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Does sport media raise her name? Examining intersectional representation in media narratives

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research was to examine the role of intersectionality (multiple marginalized identities) in narratives used within online media coverage of women's sports. The authors adopted an intersectionality lens and drew from sports media literature to explore the representation of Black athletes in women's sport.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conducted a quantitative content analysis of online articles from ESPN, CBS Sports and Sports Illustrated from the 2020 WNBA Season. The authors coded the number of times an athlete was mentioned in an article, the athlete's race, publicly disclosed sexual orientation and gender expression. The authors used hierarchical regression to examine the relationship between an athlete's social identities and frequency of media mentions.

Findings – Within mainstream online sport media, Black WNBA athletes receive less media attention than white WNBA athletes. Black athletes who do not present in traditionally feminine ways receive the least amount of media attention, while white athletes have the freedom to express their gender in a variety of ways and still capture media interest. Within league press releases, however, there is no difference in media mentions based on race, sexual orientation or gender expression.

Practical implications – The findings in this research are important for sport media professionals who write stories and player-activists who are pursuing racial justice. Outlets should commit to antiracist storytelling practices. Players, player agents and players' associations—all of whom have shown their power to create change for a more equitable industry and society—should also advocate for and organize around practices that create more equitable media coverage.

Originality/value – This study is one of the few empirical investigations of women's professional sport that examines the influence of intersecting social identities.

Keywords Intersectionality, Women's sport, Sport media, Race, Gender expression, Sexual orientation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

When professional basketball player, Aerial Powers tweeted "Put some respect on my name [. . .]‼" (Powers, 2020) in response to a tweet referring to her only by jersey number, she amplified a common experience for Black women: being overlooked, undervalued and relatively anonymous (Smith *et al.*, 2019). Research within sport management points to the unique experiences and challenges Black women face because they hold multiple marginalized social identities (gender, race, sexual orientation) in sport (Melton and Bryant, 2017; Walker and Melton, 2015). Past work also demonstrates that when women (particularly white women) conform to gender stereotypes in sport (i.e. present ultra-femininely), they reap certain advantages, such as increased sponsorship deals or media coverage (Fink, 2015). However, scholars have yet to fully examine how holding multiple marginalized social identities influences the amount of recognition an athlete receives. This oversight is regrettable as scholars call for more intersectional research (Burton, 2015; Burton and Leberman, 2017), and prominent athletes have

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begun pointing to disparities, noting how feminine white women (who are perceived to be heterosexual) receive far more media attention (Rapinoe, 2020).

We sought to explore the impact of intersecting social identities (race, gender expression and sexual orientation), and specifically explore these relationships *within* the women's sports context (as differentiated from research comparing women's sports to men's sports; see Cooky *et al.*, 2015). We borrow inspiration from the rallying cry "Say Her Name," which elevates the oft-forgotten names of Black women killed by police brutality (African American Policy Forum, n.d.), to ask: when it comes to women's professional sports, does the media *raise her name*? While Black men's professional basketball players are household names, what about Black women professional basketball players? Are their names being raised so their contributions will be remembered? We explored these issues within the context of the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), a predominantly Black league that embraces a variety of identities (nearly 20% of active players in the 2020 season were publicly out) (Webb, 2019), brings together the best women's basketball players from around the globe (Nelson, 2018) and is among the most successful women's professional leagues in history (Walker and Davis, 2020).

Drawing from literature on sport media coverage and applying an intersectionality lens, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of media coverage during the 2020 WNBA season. This research advances multiple conversations, including research on intersectionality, sports media coverage and women's sport contexts. First, this paper combines typically unintegrated approaches—intersectional theory and media analysis—to provide a greater understanding of prevailing narratives in sport. As "one of the most powerful economic, social, and political institutions on the planet" (Fink, 2016, quoting Kane, 2011) through which storylines "[influence] a person, institution, and/or a society" (Carter-Francique, 2014, p. 1,087), this understanding is critical. Second, this paper demonstrates how research can use an intersectionality lens to understand media coverage in settings of *women's* sport – where athletes' identities are "layers on top of layers" (Spruill, 2019, para. 18, quoting Clarendon). Every athlete in women's sport holds at least one marginalized identity (gender), and many hold several (race, gender expression, sexual orientation, etc.; Isard, 2020; Walker and Rose Davis, 2020). We simultaneously add to the limited work on gender expression. In doing so, we expand a conversation beyond men versus women to include a nuanced interpretation of gender experiences. Third, this research contributes to emerging scholarship on racial disparities in women's sports by examining media coverage during a summer of racial protest and reckoning (Buchanan *et al.*, 2020). Lastly, a focus on women's sport adds to the limited understanding of this under-studied sport context at large. Women's basketball receives more than 80% of women's sports coverage (Cooky *et al.*, 2015). The WNBA is a leader in racial and gender diversity (Lapchick, 2021) and in using sport to advance social justice. Thus, exploring how the media represents these phenomenal women (Angelou, 1978) is a lens through which to understand the experiences of some of the best athletes—and highest achieving Black women—in the world.

Conceptual framework

Institutionalized bias and discrimination

The recent emphasis on antiracism and social justice is noteworthy given taken-for-granted norms and practices that perpetuate racism (Singer, 2005) and sexism (Hindman and Walker, 2020; Isard *et al.*, 2022) within the sports industry. A norm is institutionalized when it is "standardized and unquestionably accepted" (Cunningham, 2010, p. 397). Notably, media plays an active role in perpetuating institutionalized bias and discrimination (Cunningham, 2010). It is bias when media omits women's sport. For example, numerous outlets proclaimed the 2014 Seattle Seahawks Super Bowl championship the first championship for a Seattle sports team since 1979 (Clayton, 2014; Kaminsky, 2014; Korman *et al.*, 2014; Myers, 2014) despite Seattle's WNBA team the Storm winning championships in 2004 and 2010. Media similarly omitted the

accomplishments of the 1999 Harvard women's basketball, the first 16 seed to beat a top seed in March Madness, when they incorrectly gave that distinction to the University of Maryland Baltimore County in 2018 (ESPN Stats and Info, 2018; SB Nation, 2018; SLAM, 2018). Another form of media bias equates excellent women athletes with being like a male athlete, as if that is the standard by which to judge athleticism. As gymnastics great Simone Biles felt the need to tell reporters after her convincing 2016 Olympic all-around victory, "I'm not the next Usain Bolt or Michael Phelps. I'm the first Simone Biles" (Reynolds, 2016; quoting Biles). And still other times, while the Washington Mystics were making history, the *Washington Post* chose to run an above-fold, multi-photo story on National Football League (NFL) quarterbacks (Gibbs, 2018). In sport, institutional norms disadvantage women (Burton, 2015), people of color (Cunningham, 2010) and queer populations (Cunningham, 2012; Walker and Melton, 2015). Thus, as women's league that is predominately Black, the WNBA is noteworthy and calls for an examination.

Racial bias. Ample research has shown that racial bias is present in media coverage (Dixon, 2002), including in sports media (Angelini *et al.*, 2014; Dixon, 2002; Eastman and Billings, 2001; McLoughlin, 2020; Mercurio and Filak, 2010; Rada and Wulfemeyer, 2005; Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers, 2004). In sport and broader media, discrimination manifests as both who the media covers (Angelini *et al.*, 2014; Dixon, 2002) and how the media talks about those covered (Angelini *et al.*, 2014; Dixon, 2002; Eastman and Billings, 2001; McLoughlin, 2020; Mercurio and Filak, 2010; Rada and Wulfemeyer, 2005; Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers, 2004). Within the sport literature, there are mixed findings about proportional representation in media coverage Black athletes receive. Eastman and Billings (2001) found that Black male basketball players received coverage proportional to their participation. Meanwhile, the same study found that Black women basketball players received coverage that was disproportionally lower than their participation rates. Further, Angelini *et al.* (2014) found that primetime coverage underrepresented Black Olympic athletes.

Discrimination in sport persists even when accounting for race as a spectrum of skin color (McLoughlin, 2020). Industry research group RunRepeat partnered with the Professional Footballers' Association, the oldest professional athletes' union, to study how media talks about athletes based on skin color. Researchers used a skin tone scale that ranks players from 1 (light skin) to 20 (dark skin) (McLoughlin, 2020). They found that media praised players with lighter skin tone for their intellect and work ethic while players with darker skin tones were "reduced to their physical characteristics" (McLoughlin, 2020, para. 4).

These findings establish that racial bias exists widely. Racial bias persists across media platforms including written (Mercurio and Filak, 2010) and broadcast (Eastman and Billings, 2001; McLoughlin, 2020; Rada and Wulfemeyer, 2005); in a variety of sports; at a variety of levels including professional (Mercurio and Filak, 2010; McLoughlin, 2020) and intercollegiate (Eastman and Billings; Rada and Wulfemeyer, 2005); and across nationalities. Such bias presents both covertly and overtly, as Rada and Wulfemeyer (2005) wrote that commentators "knew no bounds" (p. 80). Based on the aforementioned literature, we expect

H1. Athletes with darker complexions will receive fewer mentions compared to athletes with lighter complexions.

Sexism and heterosexism. Ample research has established disparate experiences for women's sport. Extant media analysis of women's sport has largely focused on comparisons between men's sports and women's sport (Cooky *et al.*, 2015; Fink, 2015; Hardin, 2005; Kane, 2013; LaVoi *et al.*, 2007), with a focus on quantity of coverage and an exploration of gender roles and tropes within such coverage.

Due to institutionalized sexism, coverage of women's sport is "dismally low" (Cooky *et al.*, 2015, p. 261). Nationally, ESPN consistently devotes less than 2.5% of time on *SportsCenter* to women and even less time (just 2.0%) across its main broadcast coverage (Cooky *et al.*, 2015). Newspaper coverage of women's sport is also disproportionately low (Hardin, 2005). Limited

data exists on online coverage, but recent findings suggest that the same trends exist (Ancheta *et al.*, 2020).

Research has also established that of the limited media time women's sport receives, coverage often frames women in gendered ways – a form of treatment discrimination. As Fink (2015) wrote, "sportswomen are rarely acclaimed solely for their athletic abilities. Instead, the focus is often on their physical appearance, femininity, and/or heterosexuality" (p. 331). For example, the famed 1999 Women's World Cup Championship team arguably received acclaim "as much for their white, middle-class 'girls-next-door' image as for their accomplishments on the field" (Allison, 2018, p. 3). Sociologist Allison goes on to explain that "Gender and sexual normativity were key components of this image, as media coverage of the team focused persistently on the heterosexuality and stereotypically feminine 'niceness' of the players" (Allison, 2018, p. 3).

Fink's (2015) and Allison's (2018) work builds on Griffin's (1992) foundational theory that connects the "insidious trio" (p. 263) of sexism, heterosexism and homophobia. As Griffin (1992) wrote in relation to sport, "Homophobia is a powerful political weapon of sexism [. . .] When a woman is called a lesbian, she knows she is out of bounds." (pp. 252–253). Accordingly, women in sport have historically actively avoided the lesbian label, including by "promot[ing] a feminine image and focus[ing] public attention on those who meet white heterosexual standards of beauty" (p. 254). Griffin coined such ideals as a "heterosexy image" (p. 255). Fink (2015) notes that when women athletes (particularly white women) conform to gender stereotypes in sport (by presenting in ultra-feminine ways), they receive increased media coverage and increased sponsorship deals.

The tension between stereotypical womanhood and athletic achievement is known as the "female/athlete paradox" (Carter-Francique and Richardson, 2016; citing Krane *et al.*, 2004). This paradox illuminates the experiences of women athletes who seek to comport themself in a manner that is acceptable to society while they simultaneously pursue a traditionally masculine activity in sport. For example, the media-adored 1999 Women's World Cup Championship team exemplified the paradox by being "physically tough and competitive yet congenial and caring" (Allison, 2018, p. 5, quoting Christopherson *et al.*, 2002).

Based on the literature on the manifestation of sexism and heterosexism, we expect

H2. Athletes who publicly identify as queer will receive fewer mentions in sport media articles compared to athletes who are heterosexual or have not publicly indicated they identify as queer.

H3. Athletes who present in more masculine ways will receive fewer mentions in sport media articles than compared to athletes who have more traditionally feminine presentations.

Intersectionality. The above research contributes to our understanding of racial and gendered bias in sport, but regrettably does so with little overlap. While bias can exist on a "single-axis framework" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139), such a disconnected Venn diagram misses the multitude of experiences of women of color, particularly Black women. As Crenshaw (1989) wrote, "often [black women] experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women" (p. 149). Our intersectional approach helps to reconnect the Venn diagram and illuminate trends across and within these disparate contexts. We explore how often Black women show up in the media and how other facets of their identity—such as gender expression and sexual orientation—impact their experiences.

Crenshaw (1991) outlined three types of intersectionality: structural, political and representational. Structural intersectionality refers to the way that women of color's lived experiences are different from white women's experiences. Political intersectionality refers to

how feminist and antiracist spaces marginalize women of color when they prioritize just one identity (gender and race, respectively) (Crenshaw, 1991). Representational intersectionality refers to the "cultural construction of women of color" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245), including how women of color show up in popular culture. To date, limited research within sport management has looked at structural intersectionality to understand the unique experiences Black women face (for exceptions see McDowell and Carter-Francique, 2017; Melton and Cunningham, 2012; Walker and Melton, 2015). For example, Walker and Melton (2015) found that an intersectional interaction between race, gender and sexual orientation led to a resignation-intention "tipping point" for Black lesbians working in intercollegiate sports. These women found college sports to be so unwelcoming to them such that they planned to leave the industry. Meanwhile, white lesbians were able to manage their marginalized identity enough to feel comfortable staying in their roles. Representational intersectionality, which addresses who does and does not show up in cultural coverage, is particularly well suited to help answer questions about the sports media.

Of the limited work done in this area, Carter-Francique and Richardson (2016) used representational intersectionality to explore the lack of sports media coverage of Black women, negative media coverage of Black women and the dearth of Black women in sport media. However, their intersectional assessment did not focus on sexual orientation or gender expression. Other research has taken gender roles (a construct somewhat related to gender expression) into account when studying Serena Williams (Frisby, 2017; Wilks, 2020). The study of a single straight athlete, however, impedes ability to explore the role of sexual orientation. Further, these studies and others (Allison, 2018; Carter-Francique, 2014) focus on the experiences of lone Black women in predominantly white spaces. While Allison recognizes the role of race, heterosexism and gender expression in women's sport, her historical observations about the 1999 World Cup raise questions about today's modern context given how much has changed for women, LGBTQ + people and people of color since. To our knowledge, research has not yet extensively explored Black women in sport, in predominantly Black spaces and at the intersection of multiple identities.

This oversight is regrettable, especially as scholars have called for more intersectional research (Burton, 2015; Carter-Francique and Richardson, 2016), and women athletes themselves have also spoken to such a need for more complete and nuanced understandings. As the most decorated track and field athlete in history, Allyson Felix told an audience, "We have to make sure that we include all girls and the different type of girl[s] that they are" (Aspen Institute, 2015, pp. 1:53–1:58). This idea that there is no singular, monolithic woman athlete experience is key. An intersectional feminist lens, like the one we use in this research, can help shine a light on these differences. The promise that intersectionality theory holds for deepening the analysis of sports coverage is clear. This is especially true for elite women athletes, who are high-achieving outliers and each hold at least one marginalized identity.

In the previous sections, we have drawn from past literature and hypothesized direct relationships between race, sexual orientation and gender expression on media mentions. When taking an intersectionality approach and exploring how these variables may interact, the literature is less clear on what the results might show. Some work indicates that Black women will face a double or triple disadvantage based on their marginalized social identities and subsequently experience adverse outcomes compared to other minoritized populations (e.g. white women and Black men). However, recent work from Smith *et al.* (2019) suggests that sometimes Black women reap certain advantages in the workplace because they are "subject to less negative stereotyping than prototypical members of their respective identity groups" (p. 1,709). Because Black women are not white (like the prototypical women), the stereotypes often ascribed to women (e.g. being passive and incompetent) attenuated for Black women. Additionally, given that the prototypical Black person is a Black man, being a woman can separate Black women from the negative stigmas associated with Black men (e.g. threatening or lazy).

Considering these mixed findings, and that past research has primarily examined race, sexual orientation and gender expression in isolation, we follow Cunningham and Melton's (2013) example and use a research question to explore the intersecting effects of these social identities. Specifically, we ask

RQ1. How do social identity variables like race, sexual orientation and/or gender expression interact to influence representation?

Research context

Political climate during 2020 WNBA season

The political environment influences opportunities for Black sportspersons (Cunningham, 2010) and is a particularly important factor to consider in this research, which focuses on April to October 2020 ("Summer, 2020"). The six months under review in this research saw the coronavirus ravage Black and Brown communities in America (Oppel *et al.*, 2020; Shamus, 2020). Simultaneously, George Floyd's murder in May 2020 sparked a summer of nationwide racial justice protests of a magnitude previously unseen (Buchanan *et al.*, 2020).

The WNBA wasted no time in addressing racial inequity. In the immediate aftermath of Floyd's murder, all 12 WNBA teams and the league office joined the players in making statements (Ziller, 2020). As time went on, some players decided to sit out the season to focus on social justice work, while others chose to leverage the power of the WNBA 2020 Season Bubble ("Wubble") to make change Abrams and Weiner (2020), Schaefer (2020).

Three weeks before the 2020 season's tip off, the WNBA and WNBA Players Association (WNBPA) collectively announced that they were dedicating the season to social justice (WNBA, 2020a). The league and WNBPA launched *The Justice Movement* and the Social Justice Council. Activists and organizers, including Black Lives Matter co-founder Alicia Garza, served as advisors.

A season of social justice manifested in many ways. Players donned warm-up shirts adorned with messages including "BLACK LIVES MATTER," "SAY HER NAME," "VOTE!," and "EQUALITY" (WNBA, 2020b). The shirts players wore when arriving to the arena also became a site of protest, with shirts like "ARREST THE COPS WHO KILLED BREONNA Taylor" emerged as a popular choice. All season long, game jerseys elevated Breonna Taylor's name, reminding viewers of the 26-year-old Black woman killed in her Louisville home by police. The game court prominently displayed the message Black Lives Matter (WNBA, 2020a). The first month went on like this. Then Jacob Black was shot by police in late August 2020, prompting players to implement a two-day playing stoppage to reflect and mobilize (Allen, 2020).

Beyond the WNBA, many other athletes, sports teams and leagues took action (Reineking, 2020; Chicago Sun-Times, 2020). Players' actions mirrored—and often stoked—the calls for and conversations about antiracism that defined the exceptional summer of 2020. *ESPN* and *CBS Sports'* parent company followed suit, releasing statements and adjusting television programming (Jones, 2020; Strauss, 2020; ViacomCBS, 2020), while *Sports Illustrated* columnists supported the sports industry's response (Mannix, 2020; Lundberg, 2020; Rosenberg, 2020). Fans overwhelmingly supported sports activism, with 59% of fans expecting athletes to advance Black Lives Matters and 70% saying teams and leagues should support athlete protests (Nielsen Company US, 2020).

Methods

Spirit of the current study

The goal and spirit of this research is to make insidious, biased practices known. As Eastman and Billings (2001) write, "If much of the shorthand of sportstalk contains hidden racial/ethnic and gender biases, making such covert practices salient may, it is hoped, influence

public policy, journalist mores, and social pressure to eliminate such unwitting prejudice" (p. 185). As white, queer women researchers, we embrace the obligation to interrogate and disrupt white supremacy in sport management research (McGarry, 2019; Vadeboncoeur *et al.*, 2021) and sports broadly.

Article and player selection

Similar to Frisby (2017), we conducted a quantitative content analysis and collected and coded data from the 2020 WNBA Season. We included every athlete listed on the WNBA's online player page (www.wnba.com/players/). We selected *ESPN*, *CBS Sports* and *Sports Illustrated* for our sample of media articles. *ESPN* and *CBS Sports* were the television network partners for the 2020 WNBA season, and *Sports Illustrated* is another mainstream sports outlet in the USA. All three are publicly available online, and none requires a subscription to access the written WNBA content. Accordingly, they represent accessible, influential coverage of the WNBA.

We used *ESPN*'s archives and *CBS Sports*' and *Sports Illustrated*'s dedicated WNBA landing pages to download all articles on their platforms. After eliminating articles that did not meaningfully include the WNBA, the final sample included 381 from ESPN, 105 from CBS Sports and 67 from Sports Illustrated.

To explore official league communications, we collected press releases directly from the WNBA's public relations landing page (pr.nba.com). After eliminating articles that did not focus on this season, the final sample included 31 press releases. In total, we analyzed 584 documents.

This study focuses on the 2020 WNBA season, so accordingly we collected all articles that were originally posted during this timeframe. We included articles posted between April 10, 2020 (one week before the WNBA Draft) and October 13, 2020 (one week after the playoffs ended). We used these dates to capture the totality of the season and the immediate pre- and post-season content during which media storylines are prominent. The WNBA season was originally slated to begin on May 15 but due to COVID-19 delays, did not tip off until July 24.

Procedures

Using NVivo Plus version 12.1.0, we queried players' last names to methodically count the number of mentions a player received in articles. We kept tallies by outlet and an overall sum. When players had shared last names (for instance, Courtney Williams, Elizabeth Williams, Gabby Williams and Riquna Williams), we cross-referenced articles by first name and individually assessed each article in which multiple players with the same last name appeared. We used this same process in cases where a player shares a last name with a common word (e.g. Young or Canada) to have an accurate count for the player. Note that we did not count typos as mentions. This research focuses on exploring who the media recognizes, and a misspelled name is hardly proper recognition.

We also coded demographics (race, gender expression, public sexual orientation) and on-court statistics for every player in the sample. We used WNBA.com to code a player's average points in 2020.

Measures

Race. We coded the race of the player on a 1 (lightest complexion) to 5 (darkest complexion) scale. We used a continuous variable because we did not ask players for their racial identity. Instead, we were concerned with how the public and media "read" a player's race. Evaluating race as a continuous variable helps neutralize biases and assumptions that people make too easily when sorting someone into racial or ethnic categories. The first author developed a

visual codebook that the second author validated. Recognizing our white privilege in an assessment as political and socially meaningful as race, we also conferred with outside panelists who identify as Black and are experts in racial diversity. Subsequently, the first author, second author and an independent researcher used players' official headshots from WNBA.com to code players' complexion. The first author and an independent researcher achieved 81.41% intercoder reliability, which is sufficient (Cho, 2008). In no instance were the first author and third researcher ever off by more than one on the scale, and in every instance, the second author independently concurred with either the first author or the independent researcher. When there were disagreements, the three researchers discussed the ratings and came to a consensus. Though we coded athletes' race on a continuum, for simplicity moving forward we will use "white" to refer to athletes who were coded as 1 or 2 and "Black" to refer to athletes who were coded as 3–5.

Gender expression. We coded gender expression on a three-point scale: masculine-, androgynous- and feminine-presenting. The first author developed a visual codebook that the second author validated. The first author, second author and an independent researcher used players' personal Instagram accounts to assess a player's overall gender expression. In cases where Instagram was unavailable or insufficient, other social media or a Google image search provided necessary data points. One or more of the following, in addition to other features, marked feminine gender expression: dresses and skirts; clothing that was tighter, shorter or lower cut; bikinis; midriff-revealing outfits; long and/or down hairstyles; jewelry and make up. One or more of the following marked masculine gender expression: clothing cut or designed for men; wearing ties to formal events; posed photographs; shorter hairstyles with more sharp or severe cut angles. Androgynous gender expressions were marked by players who neither explicitly feminized themselves nor intentionally masculinized their appearances or presented balanced gender expressions. The first author and an independent researcher achieved 80.13% intercoder reliability, which is sufficient (Cho, 2008).

Sexual orientation. We coded sexual orientation as a dichotomous variable: heterosexual/not publicly identifying as queer versus identifying as queer in public. Public outness was assessed via general knowledge (e.g. Sue Bird is very publicly dating Megan Rapinoe) and finding popular press articles where the athlete identified or was identified as queer. Verified media sources that appeared on the first page of Google results and identified a player as LGBQ were considered evidence of "public outness." We excluded tabloids, message boards and other rumor-based sources. We coded players according to their status during the data collection period.

Results

Descriptive statistics

We present the means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations for all variables in Table 1. Table 2 shows the race and gender expressions of the players. With respect to sexual orientation, 19 (13.38%) Black and eight (5.63%) white had publicly disclosed they identified as gay, lesbian or queer.

Hypothesis testing

We performed moderated regression to test all hypotheses and the research question. We entered two control variables (average points and average rebounds). We included points and rebounds because athletic performance of the player influences how frequently they are mentioned in the sports media. After entering the controls, we entered the first-order effects (i.e. the players publicly disclosed sexual orientation, race and gender expression) to test the direct relationships hypothesized. We standardized all variables that were not dichotomized.

Variable	Mean	*SD*	Points	Rebounds	Sexual orientation	Race	Gender expression	Mentions
Points	8.439	5.358	–					
Rebounds	3.473	2.344	0.624**	–				
Sexual orientation	–	–	0.298**	0.063	–			
Race[b]	3.444	1.308	0.044	0.087	−0.096	–		
Gender expression[c]	1.493	0.732	−0.180*	−0.020	−0.451**	−0.141	–	
Mentions	64.359	98.460	0.581**	0.355**	0.229**	−0.172*	−0.059	–

Note(s): [a]$n = 142$. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)
[b]Race coded on 1–5 scale, with 1 as lighter complexion and 5 as darkest complexion
[c]Gender expression coded on 1–3 scale, with 1 as masculine presentation and 3 as feminine presentation

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations among study variables[a]

		Race					
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	Total *n* (%)
Gender expression	Masculine	0	1	5	11	3	20 (14.1)
	Androgynous	6	2	2	11	11	32 (22.5)
	Feminine	17	3	19	37	14	90 (63.4)
	Total *n* (%)	23 (16.2)	6 (4.2)	26 (18.3)	59 (41.5)	28 (19.7)	142 (100)

Note(s): Race coded from 1 (lightest complexion) to 5 (darkest complexion)

Table 2. Race by gender expression

Next, we entered the two-way interactions (i.e. SO × Race; SO × GE; Race × GE) to explore the research question.

The model accounted for 41% of the variance in sports media mentions. With Hypothesis 1, we predicted that race would influence media mentions, such that white players (those with lighter complexion) would receive more mentions than Black players (those with darker complexion). As observed in Step 2, race was significantly associated with media mentions ($\beta = -0.19, p = 0.009$). Recalling that those who are white were coded as 1 or 2 and those who are Black were coded as 3, 4 or 5, the direction of the beta coefficient indicates that white players received more media mentions. White athletes on average received 117.56 mentions, compared to Black athletes who averaged 51.87 mentions. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. In line with previous literature on the negative effects of the lesbian stigma (Fink, 2012; Melton, 2013; Melton and Bryant, 2017; Sartore and Cunningham, 2010), we expected that athletes who were publicly out would receive fewer mentions (not be centered) in the sports media (H2). The second ($\beta = 0.06, p = 0.452$) and third hypotheses were not supported ($\beta = 0.05, p = 0.565$) (see Table 3).

However, when examining the interaction effects among our variables (R1), we observed that gender expression moderated the race–media mention relationship ($\beta = 0.17, p = 0.030$), and the interaction terms explained a significant increase in variance in media mentions. Simple slope analysis revealed that low gender expression (i.e. presenting more masculine) was a significant moderator of the relationship between race and media mentions ($\beta = -0.45$ $p = 0.006$). On the other hand, high gender expression (i.e. presenting more feminine) did not significantly moderate the relationship ($\beta = -0.01, p = 0.959$). Following Cohen *et al.* (2003), we plotted the two-way interaction in Figure 1. The findings indicate that Black athletes (those with darker complexion) who present in masculine ways are more adversely affected

Independent variables	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*t*	Mentions within sport media articles ΔR^2	R^2	*F*
Step 1					0.34	0.34	35.36**
Points	61.11	9.18	0.59**	6.66**			
Rebounds	−1.24	9.08	−0.01	−0.14			
Step 2					0.04	0.38	16.61**
Points	59.37	7.72	0.57**	6.22**			
Rebounds	1.19	9.05	0.01	0.13			
Sexual orientation (SO)	15.11	20.02	0.06	0.76			
Race	−18.05	6.76	−0.19**	−2.67**			
Gender expression (GE)	4.60	7.98	0.05	0.58			
Step 3					0.03	0.41	11.56**
Points	58.40	9.51	0.56**	6.14**			
Rebounds	2.52	8.96	0.03	0.28			
Sexual orientation (SO)	12.88	23.23	0.05	0.55			
Race	−21.88	8.25	−0.23**	−2.65**			
Gender expression (GE)	−2.49	9.71	−0.02	−0.26			
SO × Race	−7.03	19.35	−0.03	−0.36			
SO × GE	10.34	19.12	0.06	0.54			
Race × GE	21.39	9.77	0.17*	2.19*			

Note(s): [a]$n = 142$. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$

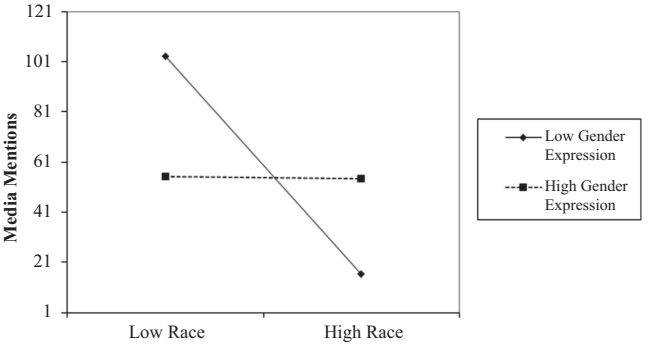
Table 3.
Hierarchical regression results for mentions within sport media articles[a]

than white athletes (those with lighter complexion) who present in a similar manner. In other words, Black women, who present masculine, received the fewest media mentions (averaging 44.05 mentions).

We further explored league press releases. In doing so, we found the predictor variables of player sexual orientation, race and gender expression had no significant effect on the dependent variables (i.e. number of articles, number of mentions). Average points scored was the only significant predictor of player mentions in the press releases published by the WNBA office ($\beta = 0.503$, $p < 0.001$).

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the influence of multiple marginalized identities on treatment within the sport media. We did this by coding the total number of times players



Note(s): Low race is white and high race is Black. Low gender expression is more masculine; high gender expression is more feminine

Figure 1.
Media mentions by race and gender expression

were mentioned in online sport media articles during the 2020 WNBA season. The findings showed that race had a direct effect on media mentions, such that white athletes received more mentions than Black athletes (H1). This is consistent with Eastman and Billings (2001), which found that television broadcasts overemphasized white women's college basketball players.

Interestingly, our results show that neither sexual orientation (H2) nor gender expression (H3) had a direct effect on media mentions. When only examining the main effects, these nonsignificant findings seem to contrast previous research that suggests women athletes face more discrimination when they do not conform to the traditionally feminine and heterosexual ideals that are pervasive in sport (Burton, 2015; Fink, 2015; Melton, 2015). However, by examining how the intersection of social identities impact media mentions (RQ1), we start to paint a more complete picture. Specifically, the findings indicate that the combination of race and gender expression have a unique influence on who the media mentions most. Black women receive even less media attention when they present more androgynous or masculine. On the other hand, white WNBA athletes who present more androgynous or masculine received the most media mentions during the 2020 WNBA season. These results seem to suggest that white athletes in women's sport are free to present in a variety of ways and still garner media attention, while Black athletes in women's sport are penalized if they do not adhere to traditionally feminine norms. In short, does sport media *raise her name*? Not really.

That Black athletes in women's sport are minimized (at best) and erased (at worst) continues a long-standing trend from white sports media (Angelini *et al.*, 2014; Carter-Francique, 2014; Carter-Francique and Richardson, 2016). In the Jim Crow South, newspapers "either entirely ignored the accomplishments of successful Black Olympians or marginalized them, devoting limited space to their stories" (Angelini *et al.*, 2014, p. 128). This marginalization continues today in nationwide coverage from the most reputable sports media outlets. Much the way that sports media ignores women's sports to uphold ideals of masculinity (Allison, 2018), the omission of Black women upholds ideals of white supremacy. It measurably harms Black women and girls, as the dearth of media representation contributes to Black girls having among the lowest sport participation rates, which impacts public health and long-term outcomes (Carter-Francique and Richardson, 2016; Staurowsky *et al.*, 2015). Given its grounding in bias and harmful impact, omission or marginalization from coverage ought to be considered seventh microaggression women in sport experience (see Frisby, 2017 for the six microaggressions). Though it is harder to measure what is not there, it is of utmost importance to do so.

This erasure cannot be explained by who the best athletes in the WNBA are. Our analyses accounted for points and rebounds. When on-court production was included in our model, race still influenced if the sports media *raised her name*. This is interesting given that Black players made up 75% of the 2020 post-season teams (First Team, Second Team, All-Rookie, All-Defensive) and won seven of eight postseason individual awards, including MVP, Rookie of the Year, Defensive Player of the Year, Sixth Woman and Most Improved. Black players are excelling in the WNBA and winning awards at a rate roughly proportional to their participation. Yet the media—whose members vote on the aforementioned awards—does not *raise her name* very often.

As opportunities for women in sport have grown, white athletes have benefitted most (Pickett *et al.*, 2019), as seen in the current study. The disparity between mentions for white and Black players may be a manifestation of "equity" serving to advance white interests (see Singer, 2005). In fact, the three players who received the most mentions were white. As white players receive more mentions, they are receiving an in-kind economic stimulus of sorts. Earned media value (or "marketing value," Allison, 2018, p. 111) is a mathematical calculation that represents what it would have cost to procure the media space allotted in an article had it been purchased as an advertisement. Which is to say, media mentions are quite literally

financially benefiting white athletes in women's sport. Not to mention that media coverage begets more media coverage and sponsorship opportunities (Carmichael, 2021), setting a self-perpetuating cycle of inequity in motion.

The benefit of being white is perhaps most pronounced when it comes to gender expression. Carter-Francique and Flowers (2013) theorized that more-masculine female athletes would pay a price for their gender expression. Our research supports this contention, but only for Black athletes in women's sport. In fact, white athletes in our study paid no significant price in the media for presenting more masculinely.

A surprising, but positive, finding is that athletes who are publicly out did not appear less in the media when compared to their heterosexual counterparts. This finding complements previous experimental works that suggests being gay or lesbian does not negatively affect an athlete's public perception (Parker and Fink, 2012), but presenting more masculine can hurt women athletes (Parker *et al.*, 2018). The current study extends this past research by incorporating field data (as opposed to fictional lab scenarios) and acknowledging the influence of race. The fact that sexual orientation did not have a direct effect in the previous studies (Parker and Fink, 2012; Parker *et al.*, 2018) or the current study does not suggest that homophobia and/or heterosexism are not present in sport. Rather, we suggest that amidst the forces that make sport a contested space for queer athletes, there is evidence of changing tides (Melton and MacCharles, 2021). This progress may be the result of a league where nearly 20% of the athletes are publicly out. As Griffin (1992) wrote, "One of the most effective tools in counteracting homophobia is increased lesbian and gay visibility" (p. 262).

Our finding that gender expression (when interacting with race) is significant, while public sexual orientation is not opens a more nuanced discourse about heterosexism in sport. Typically, past research has not explicitly separated athletes' sexual orientation from their gender expressions and instead conflates gender expression and sexual orientation into one variable or construct. For instance, research on Brittany Griner has discussed how her sexual orientation influences how others perceive her. In these discussions, authors mention her masculine mannerisms, but still focus on sexual orientation (Carter-Francique and Richardson, 2016; Lavelle, 2014). MacCharles and Melton (2021) note how gender expression can influence how LGBTQ individuals are treated within the sport industry. In their qualitative study, gay men who presented more masculine (congruent with gender norms) experienced less discrimination than those who were perceived as being more feminine. Collectively, this research suggests that there is variation in gender expression, and we need to be mindful of how more-masculine presentations among queer women impact their experiences. Further research should unpack and untangle these variables.

It is encouraging that race was not statistically significant in the WNBA's league press releases. That the WNBA produces press release communications without a race bias is promising. In using press releases to exercise control over the narratives of key moments, the league implicitly communicates that Black players and their accomplishments are just as news worthy as their white teammates. We hope that the media "got next" (Isard and Melton, 2021).

Theoretical contributions

This research makes several notable contributions. First, the finding that some social identity attributes do not have a direct effect, but are significant in conjunction with one another empirically demonstrates the role of—and need for—intersectional research. Second, the use of race and gender expression as spectra advances intersectionality research by allowing researchers to assess differences within such categories, not just across them. Third, the finding that sexual orientation did not have a direct effect provides some evidence of changing tides in sport and society. Certainly, heterosexism and homophobia are powerful societal forces that have historically shaped and continue to manifest in sport. But their

influence, at least in certain spaces, may be declining. Lastly, the finding that the WNBA's press releases do not overly mention white athletes shows that while there is plenty of work to do, there are signs of progress to celebrate. Such findings demonstrate that antiracist and antisexist media is possible and attainable.

Practical implications

The findings that Black women, and especially Black women who present more masculine in their gender expression, are left out of sports coverage are important for sport media professionals and player-activists. Outlets should commit to antiracist storytelling practices. To do so will require more than bias and diversity training. Indeed, media companies should track their stories as we did in this research to proactively measure their reporting trends in real-time and make course corrections as necessary. To encourage the media to do better in decentering whiteness, players, player agents and players' associations—all of whom have shown their power to create change for a more equitable industry and society—should advocate for and organize around practices to *raise her name*. Lastly, brands that endorse players should advocate for more equitable practices. Beyond being the moral thing to do and within the scope of their influence (Megdal, 2021), doing so enhances their return on investment. More media coverage for the players they endorse is better business for the brand.

Limitations. As all research does, ours has limitations. We only focused on one season so cannot speak to the pervasiveness of these findings beyond the 2020 season. However, as the one season included in our study coincided with heightened awareness of and commitment to antiracism, we believe these findings represent a best-case scenario. Given the prevalence of bias during the 2020 season–it is reasonable to wonder, how pervasive bias was in other seasons when public pressure to eliminate racial gaps was not as strong.

We also recognize that limiting the data to four online sources—*ESPN*, *CBS Sports*, *Sports Illustrated* and WNBA press releases—has the potential to offer findings that might be different if this research was repeated with a different dataset. However, these sources are all publicly accessible without a subscription and are among the most-read online sports outlets in the USA (*ESPN*'s digital footprint alone is 38% greater than the second-most-consumed online sports platform; Nagle, 2020). Thus, even if a different dataset resulted in different findings, those outlets would have a less significant impact on cultural norms and thus have fewer valuable insights to offer.

Future research. As several of our variables were not statistically significant alone, but were very significant in interactions, this research provided significant empirical evidence as to the importance of intersectional research. Research should continue to embrace intersectionality as critical to deepening knowledge. Researchers should also continue to investigate trends *within* women's sports, not merely between men's and women's sport. The WNBA has recently embraced a myriad of marginalized identities; more research should seek to understand this profound progress.

Future research should also explore who is creating these media storylines and with what impact. This is especially ripe for exploration given the apparent irony in the media bestowing awards on Black WNBA players while simultaneously writing them out of the coverage. What can account for this disconnect? To provide an even more complete picture of prevailing narratives, analysis could identify not just how often but also where and in which types of stories different players show up. An exploration of broadcast, radio or other media types not addressed here could also advance knowledge.

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