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Disciplining Minorities in Positions of Power and Influence

In this paper, I will be describing my choice of text, method and rationale for the paper. I will be covering three separate interactions that have dealt with attempts to discipline minorities in positions of power and influence, specifically those in the sports industry. I will be looking at Coach Prime (Deion Sanders), LeBron James, and Serena Williams. These three figures have a very prominent influence around the world, as they are known globally and have millions of followers all across their social media platforms. In the case of Coach Prime, I will be writing about a certain interaction that occurred between himself and Coach Norvell ahead of their rivalry college football matchup in 2023. I will also be writing on an interaction between basketball star LeBron James and a Fox journalist named Laura Ingraham that took place in 2018. For Serena Williams, I am going to cover the interactions that occurred between her and Umpire, Carlos Ramos. This specific interaction occurred during the 2018 U.S. Open Tennis Women's Final.

In the field of Communication Studies, media representation and its impact on the public eye can stand as a critical spot of study. This specific research paper will be covering a significant site of exploration and analysis: the media's portrayal of prominent sports figures such as LeBron James, Serena Williams, and Coach Prime. Not only have these figures

dominated in their own respective sports, but they have also transcended the realms as well. They have all become critical influencers in extensive societal discourse involving respectability politics, race, and gender. Applying racial rhetorical criticism to this research object will provide a delve into how certain narratives in the media can be constructed in the sports realms, which reflects and influences social and cultural norms heavily. By focusing on these prolific figures (athletes and coach), one is able to view the complex interplay and intersection of respectability politics, race, and gender, and gain insight into how certain factors can shape public discourse and perception. Additionally, through this analysis, a deeper understanding of respectability politics and activism will be sought out. Figures like Coach Prime, Lebron James, and Serena Williams all represent certain unique points along this discourse, where each of them bring their own special experiences and narratives that are essential in understanding the role these minorities in positions of power and influence have on societal issues.

Description and Context

In order to understand what it is that occurred in each of these interactions, it is important to know the context for each prominent figure. I will talk about Coach Prime, then about LeBron James, and finally about Serena Williams.

Deion Sanders, AKA “Coach Prime,” is a prominent figure in the football world. Coach Prime is a black male who got inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2011. (PFHOF). Coach Prime played defensive back, and he returned kicks and punts as well. During his 14-year tenure in the National Football League (NFL) with over five teams, he won two Super Bowls and etched his name there with some of the all-time greats in the sport. He was a stud player that got

drafted in the first round of the 1989 draft. He got selected 9 times to the All-Pro team, and is still considered one of, if not, the best shutdown corner to play the game. (PFHOF).

Deion Sanders wasn't just known by many for his play; rather, it would be his character and flashiness that would put a spotlight on him. He would wear flashy clothes, jewelry, and he would always speak his mind, regardless of the negative criticism he received. Because the lights were always on him and he was a must-watch talent, he earned the nickname "PrimeTime."

Whether it be in the NFL or the MLB, PrimeTime was always one of the best athletes to watch in the biggest of moments. After a long career of playing, Deion Sanders eventually found himself being a sports analyst for several years, and shortly after, he started to turn his focus to coaching. Coach Prime would eventually end up at the helm of the University of Colorado's football team in 2022, after having already been the head coach at HBCU Jackson State University since 2020. (Piccotti).

Making this move was significant in itself for Coach Prime. It would be an amazing opportunity to showcase his aptitude as a coach and mentor in front of millions every weekend. Coach Prime's flashiness that was always accentuated in the NFL transferred over to his coaching days. Since becoming a coach, Prime has always worn a hat and sunglasses everywhere he goes; whether it be at practice, interviews, press conferences, or on the sidelines of a game. That is just a part of his "look" and style.

After Coach Prime and the Buffs pulled off an upset win over a ranked Texas Christian University football team, who had played for the National Championship the season before, Coach Prime and his team garnered the attention of millions around the nation. The following

week, the Buffs were scheduled to take on their state rival, Colorado State University. Jay Norvell, a black man, was at the helm of this football team. In a weekly show that is hosted by Jay Norvell himself, the rival head coach had this to say, “And I sat down with ESPN today, and I don’t care if they hear it in Boulder. I told them, 'I took my hat off, and I took my glasses off.' And I said, 'When I talk to grown-ups, I take my hat and my glasses off.' That’s what my mother taught me” (ESPN Colorado). Although Norvell didn’t directly say who these comments were for, one can assume that they were directed at Sanders, who coaches the rival football team. These comments were not just going to be swept under the rug nor taken lightly. Sanders responded on Buffs Primetime Radio Show, stating, “I’m not going to get in front of you and change who I am just because you’re here. I don’t do that. I’m consistent with who I am” (BuffsTV). As the show continues, Deion then says, “I’m a grown man, you telling me what I’m supposed to wear, what I’m not supposed to wear? Please” (BuffsTV). This is the context and background for the interaction between Coach Prime and Coach Norvell.

Lebron James is an American black man who is regarded as one of, if not, the greatest basketball players of all time. He currently plays for the Los Angeles Lakers and is in his 21st season in the NBA. Coming out of high school, LeBron was one of the most sought-after recruits, ever. LeBron James graduated high school and decided to forego college and head straight into the NBA. He was selected as the first overall pick in the 2003 NBA Draft by the Cleveland Cavaliers. Over the course of his 21-year tenure in the NBA, LeBron has accomplished a vast list of accomplishments. He has won the NBA championship four times, been awarded NBA MVP four times as well, and is a two-time Olympic Gold Medal winner. (Biography.com). These are only a few of the accolades that James has earned over his career.

LeBron is also an outspoken athlete who is known for his activism on social and political issues in the country. He has gone and used his platform to voice his opinion on matters such as police brutality, racial inequality, and the U.S. political climate. James has never been shy to chime in on what is going on in the world. In 2012, he showed support for Trayvon Martin, who was a black unarmed kid whose life was taken by George Zimmerman. James has also gone toe to toe with former U.S. President Donald Trump.

The specific example that I will be covering is the interaction that occurred between LeBron James and comments made by Fox host Laura Ingraham in 2018. Laura Ingraham is a conservative journalist who used to host on Fox News. She was in favor of Donald Trump and all that he would say/do. While on the other hand, James, not so much. Ingraham is oftentimes very critical of what athletes or celebrities have to say when they express their opinions on political agendas. She believes that athletes should not talk about politics at all. (Raf Productions). LeBron James was in an interview with Kevin Durant on the *Uninterrupted* program. Throughout this interview, LeBron touched on the challenges of being a black public figure in the U.S. He then started to talk about politics and criticized Donald Trump, questioning his understanding and care for the people of the U.S. On her own show "The Ingraham Angle", Ingraham stated, "Here's this barely intelligible not to mention ungrammatical take on President Trump in a new ESPN podcast" (Ingraham). James stated, "the number one job in America, the point of person, is someone who doesn't understand the people, and really don't give a fuck about the people" (James). James had this to say about Trump as well, "it's not even a surprise when he says something, it's not even surprised, it's like laughable and it's also scary" (James). James made these comments when asked about Trump's racist comments. Ingraham then

responded to them saying, “seriously, look, there might be a cautionary lesson, in LeBron, for kids. This is what happens when you attempt to leave high school a year early to join the NBA. And it's always unwise to seek political advice from someone who gets paid a hundred million dollars a year to bounce a ball. Oh, and LeBron and Kevin, you're great players but no one voted for you. Millions elected Trump to be their coach. So keep the political commentary to yourself or as someone once said, shut up and dribble” (Ingraham). This incident showed a very dismissive and irreverent way to treat athletes, (who are people as well) specifically black athletes, who have and will continue to use their platforms to speak and fight for activism on social issues.

LeBron has always been an advocate for athletes using their platforms to be more than just an athlete. This certain interaction covers respectability politics, intersections of sport with societal issues, and racial dynamics and many more. There were a multitude of pieces and reactions to the comments made by Ingraham.

Serena Williams is a black athlete who is a 23-time Grand Slam champion and has earned Olympic Gold medals throughout her tennis career. 1999 was the first year that Serena won a Grand Slam. Since then, she went on to win four gold medals with her sister Venus Williams. (Biography.com). Serena has been at the forefront of battling racism, sexism and negative media representation since she set foot onto the predominantly white scene (tennis).

The specific interaction that I want to talk about comes a year after her last Grand Slam win in 2017. This certain interaction between Serena and an umpire took place during the 2018 U.S. Open Finals. This would've been the record tying 24th Grand Slam, had Williams won. During a match between Williams and Naomi Osaka, Williams was given a total of three

code violations from Carlos Ramos, the chair umpire. (Singh, et al.). The first was for alleged coaching during the match, which isn't allowed. Williams' coach, Patrick Mouratoglou gave her a thumbs up, so that she would know to calm down. The umpire, Ramos, saw this and gave Williams a warning. She responded to him by saying, "We don't have any code and I know you don't know that, and [I] understand why you may have thought that that was coaching, but it is not. I don't cheat to win; I would rather lose. I am just letting you know" (Williams). The second violation came after tension was rising between the two parties. After losing a set and becoming frustrated, Williams slammed her broken tennis racket on the court and that is what Ramos found unacceptable. He deducted her a point, and soon after that, Williams demanded that he apologize to her for taking jabs at her character by assuming that she was cheating. After repeatedly asking for Ramos to apologize throughout the match, Williams received her third violation for verbal abuse. This came after Ramos stated Williams called him a "thief" (Singh, et al.). Williams was calling him a thief for taking a point away from her in such a pivotal match. There is rarely any drama in tennis and this was one of the biggest moments in its history. One of, if not, the biggest star in the sport of tennis calling out an umpire for treating her unfairly is impactful. Williams had this to say about Ramos, "You stole a point from me. You're a thief, too" (Williams).

Her main argument was that male players in the sport have said worse things to other umpires, but they never received such harsh penalties for their actions. This is a specific example where the media portrays one interaction in a multitude of ways, mainly negative. My analysis of the media coverage will show the broader societal perspectives towards women, specifically black women, who display their black femininity publicly. I will also look at this interaction

through a racial dynamics lens. I will explore how race affected the way the media and public created their narratives surrounding the incident. I will look at the intersectionality between gender and race in regards to Williams and all that she has faced throughout her career as examples.

The intersection of activism, race and sports is not something that is new to the world, or to broadcast media. This intersection has had deep roots in American history. In 1968, at the Olympic medal ceremony, American sprinters, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, raised their fists, which were covered by black gloves, in a “Black Power salute” (Nittle). This action that was done by the two men, was not just a gesture of defiance, but this iconic moment served as a poignant sign of the struggle for racial equality in America. Certain media outlets did not respond kindly to the actions of these men, and painted them as instigators and unpatriotic. In doing so, their message of equality and justice wasn’t taken as it should have been and was overshadowed by the negative connotations of their actions. Even in 1968, Black athletes have used their platforms to bring attention to societal issues, and this has set an example for future generations.

Now, if we fast forward to more current times, the narrative of athlete activism has changed, while also remaining noticeably familiar. Colin Kaepernick is a perfect example of how one’s actions can cause social eruption. In 2016, Kaepernick kneeled during the national anthem in order to protest the racial injustice and police brutality that had been occurring in the U.S. This peaceful protest ultimately reignited the conversation of athletes’ roles in social discourse. He immediately faced backlash, and most of it was coming from conservative media outlets, like FOX News. His actions were deemed disrespectful to the military and to the flag. We can see

that similar discourses have emerged around other minorities in positions of power and influence with our current examples of Coach Prime, LeBron James, and Serena Williams. What all these athletes and figures have in common is, they have faced negative criticism for transcending their “prescribed” roles as athletes to bring attention and change to political and social activism.

There are several initial observations that emerge as I conclude the contextual analysis. The first being that in each of the instances or examples listed above, there is the interplay of gender and race dynamics. One can see that in the case of Serena, her treatment in the 2018 U.S. Open and the media coverage that would come out following the interaction would call attention to issues of racial stereotyping and gender bias. LeBron’s interaction with Ingraham brings to light the challenges that are faced by minority athletes when they decide to voice their opinions on anything other than sports, specifically politics or any activism. In the case of Coach Prime and Coach Norvell, racial dynamics are revealed and so are professional dynamics. Can a man or woman who is acting too “black” be considered professional? Acting more “culturally black” tends to not align with the mainstream concepts of respectability. Another aspect that is key to note, is the role that the media plays in either challenging or supporting accounts around athlete activism. There is a tension around prominent figures such as athletes or coaches regarding their roles as icons in the public eye, and whether or not it is appropriate for them to chime in to broader socio-political issues. Finally, the last point that I want to address is the variety of reactions the public has to each of these incidents. These portrayals often gain more interaction and feedback on social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) or Instagram. We will see more examples of this as we get to the analysis section of this paper. Perceptions are created because the media or comments on a

video/interaction influence the shaping of these perceptions. There seems to be some difference when you compare similar incidents involving athletes or figures of different genders or race, and this raises concern about the ethics and consistency of representation on social media and broadcast media.

Prospectus

In today's world, the media's role in shaping someone's public profile and portrayal has keen implications for society's perception of race, cultural dynamics, leadership, and gender. In the case study for this capstone, the media's portrayal of minorities in positions of power and influence has transcended comments into a very influential narrative force. The narratives that are created by social media sites, news stations, and other forms of media, not only highlight the achievements of these figures on and off the field/court, but they also play a significant role in shaping the social and cultural identities of these prominent figures.

This capstone project will undergo a critical exploration of the media portrayal of these three prominent figures in the sports industry: Coach Prime (Deion Sanders), LeBron James, and Serena Williams. Through a comparative analysis of media discourse around the three influential minority figures, I will aim to uncover the interactions between societal perceptions and media narratives. This will be achieved by scrutinizing the portrayals that have emerged in their roles as activists/leaders, their accomplishments, and also in the wake of controversies. The research that is presented will ultimately seek to dissect the layers of ideologies about gender and race that are embedded in media representations about people in the sports industry.

The research is important for a multitude of reasons. By bringing attention to the complexities of the media outlets (FOX News, Twitter, journalistic sources) representations, this capstone will contribute to the discourse that is ongoing on the power of media shaping societal narratives and the culture of sports. Through a diligent methodology that combines discourse analysis with content analysis, this project will bring new insight into the communicative aspects at play in the sports industry, ultimately making it a beneficial addition to the field of Communication Studies. In this prospectus, we will examine scholarship that illuminates ways in which media narratives can both reinforce and challenge societal norms for minority figures in the sports industry.

Literature Review

The scope of My literature review will highlight the importance of the media portraying prominent minority figures in sports, in the contexts of race, activism, and gender. The overall goal of this literature review is to showcase how my research engages with studies and scholarly work that already exist. Through this, I will be able to identify any gaps that my study and research will aim to fill.

Athlete Activism and Media Response

Athlete activism has become something that is rising in this digital age. Engracia et al., Galiliy, Niven, and Rey & Capra, have all done extensive work on looking at this occurrence that is increasing as athletes want their voices to be heard. Through their scholarship, we will be able to

see some examples as to the way the media has responded to that. Galily covers the exact interaction that occurred between LeBron and Laura Ingraham. Galily states, “As the same time however, sport has been viewed by many, and still does, as an apolitical space where organizers, managers, coaches, spectators, and sponsors expected athletes to focus solely on their performance and adhere to functionalist origins of the activity, including physical fitness benefits, character building, teamwork, and social entertainment” (Galily 3). Not only are athletes like LeBron and other prominent figures in the sports industry voicing their activism more commonly, but they are expected not to say anything that doesn’t pertain to them outside of their respective space. This is where the discourse between the media and these figures stepping out of their supposed lane takes place.

In the *Journal of African American Studies*, Niven talks about the certain responses to Athletes’ political activism. He notes that race is a central factor in responses to political athletes, and suggests that both race and ideology shape the attitudes on the subject (Niven). Niven states, “People with conservative political beliefs are more likely to object to political athletes. People who do not believe racial discrimination exists, or believe white are victims, are more likely to object to political athletes. In bivariate and multivariate analyses, responses to political athletes are driven both by political belief and by race” (Niven 307). Rey and Capra conducted a study on the basis of fans’ perceptions when athletes chime in against racial injustices. Rey & Capra stated, “First, it demonstrates that there are relationships between individuals’ differing fandoms and their perceptions of professional athletes using their platforms to be activists and beliefs that professional athletes should shut up and play” (Rey & Capra 47). This research is beneficial as it shows the impact on society that athlete activism has. It also

shows how important it is that fans and people judging these athletes, stay in the loop of social justice movements to fully understand the athlete's viewpoint.

Engracia, Brown and Foxx cover how black athlete activism has changed over the years and why it is important for prominent figures to make their voices heard. Engracia et al. noted that, "During their heyday, athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos were loathed by the American mainstream (white masses)" (Engracia et al. 55). The authors address how some figures are scrutinized heavily at one point in their lives for speaking out against racism, but are "lionized" once they pass. While there is existing literature that already explores the dynamics of athlete activism, my work will show how the media frames activism in various ways based on the figure's gender and race. The main focus will be on LeBron's "Shut up and dribble" occurrence as a case study.

Race, Class, and Media Framing in Sports

Cramer, Grano, and Zakos bring light on how class and race can influence media narratives in sports. They each highlight what they call the contractual morality of sport, but most importantly, they also highlight the symbolic resistance that certain figures are taking against whiteness. Cramer explores how the landscape of Black masculinity in the world of sports media in the United States is entwined with self-expression via appearance and personality characteristics. Cramer states, "Westbrook's use of style and high fashion has set the standard for similar expressions of Black culture, and therefore resistance to the NBA Dress Code, as numerous NBA players have followed his lead by combining hip-hop and high fashion for their

pre and postgame apparel...” (Cramer 67). Cramer focuses on two athletes that alter black masculinity in their own ways, by expressing themselves through ‘unconventional’ ways of dressing and on field/court antics, challenging the control that whiteness has exerted in the sports industry. Just as Cam Newton and Russell Westbrook have challenged whiteness in their own ways, both Serena and Coach Prime have done the same by expressing their black masculinity/femininity in their own controversies.

When it comes to how athletes or coaches are framed in the media, the language that is used to describe them usually depends on the color of the figure. For instance, in, “Risky Dispositions: Thick Moral Description and Character-Talk in Sports Culture” by Daniel Grano, Grano covers the way both Black and White athletes are talked about in regards to their character evaluations, in the NFL Draft. When you compare the language that is used when talking about white or black athletes, the differences are quite contrasting. Grano stated, “Indeed, the most common association between African American athletes and ‘character issues’ in American sport is with criminality or deviance, and this is especially true in professional football, where it is assumed that players become hard-wired for violence and have trouble controlling their impulses in civic settings” (Grano 264).

The idea that athletes or figures like Serena, LeBron, or Coach Prime are portrayed negatively, solely because of their race, is not fair to them at all. In one of Grano’s case studies, he focused on the theory of critical social contracts. Minorities who are playing/coaching at the highest level in their respective sport, have to always exemplify the best character traits a person can have. This is all part of a social contract that plays a major role in class, race, and respectability politics.

The notion of respectability politics has been at the helm of crossroads between Black masculinity and racial rhetorical criticism. Respectability politics refers to a group of cultural and behavioral norms that disparaged groups of people take on in order to fight against bad discrimination and stereotypes. When it comes to Black masculinity, respectability politics usually covers the discourse of how someone presents themselves, their “true” identity, and some expectations that society places on them. Grano stated, “A contractual trust is placed in the activities of athlete-heroes who perform as the main characters in mythic sports ritual.” (Grano, 449). These prominent figures have to be expressing hero-like characteristics to counter any and all bad stereotypes that certain people may place on them, and to ultimately counter the idea of black masculinity/femininity as threatening. These ideologies are bigger than one Twitter tweet, they go far beyond that. These ideologies can be found in the news, in journals, and on social media each and every day.

Zakos talks about the correlation between racial contracts and stereotypes, in regards to black athletes. Zakos claims, “...the “bad” black athlete is a socially constructed figure who is physically and athletically gifted, but unintelligent, aggressive, and inherently dangerous” (Zakos 102). Minorities are often portrayed differently because of how they express their femininity/masculinity, and this is what the media outlets feed into because of the strong connection to whiteness. In the case for the three figures in this analysis (LeBron, Serena, Coach Prime), each of them have been picked apart for doing so. My work will offer a nuanced understanding of class and race in the media, by examining how these dynamics (race and class) play out.

Gender Dynamics and Media Portrayal

In this section, I will focus on the work by Fink, Sisjord & Kristiansen, and Tredway. Their work ranges from the compound interplay of media and gender in sports all the way to the challenges female athletes face when they are portrayed in the media. Fink covers the way female athletes are portrayed in the media in comparison to their male-counterparts. Fink states, “As I will demonstrate in this review, female athletes and women’s sport are still woefully underrepresented in all types of media and sportswomen are rarely acclaimed solely for their athletic abilities. Instead, the focus is often on their physical appearance, femininity, and/or heterosexuality” (Fink 331). Although there are tremendous female athletes out there who are prominent figures in the sports industry, the media chooses to focus on their looks and femininity, disregarding their achievements. Serena Williams, a black woman, has had to face this type of scrutiny her whole career, dealing with not only sexist comments, but racist comments as well.

Sisjord and Kristiansen conducted a study on how male and female wrestlers were portrayed in the media. Sisjord and Kristiansen stated, “In essence, the women’s narratives referred to media representations in connection with wrestling competition, the males’ to entertainment programs and shows. Hence, the framing of female wrestlers resulted in raillery and disdain for their roles as athletes, whereas the framing of male wrestlers extended and transformed their image of “strong macho man” into entertainment contexts” (Sisjord and Kristiansen 364). The study took place in Norway, and still came out with the same results that have been seen in similar studies in the U.S. Women in sports will always be portrayed in very

disparaging ways when compared to that of men. Not only is this a problem in the States, but it is something that happens worldwide.

Tredway performs a direct analysis on Serena Williams and her performance of blackness in a predominantly white setting (tennis). Tredway states, “Serena has been, for the most part, unjustly positioned between the historically white and upper-class undercurrent of women’s tennis and the tenets of the intersectional linkage between racism and sexism” (Tredway 1577). Serena is one of the most accomplished tennis players that has ever played professional tennis. Since 1995, she has had to fight against the constant scrutiny for expressing her black femininity and being called violent because of her play. The media has painted Serena in a different light than her counterparts more times than not. This work done by Tredway will be significant in helping me shape mine. My research will not only build on the foundation of Serena’s media portrayal, but I will also emphasize the intersectionality of gender and race that existing literature lacks.

Perceptions of Athletes in Society and Media Narratives

Babiak & Sant, Fourney & Brown, Page et al., and Piquero delve into the societal perception of athletes, and address the media’s role in shaping athlete identity. Babiak and Sant conducted a study on the discourses of male athlete charity and how the U.S media coverage represented them. Babiak and Sant stated, “Generally, both frames conveyed a “positively” oriented tone in the news coverage surrounding athlete philanthropy. From a more critical point of view, the economic consequences frame highlights the costs, challenges, financial failings, and scandals of

athletes involved in charitable work” (Babiak & Sant 63). The way athletes are portrayed oftentimes depends on one’s “frame” of the news. There are generic frames and then there are issue-specific frames. If an athlete was involved in any scandal, then the “frame” of that story was most likely negative. Fourney and Brown cover the expectations that are placed on black men, specifically the stereotypes, and negative images they have to avoid. They focused on LeBron James to show how sports and race intersected. Fourney and Brown stated, “Once he fulfilled his ‘potential’ in winning a championship, James the activist and philanthropist was recognized.

Therefore, as a prominent black athlete, James could not be seen as anything but until he fulfilled the expectations of his judges, i.e., the city of Cleveland and a league and national media wanting another Jordan” (Fourney & Brown 108). Not only does their research show that black athletes are framed in negative ways most of the time, but it also shows that a black athlete cannot be accepted or deemed anything else, until they have achieved the expectations from their “judges”. Their work ties directly to the work that I am conducting. They also touched on the “good” and “bad” framing of black athletes, which we will get into here.

The media discourse surrounding black athletes, and black people in general, is often never as positive or nice in relation to their white counterparts. The public perceptions of black athletes when accused of crimes, or not fitting into the norms of society, must be examined in the realm of pro sports and beyond. An example of this can be seen in the article Page, Duffy, Frisby, and Perreault. Page et al. explore the responses that the media had in regards to Sherman’s unique post-game interview. The media framed and portrayed Sherman as a crazy guy

and a thug. Would the media have called a white athlete who was passionate about his livelihood and sport a thug, if he were in the same situation? I think scholars would not think so.

Page et al. stated, “Commenters and citizens criticized Sherman for behaving like a thug, a term that carries powerful negative connotations for African American males and is considered by many as code for the N-word” (Page et al. 271). Through this article, the power of the media is seen. In this case, the media fed into racism, stereotyping, thus, highlighting yet another black athlete in a negative fashion.

We can also relate the idea of a Black athlete being called a ‘thug’ to our next article. Piquero covers the stereotypes that athletes go through, providing an analysis of the impact of stereotypes and race, primarily for black athletes. At times in the media, the line that separates a black criminal and a black athlete are often fused together, and Piquero also covers the disparities between races in regards to athlete activism. Piquero stated, “Or, more pointedly, if we perceive that some people with some characteristics are bad, then they will be bad regardless of what objective data are presented to the contrary” (Piquero 238). Although some black athletes are out here advocating for justice, such as Lebron James or Coach Prime, there will always be a negative connotation from someone. Black athletes/coaches will always be looked at under a distorted lens, compared to their White counterparts.

Methodology

In the next section, I will be conducting a qualitative discourse and content analysis of the complex narratives surrounding Coach Prime, LeBron James, and Serena Williams. This mixed-methods approach will help to anatomize public perceptions and media representations.

Through a range of sources, social media posts, broadcasts segments, and media articles, prevalent themes will be brought to light through the comparative analysis. Incidents of activism, public controversy, and achievement related to these prominent figures will come from various media platforms. The discourse analysis will help to reveal the underlying cultural meanings and ideologies that appear in dominant media's narratives. Conducting this analysis from a mixed-methods approach, it will allow for an in-depth examination of the media's part in shaping these prominent figures' personas. It also helps bring insights into the intersections of athlete activism, gender, and race all within sports media. By incorporating these themes and methodologies with theoretical frameworks within gender studies and critical race theory, this analysis will contribute to that of existing scholarship. It will address gaps in understanding the media's sway on societal perceptions of minority figures in positions of power and influence.

Analysis

This analysis will focus on the media's depictions of Coach Prime, LeBron James, and Serena Williams, analyzing how these depictions and narratives are constructed and to show what they reveal about the convergence of race, gender, sports, and society. This analysis will combine discourse analysis with qualitative content analysis to further examine the contextual and textual elements of media representations of these figures. Through a meticulous examination of diverse media sources, the research that is presented in this analysis will offer a unique contribution to the field of Communications Studies. The complex interplay between societal perceptions, representation, and the role of the media molding both will be revealed.

In order to move any further, it is necessary to break down the concept of media and what I mean when I talk about “the media’s” portrayals. When I refer to the media, I am not referring to one sole entity that covers everything. I am referring to the social actors, social media platforms, and channels that basically compose the whole of the term “media.” In this analysis, we will cover three specific examples of how the media has portrayed Serena Williams, LeBron James, and Deion Sanders. By examining the interactions that occurred with these figures and the way the media reacted/portrayed each of them, we will then begin to gain an understanding of how these narratives can shape someone’s identity.

As we take a closer look at each of the interactions, it is pivotal that we understand what is happening. I will provide brief summaries of the incidents that occurred between each of the individuals. During the U.S. Open Final in 2018, Serena Williams was hit with a series of contentious penalties that provoked widespread public debate and media coverage. It all started when Serena was penalized for “receiving” coaching signals from the stands. The umpire would later follow up with another point penalty, calling for racket abuse against Williams, after she slammed her racket on the ground. All this led up to Williams receiving a point deduction for verbal abuse after calling the umpire a “thief” and a “liar” (Williams). This specific interaction happened at a championship tennis match where decorum rules are not only implicitly White but severely enforced, and the exchange was captured across multiple media platforms, from social media discussion groups to live broadcasts, with each of the representations portraying a different mix of criticism and support for Williams. In the case for LeBron James, James was scrutinized for voicing his opinions on social justice issues outside his role as a basketball player. James has been an outspoken advocate for racial injustice and political matters. His

outspokenness is exactly what led to a news anchor telling him to “shut up and dribble” (Ingraham), further confining his concerns and voice to those of just an athlete’s “role.” The coverage of this certain altercation varied, with some outlets framing James as overstepping his boundaries as an athlete, while others illustrated him as a hero for using his platform to fight racial injustice. The interaction between Coach Prime and Coach Norvell became a focal point for sport and media coverage during the fall 2023 college football season. Norvell had this to say in regards to Coach Prime, “When I talk to grown-ups, I take my hat and my glasses off.’ That’s what my mother taught me.” (Norvell). Coach Prime responded the following day while on the Buffs Primetime Radio Show stating, “I’m not going to get in front of you and change who I am just because you’re here. I don’t do that. I’m consistent with who I am.” (Sanders). Then he said: “I’m a grown man, you telling me what I’m supposed to wear, what I’m not supposed to wear. Please.” (Sanders). This interaction accentuated themes of racial undertones in sports leadership and respectability politics. The incident was covered extensively from sports broadcasts to social media forums, with a vast variety of takes on the magnitude of their exchange.

Let’s take an in-depth look at some of the reactions that materialized after the incidents took place. We’ll go ahead and start with the Serena Williams incident in the 2018 U.S. Open Final. On one side of the spectrum, there’s criticism that Williams was displaying inadequate on-court behavior, and many took this viewpoint as overshadowing Osaka’s significant win. There were many people on Twitter (X) arguing that the focus of the media should’ve been on Osaka becoming the first Japanese player to win a major tennis title, rather than Williams’ arguments. The following remarks will be from Twitter users who thought Williams’ actions overshadowed the whole tournament, and these tweets all occurred on Sep. 9,

2018. Natalie Jacobs stated, “A shame a woman “fighting for women” has overshadowed what should have been a triumphant moment for another woman #UsOpenFinal” (Jacobs). Rebecca Powell stated, “A shame that the spotlight remains on @serenawilliams behaviour & not the superior performance of @Naomi_Osaka_ Let's celebrate her win not Serena's loss #USOpen.” (Powell). Camellia actually scrutinized Williams for putting the loss on sexism. Camellia Alexan stated, “Serena Williams lost. Blaming it on sexism shows she's weak. She's doing a disservice to all women by making us look like victims. We are not victims.” (Alexan). A whole lot of these viewpoints suggest that Serena’s actions were almost tantrum-like, and took away from Osaka’s achievement and celebration. Some of the comments under Alexan’s post are disgustingly racist and sexist, scrutinizing Williams in ways she’s been scrutinized her whole career. One user had this to say, “I agree- Serena definitely did women and equality a great disservice by playing the sexist card- women are not the pathetic creatures she portrayed today in her disgraceful unsportsmanlike manner. How can you expect equal prize money when you behave like that?” (X User). Another commenter posted, “Uhh since Serena s a guy, pretty weak argument.” (X User). Serena has faced racism and sexism her whole career. Critiques of Williams’ behavior have touched on the issue of whether her response to the penalties was justifiable or if it just demonstrated a lack of control of her own emotions in such a high stakes moment, all of which reinforce racist and sexist ideologies about appropriate Black feminine behavior.

On the other side of the spectrum, there is strong support for Williams and her fight against sexism that occurred after the incident. There were both men and women defending Serena’s actions, and even a tennis legend, Billie Jean King. Billie Jean King had this to say in regards to the incident, “When a woman is emotional, she’s “hysterical” and she’s penalized for

it. When a man does the same, he's "outspoken" & and there are no repercussions. Thank you, [@serenawilliams](#), for calling out this double standard. More voices are needed to do the same." (King). This comment received over 213,000 likes, showing the immense amount of support that is behind this certain narrative. King highlights the double standards that occur in the sport of tennis, showing how expressions of emotion are penalized differently for women when they are compared to men. James Blek, former tennis player, had this to say in support of Williams, "I will admit I have said worse and not gotten penalized. And I've also been given a "soft warning" by the ump where they tell you to knock it off or I will have to give you a violation. He should have at least given her that courtesy. Sad to mar a well played final that way." (Blake). This is one of the many examples that goes to show the disparity between calls that women get in comparison to their male counterparts. Serena should've received a warning of some sort before having a whole point deducted from her. She didn't use vulgar language or get physical in any way with the umpire. Men can be as "outspoken" as they want, but as soon as a woman does it, she's labeled as "hysterical". Adam Grant, a twitter user stated, "When a man argues with an umpire, it's passion. When a woman does it, it's a meltdown. When a black woman does it, it's a penalty. [#DoubleStandards](#) [#USOpen](#) [#Serena](#)." (Grant). Grant makes it clear that there is a discrepancy in the officiating in regards to women, and more to those of women in color in the sport of tennis. There needs to be a change in rules that addresses these differences, specifically on the need for fair and equal treatment for all athletes, regardless of gender or race. Williams has been a trailblazer for the sport of tennis, solidifying herself as a symbol of resiliency and having a large impact far beyond that of just tennis. Her voice for equality continues to be heard around the world, despite the negative narratives the media attaches to her name.

Next, we will delve into the reactions and ways the media portrayed NBA star LeBron James after the “shut up and dribble” incident. In response to James’ political comments, Laura Ingraham directed James to stick to his area of expertise and stay out of politics by telling James to “shut up and dribble.” There was a significant amount of debate and discourse all across various media outlets, with some seeing her comments as racially motivated, while others critiqued the involvement of celebrities in any political conversations. You can bet that LeBron James, and fellow NBA players did not take lightly to Ingraham’s comments. They refused to be silenced when it came to voicing their opinions on social issues. James responded by posting “#wewillnotshutupanddribble” to all of his platforms. This would eventually become a call to action for athletes and people in positions of power and influence, asserting their rights to speak on matters outside of sports and their respective areas of expertise. James posted a picture of a sign stating, “[I AM MORE THAN AN ATHLETE](#)” to his Twitter and Instagram. The post gained over 1.4 million likes, and was the first official response from James. In one of the first press conferences after the incident, The Sporting News posted on Twitter, “Thank you, whatever her name is. I appreciate her for giving me even more awareness, at the best weekend of the NBA.” LeBron James at All-Star media day responding back to the Fox News host who told him to “shut up and dribble.” (sportingnews). NBA Commissioner, Adam Silver, also commended his players on being resilient and speaking up on social issues. NBA TV posted on Twitter saying, ““Let me begin by saying I’m incredible proud of our players for using the platform they have.” Commissioner Adam Silver addresses recent “shut up and dribble” comments aimed at [@NBA](#) players. [#NBAAllStar](#)” (NBATV). Not only did the NBA Commissioner back his players, but millions of people around the world did as well. Tim, a

Twitter user, replied with this comment when LeBron made his response to Ingraham, “People get scared when athletes start voicing their opinions because they are actually heard by millions. I think it’s great that they can be a voice for us.” (Tmets1986). Tim shows that these athletes advocating for themselves and the people are exactly what they need to be heard. With athletes having immeasurable power and influence in the world, they are seen as leaders and beacons of hope to speak on social issues for the common civilian.

On the other side of the debate, many defended Ingraham’s comments. Scott Vaughn, a Twitter user stated, “She is 100.0%” (Palmettocock1). On another media outlet known as “Reddit” one user had this to say in support of Ingraham, “I honestly agree with her. I’m sick and tired of athletes and celebrity telling people what’s right and what’s wrong. STFU and do what you’re paid to do, which is entertain.” (Without_options). Another Reddit user stated, “I agree with her. And I’m not a trump supporter or even a republican. Their job is to entertain. And also, as for her comment about being uneducated. That is harsh, but also correct.” (Thumper360). As you can see, not only are her supporters incompetent, but many are completely okay with taking away someone’s first amendment. After two years, Ingraham had something else to say about a certain athlete. This time, though, he was a White quarterback in the NFL, whose name is Drew Brees. In 2020, Drew Brees was interviewed by Yahoo Finance and he stated, “(he will) never agree with anybody disrespecting the flag.” (Brees). This was all in regards to fellow NFL players kneeling and protesting before NFL games in 2020 when BLM movement was occurring. He received heat and backlash from some of his own teammates and even had LeBron James call him out on social media. Ingraham was proud to defend Brees and his comments. In a live broadcast, Laura Ingraham defended Brees by stating, “He’s allowed to have his view about what

kneeling and the flag means to him. I mean he's a person. He has some worth, I would imagine... [This is beyond football though.](#)" (Ingraham). Later on in that same broadcast on Fox News, her cohost said, "He's a great Christian man" (Fox News).

This is a great example of racism and double standards right in our faces, on national television. LeBron responded quickly by stating, "If you still haven't figured out why the protesting is going on. Why we're acting as we are is because we are simply F-N tired of this treatment right here! Can we break it down for you any simpler than this right here???? And to my people don't worry I won't stop until I see CHANGE???" [#ShutUpAndDribbleThisPowerfulBlackManComingFullSteam](#)" (LeBron). This certain Twitter post received over 497,000 likes. Hannah Storm, an ESPN Director, had this to say on LeBron's tweet, "Her words are simply unacceptable and exactly what we must fight against. Thank you for being a consistently powerful voice and leader" (Storm). Another Twitter user stated, "This is completely incoherent. If anyone speaks baby here please translate for me" (BlayzeKarp). His comments were in response to the way LeBron typed his tweet. Raquel, another Twitter user, stated, "Lebron she definitely knows what she's doing .. she doesn't want you to use your platform to spread awareness on issues that affect US!! But it's okay for Drew Brees to live blindly on his privilege." (Raquel). As we can see, the criticism of James also accentuated the broader issues of race and how certain athletes' voices on political activism is perceived in various ways based on race. Attitudes toward athlete activism is shaped by both race and ideology, and this can be seen in the comments and representation of figures in the media. Followers of Laura Ingraham defended her actions, and were in disagreement with LeBron. What exactly does this indicate? This shows that the intersection of politics and sports can create

strong feedback that is influenced by the viewer's political ideologies and racial views. This incident is one of many that emphasizes the evolving role that minorities in positions of power and influence have in public discourse and the makeup of their participation in social and political debates. Figures like LeBron James can use their platforms to start conversations on societal issues that broaden far beyond the realm of sports, and figures like Laura Ingraham can use their platform to shut it down.

As we take a closer look at the interactions between Coach Prime and Coach Norvell, it is key to understand that Norvell is a Black coach as well. It is rare to see Black coaches heading entire football programs, but it is even rarer to see them taking subtle jabs at each other's characters. The media representations for both coaches played into the impact on diversity and unity that Coach Prime has brought into the broader sports community. One Twitter user had this to say about what Coach Norvell directed at Coach Prime, "Crazy part is, people will come on here Sunday and pretend we made everything up and that he wasn't taking shots at Coach Prime. They are so jealous & threatened by Prime it's sad. He said nothing but nice things about this guy. Yet becuz dude is insecure all he can do is HATE!" (Reallytheitgirl). JZM7979 said, "Coach is right about Sanders. Deion is way too old to be dressing and acting like a 20-year-old kid." (Jeremy). Another outlet frames Deion as being a reason that CU can take a step towards a more inclusive society. His sole presence can be a positive force for change. Delyce Collins, a writer for Westword, a Colorado newsletter, stated, "But this is football, a game, a tool being used by Deion Sanders to bring unity to a city that may have been behind the curve in diversity." (Collins). Applauding Coach Prime's influence to be different and express Blackness as he pleases, Collins hopes a new generation can look beyond racial divisions and look towards a

future that has much more about unity and through diversity, where there is more than one way to “behave appropriately.”

While Norvell might have assumed that the world would be on his side because he was speaking out of dominant ideology, other reactions from the media portrayed Coach Norvell as the bad guy and framed what he said as wrong. Twitter users had this to say about Norvell’s comments, “Why do we as black men have to talk bad about other black men who are doing good things.” (CliffordChatma1). A user on Reddit had this to say about Norvell, “It makes Norvell sound like an idiot and honestly... It's not going to end well for him. At best, it blows over. At worst, people will say he lost touch with reality, "boomer, or lacks cultural awareness.” (KommanderKeen-a42). Coach Prime is often scrutinized for the way he presents his Black masculinity in this white space. Others criticize him for the way he talks, the way he carries himself, and the way he dresses. Deion Sanders is going to continue doing what he does, just as he has since the time he was once a player. The way that Coach Prime displays his Black masculinity is important to those who look up to him. Sanders brings a certain “sizzle” to the space of coaching that has just not been seen before, especially at this high of a level (power 5 conference in the NCAAF).

Why exactly might it matter that Deion is displaying his Black masculinity in this way? It matters because at the end of the day, sports and coaching is all a business. A company can be scared or feel threatened when someone doesn’t conform to dominant cultural expectations, the “norm”, as some might say. Once a company or the media start to feel threatened, then the negative narratives and negative stereotypes start to emerge. Through this, articles, posts, and discussion boards are created. These spaces allow for individuals within publics and

counterpublics to discuss and talk to each other. This allows for comments, tweets, or reddit posts that reinforce and/or resists/oppose the dominant ideology of that outlet. In this certain instance, Coach Prime was seen as rude and that his mother failed to raise him correctly, which is a particularly pointed criticism in Black culture. Norvell stated, “When I talk to grown-ups, I take my hat and my glasses off.’ That’s what my mother taught me.” (Norvell). Norvell, as a Black man aligned with the White majority, attacked Sanders for how “Black” he was acting, and took jabs at his mother all in a short statement. Because Coach Prime presented himself in such a different way compared to the other coaches, he was seen as less respectable.

Through all this, Sanders has not changed, and he has continued to wear his hats and sunglasses, which has only further reinforced his being an inspiration and a role model for other Black men in the sports world. Norvell is another example of someone trying to reinforce the idea that having an outspoken personality would further reinforce negative stereotypes about Black individuals. You can understand it if you consider how dangerous it has been for Black individuals to assert their right to determine their own standard of what it means to behave appropriately within historically white spaces, which is just what is at stake in the other case studies involving Serena Williams and LeBron James. Deion Sanders has done a lot in his career in relation to impacting respectability politics and black masculinity. He has inspired others to be their true selves, no matter the circumstances. Navigating criticism and controversy can be a hard thing to do for most. But, when you’ve done it for multiple years of your life like Deion has, it is second nature at that point.

Conclusion

In analyzing the multiple portrayals and public perceptions of Serena Williams, LeBron James, and Coach Prime by different segments of the media landscape, this paper uncovers a complex web of interactions between societal discourse, athlete identity, and media framing that transcends traditional sports media. The examination of how these figures, each with distinct identities and backgrounds, are represented across various media platforms helps to construct a nuanced argument about the multifaceted role of media in shaping discourses and perceptions surrounding identity and creating perceptions.

The portrayals identified through meticulous coding and interpretation reveal patterned representations, highlighting how different media outlets and social media contributors contribute to a landscape of bias that can misrepresent and marginalize figures based on activism, gender, and race. This analysis demonstrates that minority figures such as athletes and coaches are not merely celebrated for their triumphs or good deeds, but also critically examined for their personal beliefs and activism. The results suggest a more complex scenario: media, in its myriad forms, acts as a battleground for the negotiation of societal values and identities. We see this in our daily lives on social media, TV, and the internet.

By delving into the public discourse and media coverage surrounding Williams, James, and Coach Prime, this study bridges gaps in our comprehension of the dynamic relationship between media portrayals and individual identity. It challenges the prevailing belief that portrayals of athletes are evolving towards less stereotyped and more unbiased depictions, offering a critical view of the ongoing complexities in media representations.

The insights that have been gained from this analysis are crafted to engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including scholars from Communication Studies, gender studies, racial

discourse, and sports media analysis. By presenting a multifaceted perspective on media representation, this paper encourages scholars to revise their approaches to the study of media narratives and portrayals. It particularly emphasizes the role of individual actors within the vast expanse of social media outlets, who collectively shape and challenge societal norms on a daily basis. This change prompts scholars to move beyond traditional models and explore the intricate interplay of diverse experiences and perspectives that shape the portrayal of minorities, influenced by a confluence of societal factors.

By acknowledging and highlighting the diverse contributors to media narratives, from institutional channels to individual social media voices, this paper advocates for a more nuanced approach to understanding how societal values and identities are negotiated in the public sphere. In doing so, it invites to reassess the complex, sometimes contradictory roles that certain media platforms play in reflecting and shaping the environment of representation.

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