

## Richard Sherman Speaks and Almost Breaks the Internet: Race, Media, and Football<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

On January 19, 2014, NFL star Richard Sherman made a game winning play, blocking a pass intended for receiver Michael Crabtree in a matchup between the Seattle Seahawks and the San Francisco 49ers. In an interview with Erin Andrews immediately following the game, Sherman, with great intensity, shouted, “I’m the best corner in the game. When you try me with a sorry receiver like Crabtree, that is the result you are going to get. Don’t you ever talk about me. [...] Crabtree. Don’t you open your mouth about the best, or I’m going to shut it for you real quick. L-O-B.” The brief interview, captured live on camera, provided a visual drama as arresting as the script and exploded through social media and mainstream news. Through the lens of symbolic convergence theory (SCT) informed by visual rhetoric and critical race theory (CRT), the authors examine news and citizen coverage of the Sherman interview during the week following the incident. Responses to this incident highlight how sexism, racism, and various forms of oppression have predictable patterns including casting groups as the “other” and naturalizing practices of subordination. Further, the authors show how symbols and mediated dramas shape and define social relationships.

### KEYTERMS

critical theory; ethnicity;  
stereotype/prejudice/bias;  
race; media

On January 19, 2014, star cornerback Richard Sherman made a game winning play, blocking a pass intended for receiver Michael Crabtree in a matchup between the Seattle Seahawks and the San Francisco 49ers. In an interview with Fox Sports analyst Erin Andrews immediately following the game, Sherman, with great intensity, shouted:

I’m the best corner in the game. When you try me with a sorry receiver like Crabtree that is the result you are going to get. Don’t you ever talk about me [...] Crabtree. Don’t you open your mouth about the best, or I’m going to shut it for you real quick. L-O-B.” (Sherman, 2014)

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The brief interview, captured live on camera, provided a visual drama as arresting as the script. Afterwards, social media blew up. Andrews said the volume of Sherman-related tweets froze her Twitter feed. The popular press reported on the exchange immediately and extensively. Everyone seemed to have strongly held opinions. 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. Others rushed to Sherman's defense declaring that he was provoked by Crabtree and that his demeanor was reasonable considering he had just finished a close and hard-fought game and was bound to be fired up and emotional. A few others pointed out that interviews and actions by White athletes are received much differently than those of Black athletes (Jefferson, 2014).

In the hours and days following the interview, traditional and social media outlets covered the story extensively, including *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, ESPN, network and cable television, and sports blogs. The database Press Display revealed 781 articles about Sherman within 48 hours.<sup>2</sup> This article explores the immediate coverage and reactions to this incident. We selected the Sherman interview primarily because of its salience not only in sports media, but because it received so much wider attention. A study examined Twitter in the ten-hour time period after the interview using the terms "Seattle," "Seahawks," and "Sherman" and coded each term as positive, negative or neutral in sentiment. The term "Sherman" generated 2.2 million tweets and the study found that there was almost the same number of negative tweets as positive tweets (Lewis & Tripathi, 2014). Many of these sentiments were also expressed in the form of image macros (images with superimposed wording) and became memes.

Exploring the interplay of traditional news coverage of an issue, and online citizen response to that issue, is worthy of study. Although this project does not attempt to explore media effects, it does capture, analyze, and compare the converging narratives unique to news reporting and those unique to social media conversation. This study extends from discussions on the shifting center of power in public opinion formation, from traditional news sources to alternative influences of "fake" news, citizen journalism, and social media conversations (Blake, 2015; Oremus, 2014).

Through the lens of symbolic convergence theory (SCT) informed by visual rhetoric and critical race theory (CRT), we examine news and citizen coverage of the Sherman interview during the week following the incident. SCT is particularly useful in this study because it explains how individuals come together to share worldviews and create social reality for those participating in those worldviews. CRT originally focused on how racism has been encoded into the justice system, marginalizing people of color while purporting to be colorblind (Barnes, 1990; Calmore, 1992). Rossing (2007) helpfully linked CRT with critical rhetoric (CR) which has an explicitly ideological focus. We analyze messages in the week following the interview; both in headlines of coverage in mainstream media and in the visual messages created and shared largely by citizens via social media—particularly on sports and news aggregator sites and Twitter. A popular microblogging service, Twitter has

become important in many areas but is particularly prevalent for sports, entertainment, and celebrities. Hutchins (2014) argued that Twitter and other social networks are revolutionizing sports reporting and audience consumption practices. We argue that its immediacy, ease of use, and accelerated communication may serve to emphasize polarization and intense reactions. Moreover, as journalists Tweet and respond to fans' messages, a complex sports communication ecosystem emerges (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013). We chose to also focus on mainstream news headlines as they reflect the traditional role of communicating news values to the public (Dor, 2003), and have both a summarizing function (Bell, 1991) and a persuasive function, catching attention and motivating readers (Alexander, 1997).

We first review the literature on sports reporting and representations of race and the male athlete and then describe our lenses of CRT and CR. This literature review also explores Bormann's SCT and visual rhetoric, to support a combined verbal and visual rhetorical analysis and its utility in studying our artifacts. Next, we apply SCT's method, fantasy theme analysis (FTA), to the news headlines and social media image-macro memes surrounding the Sherman interview. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and their implications for sports journalism, racism, and the growing nature of widely dispersed and highly visual conversations and media dramas that shape and define social reality.

## Literature review

### *Characteristics of athletic programming and coverage*

Considerable scholarship has documented and interrogated media framing of Black athletes. Andrews and Cole claimed (cited in Buffington, 2005, p. 33), "sports media never simply report on athletes or events in the sports world; they actively interpret them for audiences by the way they select, frame, and describe." Studies of both broadcast and print coverage of college and/or professional football have found Blacks often characterized as exceptionally athletic (Billings, 2004; Woodward, 2004), and Whites described in terms of intelligence (Woodward, 2004). Eagleman (2011) analyzed articles on athletes in major league baseball in *Sports Illustrated* from 2000 to 2007 and found that more than 80% of the time, White athletes were framed as hard workers, driven by dedication to succeed, whereas hard work and the passion to succeed were not as prominent in articles about African American baseball players.

Bigler and Jeffries's (2008) observations that NFL draft coverage, found in some of the most well-respected and widely circulated publications in sports, framed Black quarterbacks in unflattering ways (p. 126). "Blacks who have played quarterback in college and/or the NFL claim that the principal reason for the dearth of Black quarterbacks is racism" (p. 125). This led to their study of how NFL draft experts evaluate Black college quarterbacks. The authors found that draft experts buy into and perpetuate racial stereotypes about Blacks, consistently rating Blacks more negatively in the areas of leadership and intelligence/decision making (p. 139).

Mercurio and Filak (2010) looked specifically at *Sports Illustrated's* 1998–2007 coverage of Black and White College quarterbacks prior to the NFL draft, finding patterns of stereotyping: Words and phrases emphasized Blacks' physical gifts and lack of mental prowess, whereas Whites were described as less physically gifted but more mentally prepared (p. 56). The literature on representation of race in sports leads to findings that Black athletes tend to be characterized by their athletic abilities, whereas White athletes were characterized more for their intelligence and hard work (Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings & Eastman, 2001; Denham, Billings, & Halone, 2002; Gray, 1995). In a study of racialized depictions in photographs of U.S. Olympic (2000) athletes in a sample of U.S. daily newspapers, Hardin, Dodd, Chance, and Walsdorf (2004) found Black athletes were overrepresented in strength sports (contrary to the reality of the Games), concluding that such depictions reinforce notions of Black primitive athleticism and of racial difference (p. 211).

Mastro, Blecha, and Seate's study (2011) of newspaper coverage, across a 3-year time frame, of race and crime in sports news found disproportionate attention paid to coverage of Black athletes in the context of crime. Crimes committed by Black athletes (vs. Whites) were covered in more specific detail, were associated with more negative consequences, and coverage was markedly more derisive, accusatory, and sympathetic to the victim (p. 539). Reporting also attributed White athletes' crime to situational circumstances and blamed Black athletes' crime on personal/internal reasons (p. 540). Even films ostensibly aimed at promoting social justice implicitly convey ideologies of White dominance as in Crammer's and Harris's (2015) examination of *Remember the Titans* reveals. The "White power structure" of the sports leagues (Griffin, 2012), sports coverage, and the larger social milieu is persistent and pervasive. Given this scholarship on racial stereotyping in athletic programming and coverage, we now turn to societal expectations of the male athlete.

### **Media coverage of the male athlete**

The televised sports manhood formula (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000) revealed that televised sports and accompanying advertisements present a narrow scope of what is masculine and identifies 10 distinct themes: White males are the voices of authority, sports is a man's world, men are foregrounded in commercials, women are sexy props or prizes for men's successful sport performances or consumption choices, Whites are foregrounded in commercials, aggressive players get the prize; nice guys finish last, boys will be (violent) boys, give up your body for the team, sports is war, and show some guts!

Men are taught to be aggressive, not passive, and sports commercials are designed to poke at male insecurities, getting them to buy products making them the "ideal man" (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000). The message is that a real man is "strong, tough, aggressive, and above all, a winner in what is still a Man's World" (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000).

Media frame male athletes in such a way that boys and men are led to accept and even glorify a set of bodily and relational practices that resist and oppose a view of

women as fully human and place boys' and men's long-term health and prospects in jeopardy. This study seeks to determine if images found in media align with the qualities that Messner's televised manhood formula asserts are commonly celebrated in sport. Importantly, media's focus on masculinity may not be limited to observation of elite athletics but could possibly be mediated by visual rhetoric used in social media and in advertisements that often accompany broadcasts of sporting events. According to Messner, this convergence of broadcast and visual rhetoric is a "master discourse produced at the nexus of the institutions of sport, mass media, and corporations" that produce and sell products—and ideologies—to boys and men (p. 152).

Studies have proposed that several television broadcasts in particular offer the opportunity for men to emphasize masculine ideals in sport by providing viewing pleasures for male spectators (Duncan & Brummett, 1989), emphasizing empowerment through sports knowledge (Duncan & Brummett, 1993; Gantz & Wenner, 1991, 1995; Kennedy, 2000) and reinforcement of masculinity through hypermasculine sport fandom choice (Messner, 1998; Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000; Sargeant, Zillman, & Weaver, 1998; Sullivan, 1991). Though sports are readily consumed through television, one medium that has not been thoroughly investigated is the Internet, particularly social media.

### **CRT and CR**

CRT emerged in the mid-1980s and argued that politics, law, and culture were intertwined, and that policies favoring integration and assimilation reduced race consciousness and glossed over the continuing hierarchical domination of Blacks over Whites (Calmore, 1992; Crenshaw, 1988). Calmore emphasized that the concept of "race" bundles multiple social meanings that are not stable over time. This concept echoes McGee's (1990) observations about the instability of texts. In both CRT and CR, issues of power and domination are salient. Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993) argued that "words and symbols [are] part of an integrated arsenal of weapons of oppression and subordination" (p. 7). Similarly, Lucaites (1992), in describing McGee's (1990) conceptualizations of rhetoric as a "material phenomenon," wrote that when elements of communication come together, language has the "power ... to define and constitute social and political relationships" (p. 12). McGee (Corbin, 1992) observed, "bigotry is the habitual practice of identification by negation." (p. 165). He also suggested (in a pre-Internet) time that media encourage "hyper-real" representations: "Constructed images are hyperreal in that they are more heroic (or diabolical), more exciting (or pedestrian), and more courageous (or cowardly) than your actual character as measured by conduct, could ever be" (p. 165).

Matsuda (1992) offered a theory of subordination and notes that while different forms of oppression are not identical, they do reveal certain predictable patterns. These include assigning traits with cultural meanings that frame individuals and groups as the "other"; forms of oppression that benefit some parties to the expense of

others; and language that naturalizes practices of subordination, control, and power. Importantly, she posed what she called “the other question:”

When I see something that looks racist I ask, “where’s the patriarchy in this?” When I see something that looks sexist I ask, “where’s the heterosexism in this?” When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, “where are the class interests in this?” (Matsuda, 1992, p. 5)

Similarly, intersectionality theory, articulated by Crenshaw (1991), argues that the single-axis framework often applied by feminists and race theorists is inadequate and proposes approaches that analyze the interactions of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). Although Crenshaw’s main focus was on Black women’s experience, the notion of investigating the overlapping characteristics of race and gender discrimination is important. Crenshaw (1991), Williams (1989), and Nash (2008) draw our attention to absences in discussing racism and sexism, exclusions that draw attention away from patterns of discrimination and daily microaggressions that persist in society (Vega, 2014). *Microaggressions* are described as frequent and subtle attacks that stereotype based on race and gender.

A crucial point of intersection between SCT, CR, and CRT is the salience of stories, dramas, myths, and parables that represent and reinforce the mindsets of both dominant groups and oppressed groups. Stories and dramas are ideological and help us make sense of everyday actions (Delgado, 1988).

### ***SCT and visual rhetoric***

To evaluate the Sherman rhetoric, to determine how it converged in both traditional and social media, and to uncover its dominant worldview, we are guided by Bormann’s (1985) SCT, developed in 1972 from his studies in small group dynamics. The theory uses FTA, a dramatization-based method of rhetorical criticism that considers character, setting, and plot to critically examine artifacts. The term *fantasy* does not refer to psychological fantasies but is a technical term referring to a conscious fantasy visibly present in communication (Bormann, Cragan, & Shields, 2003). To further explain, it is the emotionally exciting drama constructed by people when addressing and interpreting events. When people share fantasy themes of subject matter, tone, and interpretation, they are chaining. Bormann (1985) referred to their common understanding as an *inside joke*, a code understood by those who recognize it and respond appropriately. Similar fantasies are then grouped into fantasy types that ultimately suggest the group’s worldview. SCT, as a general theory of communication in the symbolic interactionism paradigm, holds that interactions of individuals yield a group consciousness that reaches this shared understanding; in SCT parlance, a unified rhetorical vision. Rhetorical visions offer frameworks termed as master analogues creating a shared symbolic reality that may be characterized as righteous, pragmatic, or social. The righteous master analogue “stresses the correct way of doing things with its concerns about right and wrong, proper and improper, moral and immoral, and just and unjust” (Cragan & Shields, 1995,

p. 42). The social master analogue focuses on shared humanity, trust, responsibility to others, and relationships. The pragmatic master analogue focuses on efficiency, practicality, and expediency. The dramatic core of SCT resonates with an understanding of the role of myth and story in journalism as news stories fill important social functions. As Lule (2001) wrote, news stories provide models for social life that “represent shared values, confirm core beliefs, deny other beliefs, and help people engage with ... the complex joys and sorrows of human life” (p. 15). The social role extends to portrayals of race, sports, and conceptualizations of masculinity.

Visual rhetoric as a perspective is a critical-analytical way of approaching and analyzing visual data that highlights the communicative dimensions of images and the stories they tell (Foss, 2005). It focuses on the rhetorical evocation of an image—its attributions of meaning—and considers aesthetics only as they facilitate meaning. It considers the nature of visual imagery—the presented and suggested elements—and how they function to impart meaning. To analyze symbolic convergence in visual artifacts, the critic carefully inspects the images to identify the salient characters, plotlines, and settings that intersect to contribute to the fantasy themes. These themes are made meaningful by both the images’ cultural and historical contexts. Scholars have used an SCT lens with mainstream and independent media texts to identify rhetorical visions in visual imagery. Page and Duffy (2013) applied FTA to social media memes in the 2012 presidential election, analyzing how the campaigns used them strategically. Earlier Duffy, Page, and Young (2012) applied FTA to emailed images of Barack Obama, identifying racial stereotypes, group coherence, and the manifestation of a unified rhetorical vision. Benoit, Klyukovski, McHale, and Airne (2001) applied FTA to the rhetoric of newspaper cartoon imagery in the Clinton-Lewinsky-Starr affair, concluding that metaphors and allusions were used extensively and were important factors in creating the cartoons’ imaginative language.

Our review of the literature guides us to seek answers to five research questions. First, we note the use of racial stereotypes and uneven framing in media coverage of White and Black athletes; specifically the characterizations of Blacks by their athletic abilities and Whites by their intelligence and hard work. Despite common knowledge of Richard Sherman as a Stanford University scholar, does the coverage of this incident reinforce past research findings? The literature also reveals that televised sports and accompanying advertisements present narrow depictions of gender and race, including opposing a view of women as fully human and glorifying male aggression and violence. Considering the literature, and Messner’s televised manhood formula, we are interested to know if the images fit within this scope of sports framing. Our first question is:

RQ1: How did media response interpret the Sherman interview?

Social media are prominent in both channeling and influencing conversations. Although often generated by traditional media content and opinion, the discourse becomes enlivened as it chains through digital environments. One study of 2.2

million tweets referencing the Sherman interview found them to be equally negative and positive; many with image macro memes. Given the prominence and importance of social media, we ask our second question.

RQ2: How did citizen response interpret the Sherman interview?

The literature recognizes the power of traditional media to frame and influence sports narratives. It also evidences the use of online social networks in shaping the experience of sports reporting, fan consumption, and a shifting power balance. To explore both the interplay and the exclusivity of coverage and response to this issue, we ask our third question.

RQ3: How did news media and citizen perspectives intersect?

The literature supports the concept that the rhetoric of visuals helps to create meaning and tell stories, and the visual elements of mediated sports work to strengthen masculine ideologies. Given the citizen meme response to the Sherman interview, we ask our fourth question.

RQ4: How did visual imagery impact the narratives?

The literature on CRT and intersectionality theory emphasizes that the concept of “race” bundles multiple social meanings, and that words and symbols are weapons of oppression, framing individuals and groups as the “other;” at times overlapping characteristics of race and gender discrimination. The media, scholars write, create hyper-real representations. Our fifth question follows from this literature.

RQ5: How did racism and sexism manifest in the dominant narratives?

## **Methodological approach**

We examined traditional and social media coverage of the Sherman interview appearing from the date of the incident and the week following (January 19–26). Using several prominent databases (see Footnote 2), we located stories from North American sources including the Associated Press, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Daily News*, *Newsday*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The LA Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The National Post*, *Edmonton Journal*, ESPN, *Business Insider*, *Time*, *Forbes*, *Huffington Post*, sports blogs, popular culture blogs, and Twitter. We also paid particular attention to news outlets in the two teams’ hometowns, Seattle and Denver.

Concentrating on the widely syndicated stories, coverage in large-circulation dailies, and influential business media and social media sites, we focused on 36 articles for our analysis. In the next step, we examined the headlines of these stories, a decision grounded on previous research suggesting that headlines are guides for readers to assess the importance and relevance of a story (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Moreover, Dor (2003) pointed out that headlines give readers the opportunity to extract the maximum amount of information without much cognitive effort and provide guidance about whether a story is worth reading. Headlines are constructed based on news values or news criteria (Dor, 2003).



We followed the process of SCT's rhetorical methodology, FTA, which guides the critic to structure analysis into fantasy themes, types, and rhetorical visions. Similar fantasies themes are clustered by the critic, and then grouped into fantasy types that ultimately suggest a worldview or rhetorical vision. It is particularly useful for making sense of symbolic communication from multiple and diverse sources. The FTA steps are as follows; a process we will first explain with the headlines.

We conducted multiple viewings of each headline to find the dramatic elements that form fantasy themes: recurrent characters, storylines, and scenes, suggestions of motives and values, and allusions to popular culture. To illustrate these elements with examples, words characterized Sherman as "the mouth" and a "performer," who engages in storylines in which he "trash talks" and "hypes," in scenes set on the "playing field" and in the "media." We found motivations of self-promotion assigned in words such as "boorish behavior a brilliant career move," and "the economics of trash talk," and values of moral authority assigned by words such as, "I'm no villain," and "classy in face of racial code." We found little reference to popular culture in the headlines.

After examining all headlines, identifying the FTA elements, and grouping them thematically by similarity, we found that the dominant sentiment (fantasy type, in FTA terminology) is "Sherman is a self-promoter and braggart." The 14 fantasy themes contributing to this fantasy type included words such as "star," "bragging," and "talk show." Other fantasy theme clusters, detailed in our findings section, created the fantasy types: "Sherman is an enraged bully" formed by 10 fantasy themes; "Sherman is an exemplar of a good football player" formed by eight fantasy themes; and "Sherman is a victim of stereotypes" formed by four fantasy themes. This process is itemized in [Table 1](#). Notably, the interviewer Erin Andrews was seldom referenced in the headlines.

To identify the most popular visual memes relating to the incident, we used the social media analytic tool Topsy and also reviewed memes from news and entertainment aggregator websites. Recognizing the memes that resonated, we collected 36 images to analyze. Upon examination, we found it striking that contrary to the headlines, many of the visual narratives focused on the drama between Sherman and Andrews. Some variation of the two characters appeared in more than half (20) of the memes. Because of this predominance, we explored the particular

**Table 1.** Fantasy Theme Analysis Schema for Sherman Interview Headlines.

| Schema   | Fantasy theme characterizations  |
|--|--|
| Fantasy type: Sherman is a self-promoter and braggart  | The mouth, talk show, fun, bragging, performer, act, star, talks bigger, hype, trash talk  |
| Fantasy type: Sherman is an enraged bully  | Lost his mind, loses his mind, breaks Internet, screams, rants, scares, tirade   |
| Fantasy type: Sherman is an exemplar of good football player                                 | How football is played, true student of the game, hypocritical to criticize him, classic bout, love you, classic post-game interview, the best |
| Fantasy type: Sherman is a victim of stereotypes   | Side not seen, no villain, classy in face of racial code, more than just talk  |
| Rhetorical vision: Sherman is a bragging, trash-talking, crazy guy true to football culture. |  |

rhetorical force of the Sherman/Andrews memes, considering the characters, storylines, settings, motives, and values, and also noting references to popular culture.

To illustrate these dramatic elements with examples from the memes, we found images characterizing Sherman as a professional wrestler or the Predator, who performs in storylines where he wins a wrestling match or terrorizes a little girl, and in scenes set in comic books or horror stories. Motivations of destruction and self-gratification are proposed visually through depictions of Sherman as wild and as “hogging the camera.” The value of domination is proposed visually by the interplay, in various forms, between an aggressive Sherman character and a subdued Anderson character. Frequent popular culture allusions reference singer Kanye West, comedian Kevin Hart, horror film characters the Alien and the Predator, the super hero Hulk, and popularly recognized characters from Internet memes, among others.

We then categorized those elements into fantasy themes and recurring fantasy types; the dominant type being “Sherman is an alien/brute.” The 15 fantasy themes constructing this fantasy type include memes presenting Sherman as the Predator, trapping a victim, and obviously acting cruelly. Second in importance, the fantasy type, “Andrews is a victim/vulnerable woman” is formed by 11 themes. This characterization appears far more often than themes of her as a “promoter,” supported by six instances, or as a “professional,” three times. Five themes frame Sherman as a “buffoon, braggart, and self-promoter.” This process is itemized in [Table 2](#), and we provide examples of these memes in our analysis.

Although we selected 20 memes (those addressing the Sherman-Andrews drama) for deeper analysis, it yielded a total of 40 fantasy themes due to the polysemous quality of visual depictions. In contrast, the fantasy themes of the headlines were largely one-dimensional, with pointed language assigning a theme, thus our 36 headlines yielded 36 fantasy themes. For example, the headline “8 Quotes That Prove Richard Sherman Is America’s Greatest Trash Talker” framed Sherman as aggressive.

## Findings and depth analysis

Our first RQ asks how media headlines interpreted the Sherman interview. The prevailing fantasy type depicted Sherman as a self-promoter and braggart, suggesting a calculated, yet raw, performance with motive. He is labeled a “star” and “performer” who “brags,” “trash talks,” and “hypes,” with the interview as an “act.” The use of street slang characterizes Sherman as verbally intimidating and abusive, activities that are not uncommon in competitive sports. By Sherman’s own statement, he was “mic’d” by the NFL all day and was waiting for situations for “engaging with the audience ... understanding how we’re perceived as entertainers” (Soper, 2014). Of secondary importance in headlines, Sherman is depicted as an unruly and out of control wild man, distressing spectators in alarmist plots. He “loses his mind,” “screams,” “rants,” and “scares.” Through the use of specific language, as Matsuda (1991) suggests, the media frame him as “other”; his discourse beyond bounds of cultural norms within football.

**Table 2.** Fantasy Theme Analysis Schema for Sherman-Andrews Image-Macro Memes.

| Schema  | Fantasy themes   |
|---|--|
| Fantasy type: Sherman as brute/alien  | Characterizations: Alien, the Predator, Kanye West, the Hulk, subversive comedian, wild-looking wrestlers, threatening football player<br>Storylines: trapping, manipulating, acting out, terrorizing, out-of-control<br>Scenes: horror stories, "hood," wrestling matches, MTV Awards, stage, comic strips, football field<br>Motives: to terrorize, destroy, demean, denigrate, shock, and relieve stress<br>Values: aggression, domination, cruelty                             |
| Fantasy type: Sherman is a buffoon, braggart, and self-promoter   | Characterizations: clowning wrestler, child, Antoine Dodson, Ben Stiller in simpleton role, football star imposter<br>Storylines: pretending, performing hip-hop, swaggering, acting uneducated, interfering<br>Scenes: football field, stage, cartoon, comedy club, wrestling match, Tropic Thunder film<br>Motives: to deceive, exploit, sensationalize<br>Values: foolhardiness, flamboyance, narcissism  |
| Fantasy type: Andrews is a victim/vulnerable female   | Characters: Sigourney Weaver as "Ripley", Taylor Swift, the Chloe confused little girl meme, a "bitch," weak woman, Crabtree surrogate, victim of attempted rape<br>Storylines: confused, terrified, defenseless, trapped, upset, harmed, helpless, humiliated<br>Scenes: alien territory, horror film, wrestling match, MTV Awards, comedy club, defamed football field, hostile place for women<br>Motives: innocence, fear<br>Values: docility, submission, silence, repression |
| Fantasy type: Andrews is a professional/talent promoter   | Characters: sports interviewer, Gene Okerlund (professional wrestling announcer)<br>Storylines: interviewing, entertaining<br>Scenes: football field, wrestling match<br>Motives: to gather news, to publicize<br>Values: journalistic news value, sensationalism, ambition  |
| Rhetorical visions: Sherman is a violent misogynist and self-promotional bully; an imposter spoiling our game and affronting our decency. |  |
| Rhetorical visions: Andrews was robbed of her identity, becoming both a scapegoat and a shield for Sherman's antics.                      |  |

Less often, another fantasy type emerged in the headlines, celebrating Sherman as a manly man and a true football player who embodies the values of the game. He is "the best" and a "true student of the game," who demonstrates "how football is played," and who got the "last word in a classic bout." This framing aligns with Messner's manhood formula, assigning qualities commonly celebrated in the sport (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000). Least frequently, the headlines called out the stereotyping in some media coverage, proclaiming Sherman has a "side not seen," and is "no villain," but "classy in face of a racial code." Similar to the findings in Eagleman's (2011) research, Sherman defenders frequently referred to his overcoming a tough childhood capped by a successful academic career at Stanford University (see, e.g., Gordon, 2014, and Shipgel, 2014). We found little focus on the female Fox Sports interviewer Erin Andrews in the analyzed headlines.



**Figure 1.** Memes showing Sherman as alien/brute.

On the other hand, citizen response in image macro memes, the focus of our second RQ, was decidedly more negative about the encounter, portraying Sherman most often as a brute with Andrews his victim. Known popular culture references injected through digital manipulation helped to frame Sherman as a bully and a freak. For example, he becomes a voracious stalker as the extraterrestrial in 1979 sci-fi film, *Alien*, who terrorizes the female protagonist played by Sigourney Weaver (Figure 1), here a placeholder for Andrews. The dominant motives manifested in the many visual images like this one are Sherman's drive to terrorize and intimidate, suggesting personal values of aggression, domination and cruelty.

Less frequent scenarios place Sherman as a bullying celebrity and subversive comedian. For example, in Figure 2 the scene alludes to the 2009 MTV Music Video Awards. When then-teenager Taylor Swift received her first Best Female Video award, rapper Kanye West "stormed the stage" and grabbed her mic to deliver a protest "rant" (Rodriguez, 2009). The visual metaphor assigns Sherman negative traits of the outspoken and controversial rapper, which include sexist lyrics and outbursts. Within all memes in this category, only one used the word *hood*, a code word for ghetto, yet the visual message and thrust of most memes suggest that Sherman brought the "hood" onto the football field.



**Figure 2.** Meme portraying Sherman as bully/celebrity.

Elsewhere, storylines and scenes place him staging feuds, winning championships, and taunting his opponents as a glory hog in the entertainment spectacle of professional wrestling (Figure 3). Many memes placed Sherman in a wrestling ring—swaggering and dominating. Although Messner’s manhood formula in sports found that sports media herald aggression, violence, and “sports as war,” citizen memes damned or ridiculed Sherman for following these norms (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000). These memes position him as deceptive, exploitive, and narcissistic.

With Erin Andrews, the memes cast her as a victim most frequently, either the quarry targeted in science-fiction horror films, or the female subject of public humiliation, verbal aggression, or a rape attempt. Besides the violent scene borrowed from



**Figure 3.** Meme portraying Sherman as wrestler.



**Figure 4.** Meme portraying Sherman as Predator.

the *Alien*, another meme replaces Sherman's face with that of the Predator in the eponymous film (Figure 4). It also imagines Andrews as a distressed little girl, appropriating the popular "Side Eyeing Chloe" meme. Here, race and gender discrimination overlap as the assigned characteristics establish the plot: a threatening Black man confronts a vulnerable White girl. These memes assign Andrews as innocent and fearful and suggest she personally values docility, even repression.

Much less frequently, Andrews is portrayed as a professional who either reluctantly or willingly proceeds to do her job, and perhaps even welcomes the theater of it—as some memes substitute a well-known wrestling announcer in her place. We asked how the media and citizen rhetorical visions intersected in RQ3. The fantasy themes of the citizen/fan memes portrayed Sherman far more negatively than did the headlines, prominently staging him in context with Andrews, as a brute victimizing a woman. The dominant fantasy types in the memes construct two rhetorical visions, "Sherman is a buffoonish and violent bully, an imposter spoiling our game and affronting our decency" and "Andrews was robbed of her identity, becoming both a scapegoat and a shield for Sherman's antics." The news headlines, however, gave very little focus to Andrew, and tempered the brute characterization with the legitimacy of a skilled and aggressive self-promoter in football culture. The dominant fantasy themes and types construct the headlines' rhetorical vision: "Sherman is a bragging, trash-talking tough guy true to football culture."

Visual imagery communicates more immediately and directly, and by nature can suggest ideas that words dare not. Regarding RQ4, we found that pictorial cultural references commanded the narratives in the image memes, suggesting immediate associations with known popular culture villains, bullies, fools, and victims: monsters from sci-fi horror films, fall guys from comedies, outrageous wrestling "actors", blustering celebrities, the Incredible Hulk comic superhero who turns mean when



**Figure 5.** Meme portraying Sherman as the Hulk.

he's green (Figure 5), and known characters from popular Internet memes. The Hulk meme calls attention to the naturalized rhetoric of “color” and its symbolic othering function. The influence of cultural references is supported by Medhurst and DeSousa (1981), who analyzed 749 political caricatures, discovering that literary/cultural allusions functioned to invite viewers to respond with certain values, beliefs, and predispositions.

RQ5 asked how racism and sexism manifested in the dominant narratives. The memes and headlines “supportive” of Sherman’s statements and persona emphasize differences between traditionally male and female characteristics, celebrating success in professional football’s violent milieu. The defenders of Sherman’s behaviors focus on his power and athletic abilities and the appropriateness of his response to the intensity of the situation. The racist tweets and memes about the incident were countered by other memes. Journalistic coverage decried and criticized racist posts, and quotes, lauding the rant at worst as braggadocio, and at best celebrating the manliness and power of Sherman. The fantasy types are predominantly male and that preference for masculinity is even more important when compared with the relative weakness portrayed in the female interviewer (Figure 6).

The depictions of Sherman as a bullying thug in relation to Andrews echo the racist beliefs that White women must be protected from dangerous and hypersexualized Black men. Racial stereotypes deeply embedded in American popular culture characterize African American men as angry, physically strong, violent, intellectually inferior, culturally stunted, and morally underdeveloped (Pilgrim, 2000).

## Discussion

The bifurcated responses to this incident highlight several of Matsuda’s (1991) important points: sexism, racism, and various forms of oppression have predictable



**Figure 6.** Andrews portrayed as victim.

patterns including casting groups as the “other” and naturalizing practices of subordination. Further, following McGee (1990), symbols and mediated dramas shape and define social relationships and the language (and images) deployed have material consequences (Corbin, 1992). Through the lenses of CRT, CR, and SCT, we see the Richard Sherman incident as revelatory of the persistent and interlocking patterns of racism and sexism in contemporary society.

Two distinct rhetorical visions or worldviews of Sherman emerged in news headlines and social media. The image memes converged as overtly racist using code words like *thug* and reveal an ideological viewpoint emphasizing racial stereotypes and the “otherness” of the Black male. The core values reveal a righteous master analogue wherein judgment is passed, and Richard Sherman as a Black man stepped outside the lines of “correct” behavior. Although the news coverage has elements of the social master analogue, it also has a righteous orientation. Given the context of pro football, his words and actions were acceptable, manly, and laudable. Most interesting for our study is that both master analogues were infused with racist and sexist elements and serve to naturalize patriarchy and the subordination of women and African Americans. If, as Lucaites (1992), Matsuda (1990, 1992), and McGee (1990) hold, language and images are powerful in defining social relationships, the taken-for-granted roles of men and women continue to be reinforced. Our findings point to the role that traditional media play in interpreting news events as ideological dramas that reinforce racism and sexism. Perhaps even more ominous, the dominance of racist and sexist Sherman interview memes suggests that the anonymity and facility of social media are contributing to a normalization of hate within broad social spheres.



The form and content of social media, images, and language following the Sherman incident suggest the importance of additional research on how media perpetuate stereotypes concerning Black male athletes and women. Journalists, reporters, and communication researchers need to explore and critically evaluate their own racial attitudes and biases regarding ethnicity, gender, and sports particularly in taken-for-granted attitudes as those expressed by Sherman defenders. Most reporters, especially those supporting Sherman, likely would not construe their own attitudes and reporting as racist.

Young men's aspirations to play professional sports are shaped largely by television and increasingly through shared media. Thus, it is important for sports reporters and journalists to highlight other aspects of Black male athletes beyond aggression and athletic prowess. What is not known and is left to explore, are the beliefs and attitudes of White Americans as a result of exposure to the content analyzed in the present research. Because the controversy surrounding the issue of race and racism is not confined to the United States, international research on perceptions of athletes from other countries is also needed. Ultimately, future research in this area of sports journalism and media can help determine how our ever-changing media options may contribute to or lessen racial disparities and discrimination.

## Notes

1. This title was inspired by and paraphrases the headline of Jeremy Gordon's blog in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Richard Sherman Goes Off Script. Internet Nearly Breaks," January 21, 2014, retrieved from <http://blogs.wsj.com/dailyfix/2014/01/21/richard-sherman-goes-off-script-internet-nearly-breaks/>
2. In North American (Canada and the United States) publications (web, print, transcripts, wires) between the dates January 19, 2014 and January 21, 2014 were included in the following databases: Factiva (305 total), Press Display (781 total), Lexis Nexis (578 total) and ProQuest Newsstand (145 total).

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