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Context Essay

Introduction

When Caitlin Clark entered the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), she brought with her record breaking attendance numbers, a large growth in viewership, and a large increase in engagement on social media (Tendian, 2024). Her transition from college basketball into the bright lights of the WNBA was followed closely by sports journalists, national news outlets, commentators, and fans.With all these new eyes on the league came a new conversation surrounding Clark and, increasingly, what her presence meant for the WNBA. This increased attention also means that moments involving Clark can take on meanings that extend beyond what happens on the court.

In June 2026, an on-court moment between Clark and Alyssa Thomas, a player for the Phoenix Mercury, became the subject of widespread discussion beyond the game itself. This moment became a site of public discussion and debate. This paper will take this moment and examine the discourse surrounding it, including how the event was discussed and circulated across different media platforms.

Description and Context

Establishing the Research Object

On June 24th, 2026, the Indiana Fever and the Phoenix Mercury of the WNBA met for the second match up in three days. In their first match up, play got heated, with six technical

fouls being awarded, including an ejection from the game for Clark (Nawaz & Merchant). Their second meeting brought the moment to be analyzed in this paper, when Alyssa Thomas, guard for the Mercury, and Clark ended up on the floor in a fight for the loose ball. In the scuffle, Thomas' fist connected with Clark's neck, though no foul was called (Nawaz & Merchant, 2026). Clark would later exit that game with a back injury, seemingly unrelated to the previous contact with Thomas. After the game had ended, the WNBA would review the play and give Thomas a Flagrant Foul 2 penalty for it (Andrews). She would then be suspended for one game.

Rather than analyzing the foul itself as a basketball play, this paper examines the response to the moment and the ways it has been framed across media and public discourse. The foul serves as the central research object, while the journalism, commentary, and social media responses surrounding it provide the material through which its framing can be examined. In examining this response, this paper will consider how different media texts describe the contact between Thomas and Clark, including the specific language used to characterize the foul. This paper will also examine how Clark and Thomas are characterized within these discussions, as well as how writers and commentators characterize the WNBA itself when discussing the foul. Social media responses will also be considered as part of the broader circulation of the moment and the conversations that developed around it.

Who is Caitlin Clark?

Caitlin Clark rose to prominence during the 2023-2024 NCAA Division I college basketball season with the Iowa Hawkeyes. She became a household name for her scoring abilities, appearing as though she could shoot the ball from anywhere. She surpassed John Maravich to become the highest scorer in NCAA basketball history (Frommer). She was a phenomenon, even having Hall of Famer Shaquellie O'Neil call her the "best female collegiate

player ever" (Frommer). She led her team to the title game of the NCAA tournament, but was beaten by the South Carolina Gamecocks (Frommer). In 2024, Clark was selected as the first overall pick for the WNBA draft and made her professional debut with the Indiana Fever on May 14, 2024 (Frommer).

As Clark moved from college basketball into the WNBA, the attention surrounding her followed. The influence she had was easily seen, even being dubbed the "Caitlin Clark Effect" (CCE) (Drenon). The CCE has been used to describe the increased attention surrounding women's basketball following Clark's rise to prominence, including increases in viewership, attendance, media coverage, and social media engagement (Zuritsky). Her popularity has also been associated with greater visibility for the WNBA and increased opportunities for women's basketball more broadly (Zuritsky). Clark's growing visibility within the WNBA is also shaped by her intersecting identities as a white, heterosexual woman from the Midwest.

Who is Alyssa Thomas?

Alyssa Thomas is a six-time WNBA All-Star and Olympic gold medalist. She has been in the league for nearly thirteen years. The New York Liberty drafted Thomas 4th overall in the 2014 WNBA draft, but she was traded to the Connecticut Sun right away and spent ten years of her career with them ("Alyssa Thomas"). In 2025, she was traded to the Phoenix Mercury and led them to the WNBA finals that same year ("Alyssa Thomas"). She was the first and only player in WNBA history to record at least 5,000 points, 3,000 rebounds, and 2,000 assists ("Alyssa Thomas"). Nicknamed "The Engine" for her ability to do everything and set the tone for her team, Thomas is a well-known veteran of the league (Moore). Thomas occupies a different position within the league, as a Black, queer woman from Pennsylvania with a well established career in the WNBA.

The WNBA and its Cultural Context

The NBA Board of Governors approved the concept of a Women's National Basketball Association on April 24th, 1996 (WNBA). Originally starting with just eight teams, the league has since expanded to include fifteen, spanning across the U.S and one team in Canada. The league was created due to the success of the 1996 Summer Olympics women's basketball team (Sisson). The WNBA is the "longest-running women's professional basketball league in the U.S" and has provided a consistent platform for elite women athletes (Sisson). Despite its steady growth, the WNBA has struggled with finances and viewership since its inception (Dixon). However, after the 2024 season and the introduction of Clark into the league, the WNBA has been able to branch into new media contracts, and secure nearly $2.2 billion over the next eleven years (Dixon). With increased engagement and viewership, the WNBA has entered a period of greater mainstream visibility, bringing increased attention to both the league and its players. This growing visibility provides important context for examining how individual incidents within the WNBA are discussed and circulated.

However, the growth of the WNBA cannot be understood through viewership and financial success alone, as the league has also developed a distinct cultural identity shaped by its players and communities. According to The 2023 Racial and Gender Report Card released by The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports, 77.3 percent of the league is made up of people of color, with 63.8 percent being Black or African American players (Bouchet et al.). Alongside this, around 25 percent of the players identify as queer as of 2025 (Riese). The league's history and identity have therefore been closely connected to the visibility and influence of Black women, including some of the WNBA's most recognizable players, such as Sheryl Swoopes, Lisa Leslie, and A'ja Wilson. With this in mind, one can see how the WNBA has created a

fanbase that is a safe space for these marginalized identities. Fans of the WNBA not only connect with the sport, but with the representation of players shown on their screen. However, with the introduction of Clark, a heterosexual, white woman, there has been an influx of newer fans into the WNBA fan base. The influx of fans of Clark into the WNBA has shifted the WNBA's viewership to become whiter, with non-Hispanic white viewers growing 301 percent on ESPN networks (Bachman). The cultural identity surrounding the WNBA can also be understood through the concept of a counterspace. Counterspaces are spaces in which marginalized groups can find community, affirm their identities, and challenge dominant narratives about their place within society (Margherio et al.). Within professional sports, where women and people of color have historically received less visibility and recognition, the WNBA has provided a space where Black women and queer athletes have been highly visible and able to shape the culture of the league. This is especially important to consider when analyzing the ways in which the June 24th incident was framed and how the changing visibility and fan base of the league may have affected the narratives around the moment.

This incident is truly situated within the grander culture war that is occurring within the WNBA right now. Fox News has spent 13.5 hours dedicated to covering the WNBA since June 25th, 2026, the day right after the moment between Thomas and Clark (Monroe). In fact, Fox News has dedicated over 3 hours and 30 minutes of coverage across 62 segments specifically talking about this foul (Monroe). Physicality, claims of special treatment, concerns over officiating, and concerns over trans athletes have all been at the forefront in conversations about the WNBA (Fragoso). These discussions provide additional context for understanding the environment in which the Clark-Thomas incident was circulated in.

The Foul's Media Circulation

The foul itself was initially produced within the context of the Indiana Fever and Phoenix Mercury game and captured through the game's broadcast footage. Following the game, the WNBA as an institution also became a producer of information surrounding the foul through its review of the play and subsequent disciplinary decision. From there, the foul was reproduced through news articles, interviews, video clips, headlines, and social media commentary. These different forms of media allowed the same moment to circulate across multiple platforms and reach audiences beyond those who originally watched the game. The audiences encountering this coverage include longtime WNBA fans, team-specific fans, Clark and Thomas supporters, general sports audiences, and social media users who may have encountered the foul without previously following the league.

Some important responses to note include the immediate after game interview by Indiana Fever head coach, Stephanie White. White noted that the no-call was "...absolutely egregious and utterly disrespectful…", arguing that officiating is not consistent and that Clark is a "generational talent and WNBA superstar" who is not being treated "fairly" (Voepel). Both ESPN and Yahoo Shorts produced articles outlining the foul but also noting that this is not the first time a foul against Clark has been upgraded after the game had ended (CBS/AP). With multiple articles and video clips already put out into the media ether, many took to social media to continue circulating the foul and fuel into the discourse. Screenshots of the moment when Thomas' fist made contact with Clark's throat spread like wildfire across the internet, with users offering their own interpretations of the contact and the subsequent decision to suspend Thomas. This created multiple versions of the same foul across different media platforms, with journalists, commentators, players, and fans contributing to the broader conversation surrounding what occurred.

Several recurring themes emerge from my review of articles and social media posts on TikTok and X (previously known as Twitter). Most notably, the discourse surrounding the incident frequently focused on the physicality of the contact, the treatment of Clark, and the characterization of Thomas. One Fox News article says Thomas "shoved [her] fist" into Clark's throat (Reigle). Others use phrases and words such as "throat punch" (Canfield), saying Thomas has a "brutal" playing style (Thompson), and calling the foul a "cheap shot" (Root). This kind of language poured out into social media as well, with many voicing their opinions on the contact. It even drew the attention of Representative Tim Burchett from Tennessee's 2nd congressional district, who took to X to share his distaste for what occurred, saying, "The thug treatment of @CaitlinClark22 by the @WNBA is pathetic" (@timburchett). Others shared similar sentiments, including calling the foul "attempted murder" (@alessandrola) and calling for the league to protect "its most marketable, popular and important player" (@cbrennansports). Overall, there are clear themes of marketing Thomas as dangerous and violent, and Clark as someone to save or a victim.

Critical Conversation and Existing Scholarship

For scholars interested in how race and gender are constructed within media, sports has been historically a good place to look. There is extensive scholarship on the ways sports media represent athletes and reproduce or challenge broader ideas about race, gender, and identity. Research on women's sports has often examined how female athletes are represented in comparison to their male counterparts, with a particular focus on the words and language used to describe them. There has also been research examining how White and Black athletes are represented differently within sports media, particularly through the recurring "brain versus brawn" framework. This research has found that White athletes have historically been more

likely to be associated with intelligence, leadership, and strategic ability, while Black athletes have more often been characterized through physicality, athleticism, and natural ability (Cranmer). These racialized framings have long been thought to influence how fans consume sports content and have been shown to affect how fans view athletes (Cranmer).

Outside of published scholarship, there are many articles that have highlighted the WNBA as a space for a culture war at this moment in time. Most of these conversations center around political parties using the WNBA as a "political prop" (Fragoso). Many right wing or conservative outlets situated this incident "within a larger network narrative of anti-white racism in the WNBA" (Monroe). Hard fouls against white players get amped up and turned into a loud ongoing discourse online, while hard fouls against black players tend to not be spoken about at all by these groups. There are many white players, Sophie Cunningham (Indiana Fever player), for example, who are actually praised for being an "enforcer", while black players are demonized for the same thing (Asmelash). All of these ideas and patterns are topics that are being discussed within this field and analyzed through various theoretical perspectives.

Conclusion

After researching and contextualizing the June 24th incident, several patterns have emerged that make this moment a productive research object for Communication Studies. Although the incident itself lasted only a few seconds, the response to it developed into a much larger communicative event.

The differences in how Clark and Thomas are positioned within these conversations raise questions about race and representation in sports media. Clark enters the conversation as a highly visible white, heterosexual athlete whose popularity has become associated with the increased visibility of the WNBA. Thomas, meanwhile, is a Black, queer veteran whose career predates

Clark's arrival in the league. Existing scholarship provides helpful background on how Black athletes have been framed in contrast to White athletes. This research hopes to expand on those ideas and look at how these patterns appear in the Clark-Thomas incident and what the racialized framing means for the WNBA. This research object also connects to broader Communication Studies scholarship on media framing and circulation. The incident did not remain within the context of the game in which it occurred. It moved across sports journalism, television coverage, TikTok, and X, allowing different communicators to reproduce and reinterpret the same moment. This circulation is particularly important given the changing cultural position of the WNBA. As the league gains greater mainstream visibility and attracts new audiences, moments involving highly visible players can become part of conversations that extend beyond basketball itself. Overall, this paper hopes to explore how the language used to frame this event represents broader issues of race and representation within the WNBA and how a space for marginalized groups can be taken over with enough effort from the other side.

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Pictures for later





Figure 1 (Left) Brennan, Christine @cbrennansports “What a photo this is…” *X,* 24 June, 2026, 10:59PM., https://x.com/cbrennansports/status/2069993768888025598?s=20

Figure 2 (Right). Burchett, Tim [@timburchett]. "The thug treatment of @CaitlinClark22 by the @WNBA is pathetic." *X*, 25 June. 2026, 8:19 a.m., x.com.

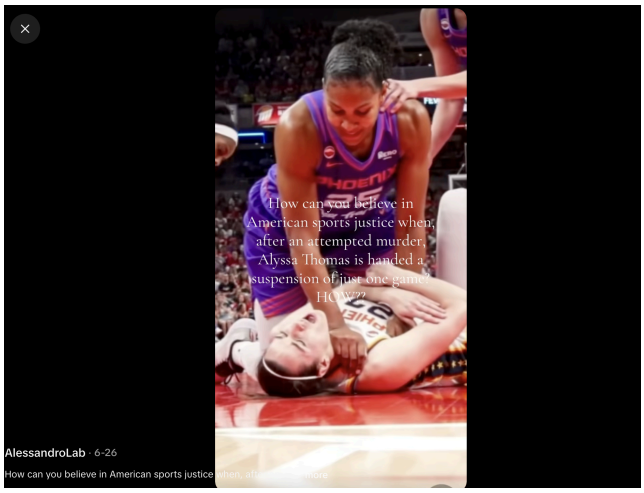


Figure 3 AlessandroLab @alessandrolab “How can you believe in American sports justice when, after an attempted murder, Alyssa Thomas is handed a suspension of just one game? HOW?” *TikTok,* 26 June 2026, https://www.tiktok.com/@alessandrolab/video/7655651123155602711?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc