketball,” “game,” and “play.”

Of the articles in the corpus that had sporting words in the headline, 75% mentioned male athletes in the lead, while only one article (4.2%) specifically mentioned a female athlete in the lead. By placing male athletes in the lead, thus making them the first athletes mentioned, along with being the first piece of text people read in an article, newspaper leads contribute significantly to reinforcing gender hierarchies. More specifically, as the data suggests, by mentioning men in the lead far more frequently than women, journalists continue to frame male athletes as more important activists because their actions are mentioned first.

Both in the overall layout of an article and in individual sentences, news discourse is organized so that the most important or relevant information is put in the most prominent position. This means that, for each topic, the most important information is presented first. Therefore, the text presented in the lead is strategically placed and should not be overlooked. In this case, male athletes being mentioned considerably more than female athletes in the lead

suggests that male athletes are more highly valued and are deemed more important. Consider this lead from an article entitled “*Pro Athletes Give Voice to Voiceless*”:

The Milwaukee Bucks were the first to use the immense power of their platform Wednesday afternoon, deciding to give up what they love the most, playing a game – an NBA playoff game at that – to give voice to the voiceless in the wake of the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin, another unarmed Black man in another American city.

As the text reveals, the author uses the lead to lionize the Milwaukee Bucks’ game boycott; the author lauds the Bucks’ actions by adding in the sacrifice they made to “give up what they love the most, playing a game.” However, rather than mention how the WNBA likewise protested and cancelled their games in the name of Jacob Blake, the author mentions only the NBA in the lead sentence. Heroizing discourse aside, because of the ordering of this text, the leading first sentence of the article positions NBA athletes and their social justice actions as the most important ones of the story. According to van Dijk (1988), especially for news, the lead helps the reader know the “most important or relevant information of the news text to be specified in the rest of the article” (p. 144). Leads include important details such as “[t]he major time, location, participants, event or action, and circumstances” that become known” (van Dijk, 1988, p. 144). Thus, by favoring male athletes over female athletes in these leads, sports journalists use ordering to establish male athletes as the major and more consequential participants in the story. In this case, NBA players are read as the more significant social justice activists, further reinforcing gendered sporting hierarchies.

By failing to mention female athletes in the lead, this omission frames male athletes, in this case NBA athletes, as the default *leaders* for social justice by literally putting only them and their efforts at the forefront. Meanwhile, female athletes’ social justice efforts are only mentioned after the lead. This is the second paragraph of the article:

What the Bucks started soon turned into a pulsating movement, sweeping through the entire NBA and WNBA, then reaching the Women's Tennis Association, Major League Baseball and finally, belatedly, the National Hockey League.

Here, the NBA is framed as the social justice leader that catalyzed a “pulsating movement” that the WNBA ended up following. By omitting their efforts from the lead, newspapers use ordering to frame the WNBA as *followers*, not leaders, because they are introduced after the lead and only after the accomplishments of the NBA have been lauded.

As Table 2 demonstrates, female athletes were rarely mentioned in these articles' leads; but even when both female athletes and male athletes were featured in the lead, this research found that female athletes were still syntactically mentioned only after male athletes and their leagues. This also exemplifies how ordering frames female athletes as followers of their male counterparts. To demonstrate, here is the lead from the only article that included both male and female leagues in its opening sentence:

The front page of the New York Times sports section Thursday commemorated a historic day in athletics, when all three NBA playoff games, along with games in Major League Baseball, Major League Soccer and the WNBA, were postponed after athletes refused to play in protest of the police shooting of Jacob Blake, an unarmed Black man, in Kenosha, Wis.

Even in this article that mentioned male and female athletes in the lead, the WNBA was the last professional sporting league to be listed, following other professional male sports leagues. This lead still frames female athletes, like the WNBA, as followers and male athletes as leaders. The description of these women's actions appears only after those of their male counterparts, thus again reinforcing sporting gender hierarchies.

Along with maintaining gender hierarchies, newspaper leads play an important role in reinforcing the hegemonic ideology that sports is a male-dominated space by gender marking the word “athlete.” As the first words to follow the headline, “*Pro Athletes Give Voice to Voiceless,*”

featuring the Milwaukee Bucks in the lead can be read as journalists further gendering the word “athlete” mentioned in the headline because the Bucks are the first athlete, league, or team to follow the headline “Pro Athletes.” Van Dijk (1988) notes that, “[a]fter reading the headline, the reader interprets the first words, phrases, and sentences of the news text which is found in the lead” (p. 144). This means that by having male athletes mentioned first in the coveted lead sentence, journalists induce the reader to believe that the article is about male, rather than female, athletes. In other words, the ordering decision that features the Milwaukee Bucks as the first three words of the article marks “Pro Athletes” as meaning “Pro (Male) Athletes.”

Silence also plays a meaningful role in gender marking because by not mentioning female athletes (in addition to mentioning men) in the lead, the omission of women helps to further mark sports as male. The notion of marking “Pro Athletes” as solely male is particularly disingenuous because this article does in fact include references to the social justice activities of professional female athletes Nneka Ogwumike and Naomi Osaka. However, they are not mentioned until after the actions of male athletes, and even those of their male coaches, are discussed. According to van Dijk, “Since the outline of the story is known after lead interpretation, the reading strategy may find a break-off point after the last words of the lead” (p. 145). Thus, because female athletes are not mentioned in the lead, they are not only denigrated as less legitimate athletes, but they become silenced in these articles because they are not part of the primary discourse and are subject to erasure. This is even more true in today’s digital environment that favors “click bait” habits like glimpsing headlines or the first couple of sentences, rather than reading entire articles. According to *TIME* magazine, 55% of online readers spend fewer than 15 seconds actively on a page (Haile, 2014). Thus, considering that the articles in the corpus were all online news stories, those mentioned in the leads are far more



likely to be read about. Therefore, as the data suggests, if more male athletes are featured in the lead and individuals do not read news articles long enough to see that female athletes are also mentioned, not only are these women's efforts forgotten, but the discourse only continues to reinforce the social construct that equates sports with males. This analysis shows that newspaper layout also contributes to the favoring of male athletes in sports media and is a journalistic technique that continues to uphold gender inequality.

RQ3: Do sports journalists reinforce male dominance by silencing female athletes' voices?

### **Silencing as a Form of Male Domination**

In addition to how female athletes are talked about and where they are placed in the layout of newspapers, another key discursive technique that is important to investigate when analyzing sports media is the silencing of female athletes. Silencing in sports media can occur in a variety of ways. In response to RQ2, the research uncovered how female athletes have been symbolically erased and silenced by not being mentioned as often or prioritized in articles with the words "Athletes" or "Sports" in the headline, ultimately helping to gender mark these seemingly neutral words and reinforcing the follower narrative. However, newspapers are also a medium for exploring how journalists engage in literal silencing – *i.e.*, where female athletes are not mentioned at all in articles (omittance/erasure) or, when mentioned, they are not quoted (silenced). In both cases, female athletes' voices and contributions go unheard. A common pattern in sports journalism is *symbolic annihilation* – the silencing of people through discourse or lack thereof (Trolan, 2013). As Cooky et al. (2015) state,

“A key aspect of media frames is the legitimation of some voices in a controversy and the exclusion of others that are silenced, rendered illegitimate or ‘outside of the frame’... While ‘key players,’ whether they are inside or outside the media frame, exercised agency in speaking out on [an] issue, who is named and who is unnamed yields

important insights regarding the hegemony of the media to shape ideologies and cultural understandings of [an] event” (p. 148).

Thus, the research analyzed the corpus to see if this pattern of silencing female athletes held true and in what ways it occurred. To analyze how athletes were silenced or symbolically annihilated in these newspaper articles, mentions were coded into three categories: (1) Grouped under a team name (*e.g.*, Los Angeles Sparks, Milwaukee Bucks, etc.) or professional sporting league (WNBA players, NBA players, etc.); (2) Specific athletes were named/mentioned in the text, but were not quoted (*e.g.*, “In the meantime, many in the basketball community, like LeBron James, have responded by either spotlighting the protests or gone even further by joining them.”); and (3) Naming and quoting an athlete (*e.g.*, “Malcolm Brogdon, a 27-year-old guard for the Indiana Pacers, also demonstrated in Atlanta this weekend. ‘I’ve got a grandfather that marched next to Dr. King in the ’60s, and he was amazing,’ Brogdon said to a crowd through a bullhorn.”) The following table represents the number of times these different discursive mentions occurred throughout the corpus:

**Table 3: How Were Athletes Mentioned**

<p>Total Articles in Corpus (72 articles)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How MALE athletes were mentioned             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ By Team/League</li> <li>○ Athlete Named (but not quoted)</li> <li>○ Athlete Quoted</li> </ul> </li> <li>• How FEMALE athletes were mentioned             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ By Team/League</li> <li>○ Athlete Named (but not quoted)</li> <li>○ Athlete Quoted</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>Number of mentions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 194</li> <li>○ 183</li> <li>○ 159</li> <li>○ 56</li> <li>○ 56</li> <li>○ 47</li> </ul>
<p>Articles that mentioned BOTH Men and Women (38 articles)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How MALE athletes were mentioned             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ By Team/League</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p>Number of mentions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 150</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Athlete Named (but not quoted)</li> <li>○ Athlete Quoted</li> <li>• How FEMALE athletes were mentioned             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ By Team/League</li> <li>○ Athlete Named (but not quoted)</li> <li>○ Athlete Quoted</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 128</li> <li>○ 95</li> <li>○ 42</li> <li>○ 37</li> <li>○ 28</li> </ul>
<p>Articles that mentioned ONLY MALE athletes (21 articles)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By Team/League</li> <li>• Athlete Named (but not quoted)</li> <li>• Athlete Quoted</li> </ul>	<p>Number of mentions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 44</li> <li>• 55</li> <li>• 54</li> </ul>
<p>Articles that mentioned ONLY FEMALE athletes (13 articles)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By Team/League</li> <li>• Athlete Named (but not quoted)</li> <li>• Athlete Quoted</li> </ul>	<p>Number of mentions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14</li> <li>• 17</li> <li>• 19</li> </ul>

*Omission and Erasure of Female Athletes*

What became evident throughout this corpus was that female athletes were mentioned far less frequently in the social justice-related sports stories that emerged during this pivotal period. There is a significant discrepancy between the total number of times male athletes were named (342)<sup>11</sup> compared to the total number of times female athletes were named (103).<sup>12</sup> In addition, female leagues and teams (56) were mentioned approximately 30% less often than were male leagues and teams (194).<sup>13</sup> The infrequency of mentions of female athletes acts as a form of symbolic erasure because they are not being talked about nearly as much as the men. When female athletes are not mentioned in these articles, not only do their actions get omitted, and

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<sup>11</sup> This represents the number of times male athletes were named, but not quoted (183) plus the number of times men were named and quoted (159).

<sup>12</sup> This represents the number of times female athletes were named, but not quoted (56) plus the number of times women were named and quoted (47).

<sup>13</sup> It is also noteworthy that grouping female and male athletes under the label of a league or team can be read as another form of erasure, especially for women, because athletes are not specified and their contributions are grouped under these umbrella referential terms that themselves carry gendered stereotypes and are hierarchically grounded.

therefore forgotten, but this technique only further reinforces that sports is a male space because male athletes are mentioned more often.

Table 3 also shows that even in articles discussing both male and female athletes, male teams/leagues (150) were mentioned nearly four times as often as female teams/leagues (42). The same pattern holds true for the number of times female athletes were mentioned without being quoted (37), compared to male athletes (128) in articles that mentioned both male and female athletes. Messner et al. (2013) argues that sports media reinforces the overall tendency of sports to be viewed as an institution that “constructs and legitimizes men’s overall power and privilege over women,” such as simply being mentioned more often in sports articles (p. 131-132). While female athletes are not completely excluded from the conversation, it is clear from the research that that they are valued far less than male athletes because they are mentioned less often in sporting articles overall. Journalists are given space to write about athletes, yet they make a conscious decision to mention more male athletes than female athletes and preserve the socially constructed gender hierarchies of the sporting world.

What became apparent in many of the corpus articles was that when female athletes are mentioned, sports journalists often tokenize a limited constituency of superstar female athletes and repeatedly use only them in their articles. By contrast, in addition to being mentioned more often than female athletes, male athletes across a variety of leagues and teams are named in these articles and are not tokenized nearly as often as their female counterparts. An example of this pattern is seen in an article entitled *When the Athletes Brought Games to a Halt. 8/26 A Day in Sports Like No Other*. In this story, like many published during this timeframe, the author tokenizes superstar player Naomi Osaka’s decision to boycott her tennis tournament to bring attention to the shooting of Jacob Blake.

When tennis player Naomi Osaka withdrew from her semifinal match at the Western & Southern Open in New York, officials responded by pausing the whole tournament.

Osaka is tokenized by virtue of being the only female athlete mentioned in the entire article, and her actions are framed as the model for all female athletes. In fact, the author completely omits any mention of the actions of WNBA athletes like the Washington Mystics protesting at half court with seven bullet hole t-shirts, representing the number of times Jacob Blake was shot.

Rather, the author simply writes:

As word spread at digital speed, players in the WNBA and Major League Soccer were making similar decisions. The NHL postponed games the following day.

By contrast, a total of eight male athletes – including athletes from the NBA (*e.g.*, George Hill, DeMar Derozan) and MLB (*e.g.*, Mookie Betts, Clayton Kershaw) – are mentioned in this same article. The infrequency of female athlete mentions is significant because, as an agenda setting agent, sports media reinforces the ideology that sports is an inherently male space because of the powerful influence they have on informing and influencing the public (Weaver, 2007).<sup>14</sup>

According to Duncan & Sayaovong (1991, as cited in Messner et al., 2013), media texts tend to “frame female and male athletes as ‘fundamentally and essentially different’” (p. 123). In truth, it is sports media that makes us *think* they are fundamentally different by their sporadic mentions of female athletes, leagues, or teams. Humans do not innately believe that women do not belong in sports. But when sports journalists fail to display or mention them in articles, we are influenced, trained, and encouraged to believe that sports is a male space and that female athletes

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<sup>14</sup> According to Cohen (1963, as cited in Weaver, 2007), the “mass media not only tell us ‘what to think about’ but also ‘what to think’” (p. 145). Thus, by not mentioning female athletes as much as male athletes, sports journalists tell readers that sports is a predominantly male space, further helping to naturalize the socially constructed idea of male dominance in sports and frame it as common sense.

do not deserve to be heard. In other words, at a time when inequity is on stark display and these articles are focused on racial injustice, gender inequality continues to be perpetuated.

### *Quotations & Power*

As the research demonstrates, not only were male athletes mentioned more often than female athletes, but they were also quoted far more often than female athletes. In articles that mentioned both male and female athletes, male athletes (95) were quoted more than three times as often as female athletes (28). Unfortunately, this data is consistent with the historical inequality of women's quotations in print media. According to Haapanen & Perrin (2017), “in terms of presence and the authority of narrative roles in media items, Western elite males are most often quoted at the expense of women” (p. 427). In news articles, men are generally considered “leaders” and “are quoted far more often than women by a ratio of about 3:1” (LaFrance, 2016). This corpus demonstrates that the same pattern holds true in the world of sports. In fact, the corpus research data almost exactly replicates La France’s (2016) finding. The lack of female athlete quotations is significant because it perpetuates male dominance and the notion that male athletes should stand as the speaking subject.<sup>15</sup> Teo (2000, as cited in Youssefi et al., 2013) argues that quotations involve (re)interpretations of events and power relations between news participants. Therefore, by not having female athletes quoted nearly as frequently as male athletes, female athletes are not only silenced, but they and their social justice actions are deemed less consequential than those of their male counterparts. This further reinforces sports’ gendered hierarchy in that men are more powerful because they are heard, while women are just

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<sup>15</sup> Julia Kristeva formulated a theory about the “speaking subject” that addresses the symbolization of nonverbal experiences (Smith, 1998, as cited in *Speaking Subjects*, n.d.). Kristeva argues that language produces subjects (*Speaking Subjects*, n.d.). Therefore, when athletes are given space to speak (*i.e.*, are quoted by journalists) they become the speaking subject and thereby obtain power and agency. On the other hand, when female athletes are named, but not quoted, this type of discourse reduces them to silenced subjects.

seen. Furthermore, direct quotations are important in newspapers because they give agency and importance to the voice being shared. Zelizer (1989, as cited in van Krieken, 2019) notes that “quotes may increase the credibility of a news text by adding precision and authority to it” (p. 145). Because men are quoted more often than women, quotations increase male athletes' agency and expertise on social justice, thus helping frame them as the most important activists. When male athletes have their voices heard more often than those of female athletes, the ideology is reinforced that men are social justice leaders while women's contributions are “neglected, forgotten, or considered inconsequential or of secondary importance relative to those of men” because they are not quoted (Barnett, 1993, p. 163). For example, as shown in Table 3, more of the articles that mentioned both men and women included paraphrases or simply the name of female athletes (37), rather than quoting them directly (28). When talking about male and female athletes together, female athletes' voices are omitted from the frame in favor of male athletes' voices and are virtually silenced. The corpus data demonstrates that even when reporting on social justice, gender inequality and male dominance remain pervasive.

Even when given their own space to speak, female athletes were again not allotted the same amount of agency as their male counterparts. In articles mentioning only female and only male athletes, female athletes (19) were quoted justly slightly more than one-third as often as male athletes (54). As the corpus demonstrates, even those articles that were dedicated exclusively to female athletes' social justice activities, women were still not treated as equal speaking subjects compared to their male counterparts. Thus, even when men are taken out of the equation, women are not given the same speaking role and presence as men being reported about under similar circumstances. The lack of quotations can be read as a journalistic and discursive technique of silencing and symbolic annihilation that essentially erases female athletes' voices in

the fight for social justice. Pratt et al., (2008) state that quotes are “often used to humanize...the person featured in the news article” (p. 36). Thus, rather than being afforded agency as speaking subjects, when female athletes are simply named or mentioned but not quoted, sports journalists frame women as viewable objects whose actions are meant to be seen, but their voices are not meant to be heard.

While the silencing of women during a social justice movement may seem startlingly paradoxical, similar practices were utilized during the Civil Rights era. Barnett (1993) describes how leadership roles, including speaking roles, were “de facto a *male* role in both Black and white communities” and that women “were expected to adhere to the adage that they should be seen, not heard” (p. 173). This same pattern replicates itself throughout this entire corpus, reinforcing the hegemonic ideology that men are speaking subject leaders while women are the silent following objects. One strikingly notable instance of this paradigm is that in those articles dedicated solely to female athletes, it is their male coaches, not the athletes themselves, who are quoted. The following is an example of an article that lists multiple WNBA athletes as social activists, but only the Los Angeles Sparks’ male head coach, Derek Fisher, is quoted:

Sparks forward and WNBPA President Nneka Ogwumike offered Ruffin-Pratt's name for the committee, which the WNBA announced July 6. The social justice council, headed by New York Liberty guard Layshia Clarendon, will lead campaigns to address inequality, implicit bias and systemic racism in the United States, the WNBA said in a statement. The group, which includes Chicago guard Sydney Colson, former league MVP Breanna Stewart of Seattle, former No. 1 overall pick A'ja Wilson of Las Vegas and Dallas rookie Satou Sabally, will host community conversations, virtual roundtables and player-produced podcasts.... “In this country, I think we're finally ready to have these conversations and to feel uncomfortable while we do it,” Sparks coach Derek Fisher said. “For many years, definitely the generation that I came through, it just was not something that was as acceptable for players to speak to issues that maybe we did not have experience in. If we were not social activists, then what role do we play in that regard? But that was just conditioning.”



As demonstrated here, although the focus of the article is about the WNBA's social justice council, WNBA athletes involved in the council are infrequently quoted. The omission of their words and the passive mentioning of their names minimizes female athletes' agency and contributions to social justice by not quoting them – ironically in a story dedicated to empowering their voices. This is unfortunately a common pattern in sports articles. According to Schmidt (2016), “while male coaches, mentors, officials and team executives are frequently quoted in stories about both men’s and women’s sports, women in positions of authority are rarely quoted at all” (p. 291). By quoting coach Derek Fisher, this article reinforces the hegemonic “male-dominated culture of sport” (Schmidt, 2016, p. 291) and the gendered ideology that men are de facto leaders and spokespersons whose voices are heard, while women are visible subaltern followers whose contributions may be seen, but whose voices continue to go unheard (Barnett, 1993). Even in stories written only about themselves, women are neither given the same agency nor powerful speaking abilities as their male counterparts. Thus, silence is an extremely gendered and normative practice. Through the practice of silencing, journalists continue to reinforce the gender inequality of female athletes while simultaneously minimizing their voices in the fight for racial justice.

### **Limitations, Further Research & Looking Forward**

One limitation of this research is the size of the corpus. Had the corpus been larger, the data collected and counted would be more statistically significant. For example, had more articles been collected for the corpus, there is strong reason to believe that more articles would have been found that framed female athletes as mothers. This would make the total number of articles that framed female athletes more statistically significant than just 6.9% of this smaller sample. In addition, articles in the corpus were not filtered or controlled as strictly as they could

have been. First, numerous articles mentioned only male and only female athletes. This made it difficult to compare and contrast how athletes were framed differently because there were more articles in the corpus that mentioned only male athletes (20) compared to the number of articles that only mentioned female athletes (13). Second, since the majority of this thesis focuses on comparing how NBA and WNBA athletes were framed or silenced, filtering and controlling for the type of sport that athletes played would have strengthened the analysis and beneficially impacted the data because articles that mentioned other professional sports – like the MLB & NFL, that do not have a professional female counterpart – would have been omitted. The final limitation of this research is that the corpus was filtered to only include articles that mentioned professional sports leagues, teams, and athletes – thus excluding collegiate athletics and athletes. Therefore, this corpus reflects only patterns found for professional athletes, rather than all athletes (*i.e.*, amateur, collegiate and professional). This is significant because the search term used when looking up articles in the ProQuest data base was simply “Athlete,” though this paper’s analysis limited itself to only professional athletes.

Looking forward, further research might address the ways in which social media platforms (including blogs and Tweets) do or do not conform to the paradigm seen in these traditional mainstream media outlets. Absent that direct comparison, athlete quotes that appeared in the corpus articles which merely reprinted Twitter and/or Instagram posts were counted as equivalent to those where a sports journalist had personally interviewed the athlete in question. We also do not know the extent to which social media postings are more or less influential than the contents of traditional sports journalism. Future research could also explore whether female athletes have gained speaking power via new media and Web 2.0 compared to how they are traditionally reported upon in newspapers. Finally, CDA and this type of research can be applied

to issues other than the Black Lives Matter movement. In fact, the past two months have witnessed a marked increase in attacks on the population of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; both male and female athletes have continued to be at the forefront of discussions about stopping anti-AAPI hate. Researchers should take advantage of this historical time to apply CDA to the various kinds of racism and other injustices that have now made their way to society's front burner.

### **Conclusion**

In 2020, while athletes took to the streets, walked off courts, deflected interview questions, boycotted games, and kneeled during national anthems to bring awareness and attempt to forge social justice, newspaper media continued to demonstrate a silently visible injustice within the world of sports.

While, at first glance, it may not seem damaging, the ways in which female athletes continue to be inadequately framed, symbolically annihilated and silenced by sports media only reinforce greater dominant, problematic ideologies. Whether it be what is read in the headlines and leads or within the body of the story, this research shows that what sports journalists leave outside the frame, in addition to what they highlight within the frame, reinforces the hegemonic ideology that sports is a male-dominated space even off the court. The male dominance perpetuated by this unequal sports media discourse demonstrates how far we are from achieving complete equality. This imbalance will only be corrected when female athletes, who are fighting equally assiduously for social justice, are no longer given less agency due to their gender identity.

This thesis examines how newspaper media continue to implement hegemonic ideologies and gendered tropes of female athletes being less legitimate athletes by discursively framing

female athletes as mothers first and athletes second. The research also reveals how male athletes are rarely framed as being fathers; when they are, they are heroized for their actions. This discursive framing of female athletes as mothers, while male athletes are simply athletes, not only reinforces how sports is seemingly an innately male space, but it also contributes to the reproduction of outdated gender practices. In addition, sports journalists' continued reliance upon passive "follower" discourse when describing female athletes' social justice actions sidelines their contributions. Meanwhile, the heroizing discourse used for male athletes highlights their actions and further reinforces their social positions as sporting leaders and captains for social change.

As Messner et al. (1993) note: "Language is never neutral." This thesis showed that, like language, newspaper layout is also not neutral. Headlines and leads, in addition to the language used, set reader agendas and perpetuate gender hierarchies. By having more male athletes mentioned in articles headlined with neutral words (quantitative) and highlighting male athletes first in article leads (qualitative), sports journalists use language, together with their newspapers' structural layout, to gender-mark seemingly neutral words and affix male dominance to sporting matters, even when their stories do not revolve around competition.

Finally, the research shows the undeniable inequality that exists in sports media as male athletes were consistently far more likely to be mentioned in sporting articles than their female counterparts. Moreover, even when mentioned in sporting articles, female athletes were often silenced because of how infrequently they were quoted when compared to their male counterparts. The inability of female athletes to have their thoughts, in addition to their actions, shared in this way demonstrates the benefits of social media compared to traditional newspapers due to the gatekeeping, silencing, and prioritizations of male voices over female voices exhibited

by these journalistic patterns. When sports journalists continue to elevate the voices of male athletes as spokespersons for social justice, they are engaging in an historical practice where men become the voices of social movements while women are viewed, but not heard.

All of these findings point to the fact that discourse perpetuates the notion that sports is a male space even when no game clock is running. Our social understanding of hegemonic male dominance in sports and female athletic inferiority is perpetuated by sports journalists as agenda-setting agents (Kaiser, 2017). The discursive work journalists do, either knowingly or unknowingly, minimizes and ignores the hard work undertaken, and sacrifices made, when female athletes strive to achieve social justice. In fact, just two months ago Renee Montgomery retired from the WNBA to pursue social justice as her full-time occupation. Not a single NBA athlete has done likewise.

Due to these media frames, female athletes are read and viewed as less legitimate athletes. Sports media contribute to the idea that female athletes' gender identity undercuts their platform and influence when they choose to speak up and act for social justice. As they go unheard in national newspapers, female athletes are forced to find other platforms to speak out against injustices. For example, just last month, female NCAA basketball players competing in the Women's Basketball Tournament turned to new media (specifically TikTok) to show the shockingly minimal amount of training equipment (yoga mats and one pitiful rack of dumbbell weights) made available to them in their tournament bubble. Meanwhile, the male NCAA players were provided with a literal warehouse filled with state-of-the-art strength training equipment. Moreover, the women's NCAA basketball tournament does not even merit the popular "March Madness" moniker, a term reserved exclusively to the men's tournament. In fact, the women's courts, towels, gift bags, etc. all read "Women's Basketball," while the men's read

“March Madness.” This discourse reveals how gender marking of neutral words exists beyond just newspapers and how it has been normalized by some of our biggest institutions, such as sports media and even the National Collegiate Athletic Association. This moment shows that language is meaningful and has a material impact upon the ways in which we view the world.

Eitzen and Baca Zinn (1989, as cited in Messner et al., 1993) argue that “[l]anguage suggests how women and men are to be valued. Language embodies negative and positive value stances and valuations related to how certain groups within society are appraised” (p. 133). Thus, when institutions do not talk about female athletes as equal to their male counterparts – such as by omitting them from the “March Madness” label – readers are taught that women are not as valuable as men and, hence, that they are inherently unequal. As this research has shown, this practice also occurs within sports media: When we do not see women in sports newspaper stories, society continues to view them as illegitimate athletes because they are not read or included in sport conversations. Furthermore, the way journalists frame female athletes is the lens through which we view female athletes in the world because “the manner in which the media frames issues impacts how the public perceives reality” (Fink, 2013, p. 332). Sports media’s silencing and symbolic annihilation of female athletes only reifies the gendered hierarchy that sports is a male-dominated space and that female athletes are both less legitimate athletes and, consequently, less significant social justice players. Because language is powerful, those who produce discourse, like sports journalists, can not only report how athletes act and react to the social justice issues of the day, but also powerfully encourage its advancement. However, when television continues to refrain from airing female athletic competitions (Messner et al., 1993), and when they are not reported by sports journalists (as shown in this thesis), sports

media only reinforce the problem. Therefore, it is *time* for sports media to call *out* these gender inequalities instead of reinforcing them.

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