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Prospectus

Introduction

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 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 the 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 the three influential minority figures, this paper 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 gender and race that is embedded in media representations in the sports industry. This project will also be driven by some research questions. Here are a few: How do these narratives that are pushed out by the media challenge

and preserve existing societal norms and stereotypes that are related to gender and race? How does the media's portrayal of these prominent figures contribute to the public's understanding beyond their sports personas?

The research is important for a multitude of reasons. By bringing attention to the complexities of the media's 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 overlook 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. Because of this, the media tends to forget that athletes are people with a voice and opinions of their own as well. 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 figures 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 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 and Russell 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 covered and 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. 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 the media may place on them, and to ultimately counter the idea of black

masculinity/femininity as threatening.

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 and corporations 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 under-

represented 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. On the other hand, if you are a white, blond haired woman, your media coverage will tend to be positive, rather than negative.

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. 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, 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. 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. In a composition by Piquero, Piquero covers the stereotypes that athletes go through. This article provides 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 lens, compared to their White counterparts. (Parts of the literature reviews by Cramer, Grano, Page et al., Piquero and Zakos have been extracted from my previous works).

Methodology

There will be 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 the media's narratives. By committing 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 that root from 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.

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