

Flipping the Script: Reimagining Media Coverage of Female Athletes in America

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Introduction

In recent years, the popularity of women's sports in America has continued to grow, with broadcast events such as the WNBA Draft increasing its audiences by 49% from 2022 to 2023 (Nielsen, 2023). Yet, while the popularity of women's sports continues to grow exponentially, studies have shown that the frequency and quality of media reports remain limited, often focusing on women's appearance and personal life, instead of their athletic prowess (Sun & Wang, 2023).

Past studies have overlooked the direct reporting habits and implications within American Professional and Collegiate sports. Most of these studies have been focused on female Olympic athletes or global perspectives of professional sports. As we witness the rise of extraordinary collegiate female athletes, such as Caitlin Clark and A'ja Wilson, becoming central figures in conversations, it's necessary to expand our collective focus to study collegiate and professional female athletes within the United States, assess media reporting on them, and evaluate their impact on the sport.

Through a mixed method study, including qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative survey, I examined how female athletes would prefer to be featured, as well as where inequality in sports media coverage has manifested itself in the past and present. This investigation aims to deepen our understanding of how collegiate and professional female athletes in the U.S. are portrayed in the media and public perceptions of them, and this study seeks to establish guidelines for achieving more equitable media coverage. Studying the portrayal and perceptions of female athletes will benefit organizations as well as athletes because, hopefully, strategic

communications efforts within the sporting industry will be seen as more trustworthy and reliable with more equitable coverage, and women everywhere will see themselves reflected positively in the media.

Literature Review

Inequitable Media Coverage of Female Athletes Compared to Male Athletes

Women in sports media often receive less coverage than male athletes, and when they do receive coverage it is generally shorter and/or less focused on their sport and profession (Sun & Wang, 2023). A mere 4% of media coverage on one of the sporting world's largest media networks, ESPN, is dedicated solely to female athletes (Sun & Wang, 2023). And even then, research has shown that the stories dedicated to women are frequently shorter and/or less in-depth than the stories on male athletes (Sun & Wang, 2023). This means that when female athletes can achieve media attention, they still receive unequal coverage in quality. These statistics highlight the fact that the media places little emphasis on the contributions of female athletes, thus contributing to the public perception of them as unimportant and irrelevant.

Studies have also shown that the frequency and quality of media reports on female athletes remain limited, often focusing on women's appearance and life outside of their profession, instead of their athletic prowess (Sun & Wang, 2023). According to Sun and Wang (2023), "... appearance, family life, and emotions of female athletes often become the focal point of reporting, while their athletic abilities and achievements are frequently downplayed" (p. 2). This style of reporting again contributes to the public perception of female athletes and their professional achievements as negligible, highlighting a portrayal of female athletes and their professions as unimportant compared to the fact that they are women. In other words, when media attention is given to female athletes, they are viewed as emotional and feminine beings

instead of through their defining characteristics of athletic achievement, like their male counterparts (Shifflett et al., 2016).

This act of inequitable reporting on female athletes within the media is not just something that can be proven. Indeed, members of the public are noticing (Holleran, 2024). Women's National Basketball Association Reporter Nicole Auerbach witnesses firsthand the difference in coverage between men's and women's sports. She recently spoke out, saying, "Reporters ARE supposed to ask about actions athletes choose to take during games. That line of questioning happens all the time in men's sports and with athletes regardless of race (Holleran, 2024, para. Nicole Auerbach). Her message implies that this is not a line of questioning that is generally followed when it comes to female athletes. This testimony comes directly from an individual who witnesses female and male athletes' coverage regularly and professionally, offering direct insight into the flaws of the system from inside its mechanisms.

Male athletes have historically dominated sports media coverage, often being the primary focus of broadcasts and news stories, even when covering female athletes (Shifflett et al., 2016). A common tactic used to legitimize female athletes' athletic accomplishments is to compare them to male athletes (Shifflett et al., 2016). It is important to note that male athletes are also compared to other male athletes. This practice further perpetuates the stereotype that men are the "standard" athletes that all others should be compared against, resulting in a depiction of male athletic superiority. By positioning men in such a light, it sets the precedent that male athletes are the "... primary actors in the domain of sports" (Shifflett et al., 2016, p. 14). Even when credit is not due, male athletes are afforded the opportunity to gain more media attention and boost their public perception.

Even when stories are mainly focused on women, the amount that they are featured is a mere fraction of that of male athletes. Based on a study conducted in 2016 on the content of ESPN videos, 11 out of 99 videos were focused on female athletes, and the rest highlighted male athletes (Shifflett et al., 2016). Measuring in minutes, this left male athletes with an accumulation of over 200 minutes of coverage and female athletes with just under 29 minutes of feature time. Within the videos, the sports that were covered for female athletes included ones that are traditionally considered to be sports suitable for women, including softball, gymnastics, skiing, and swimming. While the female athletes in these videos were not sexualized, they are still being stereotyped so that the perception of women in sports conforms to more traditional ideas surrounding gender roles (Shifflett et al., 2016).

Statistical and testimonial research proves the lack of coverage female athletes are currently receiving, effectively highlighting an area within the sports media industry that should be addressed and amended. Yet, there is still a need to review exactly how larger quantities of the general public perceive female athletes to ensure effective tactics are implemented for the future of women depicted in sports journalism. When women in sports are able to garner media attention, their stories lack depth and information pertaining to their sport, often being talked about for their lifestyle or appearance instead, overshadowing their professional accomplishments (Holleran, 2024; Shifflett et al., 2016; Sun & Wang, 2023). This skewed method of reporting ultimately leads to a misshapen representation of the contribution of female athletes in their sports and reinforces typical gender stereotypes that are perpetuated within sports journalism (Holleran, 2024; Shifflett et al., 2016; Sun & Wang, 2023). By placing more focus on female athletes' athletic ability, they will get the recognition they deserve in the industry for which they should be known.

Representation of Female Athletes in the Olympics

While the current study is focused on American female athletes, there is information that can be contextualized from previous research on the perception and media coverage of female Olympians. Female athletes in the Olympics are often portrayed as symbols of gender inclusivity rather than athletes. Over the last 113 years at the Parade of Nations at the beginning of the Olympics, the gender probability of a woman being selected to be a flag bearer compared to a man has been significantly lower (Malanski, 2023). While this difference has become less prominent year to year, as of the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics, it is still present (Malanski, 2023). Through the push for equality in representation from organizations such as The International Working Group of Women and Sport, the number of female flag bearers continues to grow from game to game. Even so, women are more likely to be presented in roles that are made to portray them as aesthetically pleasing, such as event hosts. Within their competitions, coverage of female athletes tends to skew toward events like gymnastics and diving that continue to highlight women's femininity, as opposed to their male counterparts, whose media attention focuses on sports that highlight their strength and power (Malanski, 2023). In the end, while the issue is being addressed and strides are being taken to foster an environment of inclusivity within the Olympics and coverage thereof, there is still an underlying message of femininity being focused on when portraying female Olympians.

Beyond media coverage of the Olympic Games, scholars have also examined the Olympic Games lack of focus on female competitors. Since 2005, the amount of research that publications have written about women's participation in the Olympics has increased, as well as the total number of outside sources cited per study (Salido-Fernandez & Muñoz-Muñoz, 2021).

No matter the country the Olympics take place in or the medium they are viewed on, there is clear evidence of quantitative “... progress made in the coverage of women’s sport, [but] gender, and gender norms continue to shape the media coverage of the Olympic Games today (Salido-Fernandez & Muñoz-Muñoz, 2021, p. 8-9). The coverage within these articles remains inequitable by focusing less on the athleticism of female athletes and more on the female athlete’s sexuality and feminine beauty, emotion and dependence, and infantilization and passivity (Salido-Fernandez & Muñoz-Muñoz, 2021). In the end, the media portrayal of the Olympic games is a prime example of how media coverage directly affects different aspects of culture and shapes the public perception of female athletes in the exact way that they are being portrayed: as fragile and dainty objects for public consumption instead of athletes.

Even as the Olympic Games are making efforts to appear less biased and more gender-inclusive, many times it is done in a way in which the appearance or emotional characteristics of women are being highlighted, leaving them to be presented as symbols of femininity instead of symbols of power and strength within their sport, or at the very least representations of their sport (Malanski, 2023; Salido-Fernandez & Muñoz-Muñoz, 2021). This misrepresentation diminishes the contribution of female Olympians, all the while portraying the Olympics as inclusive even as the progress toward gender equality is undermined (Malanski, 2023; Salido-Fernandez & Muñoz-Muñoz, 2021). This information leaves a precedent of the depiction of female Olympians, but there is still a gap in research concerning the depiction of female athletes in America, and whether this same pattern is applicable.

Preferred Media Portrayals of Female Athletes

Previous research into media portrayals of female athletes is limited, with most studies focusing on stereotypical depictions of female athletes or the way they are affected within their

sport because of these portrayals (Chahardovali & McLeod, 2022; Martinez & Bhalla, 2023; Sun & Wang, 2023). For example, in their qualitative study, Martinez and Bhalla (2023) explored how female college athletes would prefer their sport to be portrayed in the media. Research found that female college athletes preferred media portrayals that focused on their athletic competence, as opposed to other options such as mixed message, “classy,” and soft pornographic. After conducting in-person interviews with female collegiate athletes in soccer, volleyball, and track and field, the researchers found that participants overwhelmingly preferred to be portrayed for their athletic competence within media depictions of their sport (Martinez & Bhalla, 2023). This research study also concluded that “...images of athletic competence and mixed messages show respect for the sports accomplishments... and bring attention to women athletes’ power” (Martinez & Bhalla, 2023, p. 7). Female athletes’ power is most effectively portrayed by depicting them in ways that highlight their athletic ability or the nature of their profession within their sport. Ultimately, the findings of their study suggest that how collegiate female athletes see themselves and other women being portrayed in sports media impacts how female athletes are viewed as a whole. These portrayals also have an effect on how female athletes see themselves, and they feel most recognized when being focused on for their athletic abilities.(Martinez & Bhalla, 2023).

The ways in which female athletes are portrayed in the media extend beyond an interest in representing their sport. By being presented athletically, female athletes feel that they have more power and are being highlighted for reasons regarding their sport and not their sex appeal (Martinez & Bhalla, 2023). Female athletes, therefore, preferred to be athletically portrayed because this representation positively affected their self-esteem. A research study on competitive collegiate female athletes found that the way women are portrayed in sports media can lead to

the objectification of their bodies, eventually leading to effects on body esteem (Reichert Smith, 2016). When the Division 1 female collegiate athlete participants in this study were shown photos of female athletes in overly sexualized contexts, they were more likely to critique their body image, unable to understand that this photo is generally unrepresentative of the athletic prowess of professional female athletes and that it's idealizing one specific body type that doesn't represent the vast majority of the body types and abilities generally presented in female athletes (Reichert Smith, 2016). Additionally, findings from this study suggest that when shown images of female athletes utilizing their athletic ability/highlighting their profession through the game they play, participants (who were female athletes) were less likely to use objectifying statements to describe the image, and overall they preferred it when an athlete's skill was highlighted. When the athletes' skills were highlighted, the collegiate athletes even expressed some ideas of positive and powerful self-esteem (Reichert Smith, 2016).

Beyond the scope of their athleticism, female athletes contend with personal issues that directly impact their self-esteem, stemming from how they are portrayed in the media. In a research study conducted on Division 1 collegiate athletes, test subjects exhibited attitudes toward their bodies and self-esteem in positive or negative ways, depending on an image shown to them of either female athletes participating in athletic and competitive contexts or female athletes shown in glamorized and sexualized ways (Reichert Smith, 2016). This study indicates the way that female athletes would prefer to see others like them in the media, and that this has a direct impact on their esteem (Reichert Smith, 2016). Regardless of the sport they played or the university they attended, "... participants in this study report[ed] more physical and positive statements when viewing images of performing athletes, and more beauty and negative statements when viewing the two nonperforming conditions" (Reichert Smith, 2016). Yet, when

shown athletes engaged in the sport, they describe themselves and the athletes through positive, powerful, or prideful adjectives. On the other hand, non-performance photos of female athletes left participants with feelings related to self-objectification and a skewed sense of the athlete, a majority of the time commenting on the woman's body or appearance (Reichert Smith, 2016).

Current research suggests that female athletes would prefer to be contextualized within their athletic ability or overall profession as an athlete. In numerous studies, female collegiate athletes preferred to see other female athletes presented in situations that either depicted them playing their sport or representing their athleticism and/or their team (Chahardovali & McLeod, 2022; Martinez & Bhalla, 2023; Sun & Wang, 2023). To achieve a broader understanding of current depictions of female athletes, more information is needed on the public perception of collegiate and professional athletes, as well as how their current depictions are absorbed by the general public.

The Burden of Media Coverage

Research suggests that female athletes receive less media attention than male athletes, yet the burden is solely placed on them should they want more coverage (Chahardovali & McLeod, 2022). One reason for this is that investment in a women's sports team is seen as faulty or a bad idea, while doing so for a men's team is viewed as the opposite (Chahardovali & McLeod, 2022). Because of this, a majority of fundraising, marketing, and promotion for their sports falls directly onto the shoulders of the female athletes on the team and is generally expected of them without the promise of compensation (Chahardovali & McLeod, 2022). The main driving factor that makes female athletes willing to participate in un/underpaid work such as meet and greets or youth camps is to hopefully drive society towards a better position for the youth who will eventually fill their shoes (Chahardovali & McLeod, 2022). While "... added expectations for

unpaid work takes time, effort, and energy away from training, recovery, and other income-earning activities,” female athletes understand the importance of doing so to work towards a future of equal representation within the industry of sports as a whole (Chahardovali & McLeod, 2022, p. 1).

Within the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), a prominent league for the sport of mixed martial arts, female athletes are required to use social media to present themselves in an advantageous way to the organization (McClearn, 2021). By doing so, promoters and organizations plan that the female fighters will be viewed by UCF as a viable assessment to ultimately gain them sponsors (McClearn, 2021). This responsibility of visibility online is left solely up to the fighters and is done so with a general lack of reward (McClearn, 2021). Not only does gaining media attention affect public perception of these fighters, but it can make them more valuable to their organization. When a fighter “... generate[s] significant followers, clicks, likes, and comments, the UFC often takes notice, schedules them to fight, and may potentially spend additional resources in that fighter’s promotion via more mainstream... media channels” (McClearn, 2021, p. 101). This means that when a fighter is more popular in the media, the UFC is more likely to allow them to fight (McClearn, 2021). The UFC is a prime example of the burden placed on women to be respected within their sports and the direct impact this can have on their careers.

Media coverage impacts the public perception of female athletes as well as their career opportunities (Chahardovali & McLeod, 2022; McClearn, 2021). If female athletes want to be successful as athletes in the sports industry, they must do added labor with no pay in hopes that they will ultimately gain media attention, which would benefit them and other female athletes by working towards a future where media coverage of female athletes is more common.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Research was examined through a lens of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, or FCDA. Developed by Michelle M. Lazar (2007), this framework studies language and discourse and how they reinforce power dynamics. This framework is unique because of its specific focus on the critique of gendered power structures (Lazar, 2007). Gender and power dynamics, namely the idea of male dominance, are perpetuated through language that expresses patriarchal ideologies (Lazar, 2007). But it doesn't have to be like this. The purpose of FCDA is to contest and reshape meanings of language through intervening when sexist language is present (Lazar, 2007). To effectively challenge inherently sexist discourse, a multi-level analysis is key. Steps include analysis on linguistic features, discursive strategies, and the socio-political context or power structures that affect discourse (Lazar, 2007). FCDA plays a crucial role in media and communications by analyzing the portrayal of women and how it's shaped by male-dominated narratives (Lazar, 2007).

Altogether, the research above alludes to a greater problem within the sports media industry: Female athletes receive little media coverage, and many times, they are the ones who put in the work to receive recognition (Chahardovali & McLeod, 2022; McClearen, 2021). To address this gap in the scholarship concerning female athletes' media coverage and public perception of female athletes, this study will address the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does public perception differ of male and female athletes in media coverage?

RQ2: How does the public prefer to see female athletes depicted in the media?

RQ3: How often is the general public exposed to women in sports vs. men in sports throughout the media?

RQ4: In what ways does media content differ when reporting on female athletes (Caitlin Clark and A'ja Wilson) vs. male athletes (Jayden Daniels and Patrick Mahomes)?

Method

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the depiction of women in sports media, a qualitative content analysis and a survey were utilized. The qualitative content analysis was conducted on 32 published articles from top sports media journals on both women and men, and a survey was disseminated to adults ages 18 and older living in the United States to understand public perception of women in sports media.

A qualitative content analysis, specifically thematic analysis, is an appropriate method to gather research for this thesis, as coding is an opportunity to critically reflect and analyze data to interpret its meanings through categorization (Miles et al., 2013). Since this type of research is heuristic in nature, it lends itself to the deep and descriptive research of the content of written work, as well as its comparison (Miles et al., 2013). Accompanied by data gathered from individuals through survey research, this study uncovers discrepancies in reporting between male and female athletes and contextualizes how the public internalizes that dissonance.

Thematic analysis and surveys are effective tools within mass communication research, as they allow researchers to gather insights into practitioners' communication strategies (Miles et al., 2013). This study's mixed-method approach is strategic, too. This study's mixed-method approach allows the researcher to answer the posed RQs and ultimately uncover inconsistencies between multiple topics of communication, such as that of men's and women's features in sports media writing and public perceptions of this media coverage.

Data Collection

Qualitative Content Analysis

A thematic analysis was performed to understand how female athletes are portrayed in sports media. The sample included articles on the top National and Collegiate American female and male athletes published in two of the most popular online sports reporting journals as of 2024 based on total unique visitors: ESPN with 136,200,000 unique visitors, and Fox Sports with 35,400,000 unique visitors (Aelieve, 2024). The analysis focused on four of the 2024 'ESPY' winners. The ESPY Awards are an annual ceremony presented by ESPN and ABC that celebrates the achievements of top American athletes. Focus was placed on the 2024 winners of the ESPY for college and professional female athletes, including Caitlin Clark and A'ja Wilson, and the ESPY for college and professional male athletes, including Jayden Daniels and Patrick Mahomes.

The four most recent articles per athlete per online journal were selected on Monday, January 20, 2025, leading to a total of 32 articles to be analyzed. To find articles about each athlete, their respective names were input into the search bar of each online journal, and the four most recent articles were then selected and saved. January 20th was chosen to exclude bias since all selected athletes play different sports at differing times throughout the year and because of limitations with the websites' archiving abilities. An article was only considered to be about an athlete if their name was listed in the headline.

Survey

A survey was utilized to understand the public perception of female athletes. The survey was disseminated to adults living within the United States, and began with questions centered

around general knowledge regarding the same ESPY winners that content analysis focused on, then led to personal observations on each athlete. Then, respondents indicated their perception of the media coverage the athletes receive before answering demographic questions about their age, location, HHI, and gender. See Appendix A for the full survey codebook. Snowball sampling of the researcher's personal contacts was used to gather data. To recruit respondents, the researcher sent an invitation to participate in the survey via email, along with one follow-up email notifying them of the opportunity to engage in this study. Participants were asked to share the study information with others who might be interested in this topic.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Content Analysis

The researcher used Saldaña (2009) and Miles et al. (2013) as a guide to analyze qualitative data. Specifically, the researcher began by coding each article and identifying subcodes when necessary. Example subcodes include opinions for the athlete or facts about the sport. As data analysis progressed, categories were formed from overlapping codes and then grouped into themes (Saldaña, 2009). For example, sadness, happiness, excitement, disappointment, thankfulness, intimidation, and disappointment were grouped into a theme of emotions. While grouping categories into themes, patterns were identified and examined across articles (Saldaña, 2009).

Importantly, before coding the articles, initial codes based on previous research regarding the depiction of women in sports media were identified to guide this inquiry (Holleran, 2024; Martinez & Bhalla, 2023; Shifflett et al., 2016; Sun & Wang, 2023). These codes included “accomplishments,” “personal life,” “lifestyle/appearance,” “emotion,” and “lack of depth.” Each code will be discussed in depth in the Findings section. In addition to coding for these

previously researched topics, the researcher coded for additional topics, themes, categories, and content that emerged organically from the data.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, the researcher engaged in peer debriefing by selecting eight random articles from the sample for another researcher familiar with this project but unfamiliar with the topic to code. This practice is in line with what the researcher suggests when testing the credibility of data. Additionally, the researcher utilized memoing to record, reflect on, and share observations with another qualitative researcher throughout the analysis process.

To analyze survey data, the researcher reported descriptive statistics gathered from Qualtrics. To measure public perception of female and male athletes, the same initial codes that were used for qualitative content analysis were used to gauge how respondents interpret media focus on these athletes. The options included “accomplishments,” “personal life,” “lifestyle/appearance,” “emotion,” and “lack of depth.” There was also one short answer question on the survey, which was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics, with the unit of analysis being per sentence.

Results & Findings

The following section summarizes key findings from survey results investigating public perception of female athletes in sports media. These results indicate that the public sees female athletes in the media much less than male athletes and that they would prefer to see these athletes portrayed for their athleticism. Descriptive statistics of survey respondents can be viewed below in Table 1. The average survey respondents were Caucasian female 18-24 year-olds from Colorado with a bachelor’s degree.

| Variable | % | Number |
|-------------------------------------|----------|---------------|
| Age | | |
| 18-24 years old | 34 | 24 |
| 25-24 years old | 7 | 5 |
| 35-44 years old | 8 | 6 |
| 45-54 years old | 21 | 15 |
| 55-64 years old | 25 | 18 |
| 65+ years old | 4 | 3 |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 33 | 24 |
| Female | 67 | 48 |
| Ethnic Background | | |
| White or Caucasian | 92 | 66 |
| Asian | 3 | 2 |
| Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin | 8 | 6 |
| Prefer not to say | 1 | 1 |
| Level of Education | | |
| High School Graduate (or GED) | 4 | 3 |
| Some College or Technical School | 21 | 15 |
| Associate's Degree | 1 | 1 |
| Bachelor's Degree | 43 | 31 |
| Graduate or Professional Degree | 31 | 22 |
| State of Residency | | |
| Arizona | 3 | 2 |
| California | 1 | 1 |

| | | |
|----------------------|----|----|
| Colorado | 63 | 45 |
| District of Columbia | 1 | 1 |
| Florida | 1 | 1 |
| Illinois | 3 | 2 |
| Indiana | 1 | 1 |
| Iowa | 1 | 1 |
| Massachusetts | 1 | 1 |
| Michigan | 1 | 1 |
| New Jersey | 1 | 1 |
| New Mexico | 1 | 1 |
| New York | 1 | 1 |
| Ohio | 7 | 5 |
| Oregon | 3 | 2 |
| Texas | 4 | 3 |
| Virginia | 1 | 1 |

RQ1. To what extent does public perception differ of male and female athletes in media coverage?

When survey participants were asked how often they see female athletes receive media coverage for their athletic accomplishments compared to male athletes on a 4-point Likert scale, the majority of respondents answered “sometimes” (46% answered sometimes, followed by 32% who answered rarely). These results indicate that the public generally sees less coverage of female athletes compared to males, with only 6% of respondents believing they always see these athletes receive equal coverage. The standard deviation was 0.871, and the mean was 3.0.

Within the coverage that respondents do see female athletes represented in, the majority believe that female athletes are reported on for their athletic accomplishments (40% of respondents), but not all believe this. 19% of respondents believe that media coverage on female athletes lacks depth and another 19% notice mentions of lifestyle or appearance within the content. Among survey respondents who observed coverage of male athletes, 75% believed that such coverage focuses on athletic accomplishments. The next most common answer choice was mentions of lifestyle and appearance, selected by 10% of total respondents.

| Variable | % | Number |
|---|----------|---------------|
| How often do you see female athletes receive coverage for their athletic accomplishments compared to male athletes? | | |
| Always | 6 | 4 |
| Often | 17 | 12 |
| Rarely | 32 | 23 |
| Sometimes | 46 | 33 |
| How would you describe the type of media coverage that you typically see for female athletes? | | |
| Focuses on Athletic Accomplishments | 40 | 29 |
| Focuses on Personal Life | 7 | 5 |
| Mentions Lifestyle/Appearance | 19 | 14 |
| Emphasizes Emotions (Positive or Negative) | 14 | 10 |
| Content Lacks Depth | 19 | 14 |
| How would you describe the type of media coverage that you typically see for male athletes? | | |
| Focuses on Athletic Accomplishments | 75 | 54 |

| | | |
|--|----|---|
| Focuses on Personal Life | 6 | 4 |
| Mentions Lifestyle/Appearance | 10 | 7 |
| Emphasizes Emotions (Positive or Negative) | 1 | 1 |
| Content Lacks Depth | 8 | 6 |

RQ2. How does the public prefer to see female athletes depicted in the media?

Respondents had the opportunity to answer an open-ended question that asked what changes they would like to see within the depiction of women in sports media, if any. A total of 36 respondents answered this question. Respondents indicated that they would like to see female athletes receive more equitable coverage in terms of female athletes reported on for their athleticism and technical contribution to their sports as much as male athletes are and reported on as frequently as male athletes.

41% of survey respondents answered this question. All respondents who answered the question reached a consensus concerning more equitable coverage for female athletes. All responses can be read in Appendix B.

RQ3. How often is the general public exposed to women in sports vs. men in sports throughout the media?

While the frequency of content released by the media may differ between men's and women's sports, it is essential to also consider the exposure level the public has to each topic, and the content of the media being released. When survey respondents were asked what percentage of sports media is dedicated to female athletes' athletic accomplishments compared to male athletes, the predominant answer was that men received significantly more coverage on this topic. With 36% of responses, the most common answer choice to this question was that women

received 20% of coverage on athletic accomplishments, compared to 80% for men. The next two most common answer choices selected were 10% female and 90% male, followed by 30% female and 70% male.

This survey question was directly related to the public's exposure levels and does not necessarily represent the exact amount of content being released on female and male athletes.

See Appendix A for full responses.

| Variable | % | Number |
|---|----------|---------------|
| What percentage of media coverage do you think is dedicated to female athletes' athletic accomplishments compared to male athletes? (Your total should add up to 100%) | | |
| 0% female - 100% male | 0 | 0 |
| 10% female - 90% male | 25 | 18 |
| 20% female - 80% male | 36 | 26 |
| 30% female - 70% male | 24 | 17 |
| 40% female - 60% male | 7 | 5 |
| 50% female - 50% male | 3 | 2 |
| 60% female - 40% male | 1 | 1 |
| 70% female - 30% male | 3 | 2 |
| 80% female - 20% male | 1 | 1 |
| 90% female - 10% male | 0 | 0 |
| 100% female - 0% male | 0 | 0 |

The last RQ includes findings from the qualitative content analysis. The findings are presented below.

RQ4. In what ways does media content differ when reporting on female athletes (Caitlin Clark and A'ja Wilson) vs. male athletes (Jayden Daniels and Patrick Mahomes)?

Female Athletes

Athletic Accomplishments

Athletic accomplishments are a major topic discussed in media focused on female athletes. This was done in one of two ways: mentioning an athletic accomplishment as an introduction to an athlete or listing off their accomplishments. The purpose of mentioning athletic accomplishments is generally to give readers context and background on the athlete being discussed. Accolades such as honors, awards, successful plays, and broken records are just a few examples of the athletic accomplishments mentioned by Caitlin Clark and A'ja Wilson. For the vast majority of accolades mentioned, the sole purpose was to provide background information on the athlete being discussed, which can be seen here:

[Article 7] Named AP's Female Athlete of the Year. Named TIME's Athlete of the Year. First rookie since 2008 to be named to All-WNBA first team. 2024 WNBA Rookie of the Year. 2024 WNBA All-Rookie Team. Most points by a point guard in a season in WNBA history. Most double-doubles by a rookie guard in WNBA history. Most points by a rookie in WNBA history. Most assists by a rookie in WNBA history. First WNBA rookie to record two triple-doubles. First triple-double by a rookie in WNBA history and first triple-double in Fever history. 1st player in WNBA history to be named Player of the Month and Rookie of the Month in the same month. 1st player in WNBA history with 20+ points, 15+ assists and 5+ rebounds in a game. 4x WNBA Rookie of the Month. 3x Eastern Conference Player of the Week. WNBA rookie single-season scoring record.

When an achievement wasn't being talked about as an introduction to the athlete, it was because the discussion was centered around an award recently presented or an achievement from a recent game that the athlete played in. For example:

[Article 17] The Las Vegas Aces star was named the league's MVP earlier Sunday, also unanimously.

In around one-third of the articles, the headlines of the stories either mentioned or focused directly on the athletic accomplishments of the athletes, even if the article's main idea was not focused on accomplishments such as Most Valuable Player. While there are many mentions of Caitlin Clark and A'ja Wilson's athletic achievements, as well as occasional mentions of successes from other female athletes, it is also important to note that in two articles, there are mentions of the athletic achievements of men, namely Shohei Ohtani.

Personal Life

The personal lives of Clark and Wilson are consistently talked about when they are reported on. One area of emphasis within these athletes' personal lives is their online presence and how they handle being perceived publicly:

[Article 2] ...she is often the centerpiece of debates and online toxicity toward her and other players in the league.

[Article 24] (Excerpt of a quote from A'ja Wilson) That's the beautiful thing about social media is that it can go away if you just really don't pay it any mind. It's kind of like a plant in water. It's going to grow. It's going to consume you. But if not, it dies. And then it goes away. In some cases, I really kind of stayed off of social just to protect my mental because I'm not about to fight with computer warriors. I'm not about to be there. I'll be there all day.

Topics that have to do with their daily existence—such as attending other sporting events with other celebrities, their past education, or how they spend their time off the court—were also discussed on multiple occasions:

[Article 1] (Headline) Taylor Swift returns to Arrowhead Stadium to watch Chiefs alongside Caitlin Clark

In multiple articles, there was mention of an incident involving an individual stalking Caitlin Clark. The entirety of the case was laid out for readers, including direct quotes from messages sent to Clark and details of exactly how and when she was stalked. This gave readers

an insight into the specificity of a very personal and sensitive matter while forcing Clark to not only handle the issue at hand, but also having her personal life chronicled in detail about it.

Female athletes' personal lives were brought up for entertainment and relatability. By sharing such information, the athletes become more personable. These facts shared about Clark and Wilson's personal lives make viewers realize that they are not just athletes, allowing readers to relate to them and see them as less successful athletes and more as someone just like them.

Lifestyle/Appearance

Lifestyle and appearance were infrequently discussed within the analyzed articles of Clark and Wilson. When this theme was brought up, it had no relation to the athletes' sport or even sports in general. In the few instances that this theme presented itself, topics concerning lifestyle and appearance occurred in the form of mentions of what an athlete was wearing or how they looked:

[Article 24] A'ja Wilson walks inside a production studio a few miles south of Las Vegas, wearing her bonnet, sweats and Crocs, before a trio of hair and makeup assistants swarms her to get her ready for a photo shoot.

While this theme didn't emerge often, when it did emerge, it had no relevance to the athletes' careers, ultimately drawing focus away from their profession and making them seem more feminine.

Emotions

The emotions of Clark and Wilson are common topics of discussion throughout the articles centered around them. A variety of both positive and negative emotions are seen throughout the articles. When emotions outside of Clark and Wilson's were mentioned, it was to express emotion *about* these athletes. For example, a coach or teammate may be talking about

how impressed they were with how a situation was handled by the female athletes or how excited they are to see what comes next from them.

The first emotion that frequently presented itself was thankfulness. Both Clark and Wilson can be seen often expressing gratitude towards an award or honor they received, or simply over some general acknowledgment for the situations they are in professionally:

[Article 3] "I'm forever proud to be a Hawkeye and Iowa holds a special place in my heart that is bigger than just basketball," Clark said. "It means the world to me to receive this honor and to celebrate it with my family, friends and alumni. It will be a great feeling to look up in the rafters and see my jersey alongside those that I've admired for so long."

The utilization and expression of such an emotion is to show these athletes' humility.

Other emotions repeatedly seen throughout the articles are happiness and excitement. These emotions are used to express contentment with the athletes' professional situations or excitement for what is to come from their sports and personal performances in the future, meaning that both these emotions also manifest as pride. Such pride was more consistently depicted when Clark and Wilson were being talked about by their teammates:

[Article 8] Lobo also has been impressed with the way Clark, 22, has handled the pressure and attention that has come her way.

Alternatively, when the female athletes were expressing their own emotions of happiness or excitement, it was in terms of an optimistic outlook on their sport, whether it's their impact within a game or the community as a whole:

[Article 20] (Quote from A'ja Wilson) "I hope when girls wear this shoe, they believe in themselves," Wilson said. "I want them to hopefully lace them up, feel powerful and understand that nobody can stop them from their dreams. Set those goals high. Go get them — that's the biggest thing."

Altogether, this range of positive emotions showcases the successes of Clark and Wilson and their hopes for the future of their sport, successfully shining a light on the real-world impact of women's sports.

The athletes can also be seen expressing negative emotions, including sadness, intimidation, and indifference. These emotions were seen less often than those with positive connotations but still present themselves enough to create meaning. When they were mentioned, such emotions were not generally used to express feelings about Clark or Wilson's athleticism or their careers, but instead their personal lives:

[Article 6] The posts "actually caused Caitlin Clark to feel terrorized, frightened, intimidated, or threatened"

[Article 24] It's just who I am. I've been in low, dark places where I haven't been myself and I let the enemy, I let the trolls win and it sucked because it wasn't me. I was people-pleasing and it was imposter syndrome. I lost myself in that. So, I made a deal with myself leaving the bubble that I will never let those people win. Now when I approach it, I approach it myself, and like it or love it, I'm going to be me and then we going to keep it pushing. I made a deal with myself that I'm not going to go down that road of people-pleasing and letting people see me down or let them see me uncomfortable.

If sadness, intimidation, or indifference were mentioned concerning the female athletes' careers, it was in a way of how they cope with the pressures of their sport:

[Article 24] When it came to pressure, I would just disconnect myself. I had two of my best friends come out one weekend and I think that was probably the best weekend and time that they could have come out. They're two of my friends that don't play basketball. They allowed me to be A'ja and not the girl in a uniform. That's how I handle pressures -- just kind of escape it. Disconnecting from it.

The expression of such emotions allows audience members to realize that these athletes are not superhuman as many athletes are oftentimes portrayed to be. By taking this more personal approach to the depiction of Clark and Wilson, they are, in turn, seen as people first and athletes second.

The expression of such a wide array of emotions by and about Clark and Wilson serves many purposes, but they all share a common impact on how the athletes are viewed and interpreted. No matter if positive or negative emotions are the topic of focus, these emotions

allow the audience to relate with the athletes on a deeper level by recognizing them for more than just their profession.

Lack of Depth

The degree to which information about Clark and Wilson is presented can be seen as lacking in some areas. *Lack of Depth* presents itself within the articles on these female athletes when a vague phrase is said about them with no further explanation or analysis:

[Article 7] Caitlin Clark has taken the WNBA by storm. Following a record-breaking college career, Clark had a dazzling debut season as a guard for the Indiana Fever. Here's a look at Clark's professional accolades:

This example does not highlight any of the records that Clark broke in her college career, and then the article immediately jumps into listing Clark's professional successes in bullet point form. Since her achievements are nothing more than listed, no analysis or explanation accompanies them.

This same lack of depth presents itself in articles focused on Wilson. In an article discussing all of the WNBA Most Valuable Player Award winners (Including Wilson) since 1997, one of the MVPs was brought up:

[Article 22] Jones delivered standout performances in the hard-fought series to win WNBA Finals MVP for the first time.

Similar to the mentions of Clark, this sentence was the only piece of information mentioned about the MVP, Jones. Instead of listing any of her specific accomplishments during her 'standout performances', the audience is left with a vague sentence on the athlete. Ultimately, this lack of depth glosses over important achievements of female athletes without proper analysis or explanation, leaving the athletes with no recognition.

Facts

Relaying factual information is a priority in journalism. In sports articles centered around Clark and Wilson, it is no different. Such facts are truly the driving variable of a vast majority of the articles analyzed. Whether the facts are about the athlete individually, their team, or their sport as a whole, the featured facts are an informative depiction of the lives and professions of Clark and Wilson.

Many facts within the articles are centered around the athletes individually. When they were the topic of discussion, the facts mentioned about Clark and Wilson ranged from their scoring statistics to their leadership styles or even their betting and sportsbook odds. However, it is important to note that facts were more frequently mentioned about Wilson than Clark. The facts on each athletes gave direct information for the purpose of providing context:

[Article 20] Last season, Wilson averaged 22.8 points, 9.5 rebounds and 2.2 blocks per game. She then averaged 23.8 points per game in the playoffs.

Facts about the athletes' teams as a whole were an occasional topic as well.

Many times, team facts were included to discuss the relationship between teammates, the relationship between teammates and coaches, or game details such as the date and time of an upcoming game. All of the facts mentioned about the athletes' teams as a whole are supportive. They aren't necessarily the focal point of the article, but they are worthwhile, nonetheless to allow readers to fully understand the context of why something is happening.

The last topic of factual information presented in the articles is about the sporting organization as a whole, which in this case is the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). The facts centered around other female athletes or teams as a whole, giving context to the greater industry layout and the positionality of key players within this system:

[Article 17] Clark headlined the all-rookie team along with Angel Reese of the Chicago Sky, who broke the rebounds-per-game record by averaging 13.1. She would have had the overall rebounding record as well had she not gotten hurt at the end of the season.

Other rookies on the team were New York's Leonie Fiebich, Los Angeles' Rickea Jackson and Chicago's Kamilla Cardoso.

These facts are supportive, as they aren't directly reporting on the main topics of the articles (Clark or Wilson), but they provide useful context. It is also important to note that there was one fact mentioned in Article 1 about the Kansas City Chiefs' game schedule. This is the one fact that had no interpretable reason to be featured, as it was not about the same sport that the athletes of focus play.

Factual content is necessary for readers to understand the content they are reading and either justify or refute their conclusions about a topic. Such information is an important part of sports journalism that leaves us more rightfully opinionated and well-informed.

Opinions

On rare occasions, sports journalists can be seen expressing their own opinions on Caitlin Clark or the WNBA in their writing. No opinions were directly expressed about Wilson. The inclusion of opinionated comments was all in support of Caitlin Clark and the WNBA as a whole:

[Article 19] If Clark ends up capturing the All-Star Game MVP title, Clark supporters — like "The Herd" host Colin Cowherd — might consider it a form of poetic justice after her Team USA snub.

While these comments were infrequent, their presence is a way to signify to the audience that further analysis is required on some topics in sports. Opinions from the authors also set an important example to readers that there is something here to be further dissected, and that this topic is important enough to warrant a stance on it at all.

Fan Impact

As public figures, Clark and Wilson have contributed to the growing fan base of women's sports by cultivating their own fan bases. Their public perceptions are shaped by their fans, who directly influence the public perception of women's sports as a whole:

[Article 2] Fans packed sold-out arenas, and millions of television viewers tuned in to follow her journey. Clark's exploits were far reaching, casting a light on other women's sports leagues along the way.

Similar to the theme of opinions, whenever *fan impact* presented itself in articles, it was only to mention a phenomenon around Clark.

These mentions of fan impact suggest that the influence of women's sports is growing. Sold out arenas and increased viewership indicate a rise in popularity, challenging long-held assumptions of the impact of female athletes.

Male Athletes

Athletic Accomplishments

The athletic accomplishments of Jayden Daniels and Patrick Mahomes are frequently talked about in the articles reported on them, but these codes extend past the individual athletes and include team accomplishments too. When articles discuss Daniels and Mahomes, athletic accomplishments are mentioned to give readers context into the skill of the athlete and/or to discuss an accomplishment they recently achieved. When contextualizing this idea within the broader depiction of male athletes and teams, athletic accomplishments are often discussed to compare and contrast individuals and organizations. This may be done to either justify a claim about the praise an athlete is receiving or to predict the outcome of a game. In other words, male athletes' successes are mentioned for argumentative purposes:

[Article 25] When Patrick Mahomes and Josh Allen square off, they make magic. Historically speaking, Mahomes has made just a little bit more magic than Allen, and that's why the Bills haven't beaten the Chiefs in the postseason in the Allen-Mahomes era. Mahomes is 3-0 against Allen in the postseason. And the version of the Bills that beat the

Ravens on Sunday night — while impressive — isn't the version that's likely to beat the Chiefs in the AFC Championship Game.

Other athletes' and teams' achievements are also frequently mentioned to provide insight into the sporting league or the athlete who is the topic of the article. These accomplishments are frequently used to give readers background knowledge on an individual mentioned or on a recent game:

[Article 26] Then offensively, Mahomes and Kelce worked their magic, like we've seen too many times to count over the past several years. Mahomes completed seven of his eight targets to Kelce, who had 117 receiving yards and a fourth-quarter touchdown (on a falling throw from Mahomes). Kelce's 49-yard catch and run in the second quarter set up the Chiefs' first score, too.

While one-third of the headlines mentioned the athlete's athletic accomplishments, all of the articles in the sample on male athletes emphasized their athletic accomplishments.

Personal Life

There are few instances where Mahomes' personal life is discussed, and none concerning Daniels. When Mahomes' personal life is mentioned, it is in acknowledgment of the birth of his child:

[Article 30] (Headline) Patrick, Brittany Mahomes share birth of daughter Golden Raye

Such a milestone from a significant figure within his sport attracts attention, especially as the Mahomes family posted updates and announcements regarding their growing family on social media. News reports regarding Mahomes' personal life were respectful, as the majority of personal details shared were gathered either from information posted by the Mahomes themselves or discussed in public interviews by the Mahomes.

Lifestyle/Appearance

The theme of lifestyle or appearance of either Jayden Daniels or Patrick Mahomes never presented itself in any of the sampled articles.

Emotions

Frequently, the theme of positive emotions is presented in articles through observations primarily about Daniels and a few about Mahomes. These observations are centered around the demeanor of the male athletes, or how observers and journalists feel to watch them play and feature emotions like happiness, excitement, and thankfulness:

[Article 13] "We got a special, special dude," Cosmi said in September. "That makes me excited to be here."

Positive emotions also presented themselves within the articles when players talked about their own experiences, professionally and personally. For example, Mahomes was quoted talking about his happiness with his most recent child.

Occasionally, intimidation, an emotion with a more negative connotation, was depicted. This emotion could only be seen sparingly, but when it was present, it was again about observations of certain players:

[Article 28] TIER 5: I'm a little scared for them

The inclusion of emotional expression within news articles on male athletes made both Daniels and Mahomes seem even more compelling. By sharing excitement and encouragement about the athletes and creating an underdog narrative through the emotion of intimidation, reporters created suspense by shaping a narrative beyond just fact.

Lack of Depth

The theme of lack of depth of either Jayden Daniels or Patrick Mahomes never presented itself in any of the sampled articles.

Facts

The facts shared in news reports about Daniels and Mahomes focus on Daniels and Mahomes themselves, their teams, or the National Football League, which is the sporting organization that both athletes are affiliated with. When facts are centered around the athletes, they focus on information like stats, general performance, and specific plays from previous games:

[Article 16] Daniels completed 9 of 12 passes for 97 yards on his first two possessions and ran five times for 15 yards.

Similar to facts presented about the two athletes, facts were also presented about the teams, specifically concerning passes and plays made in games, stats, or the scores of games. Additional facts included the details of an upcoming game, like the date, time, and players who will be playing vs. players who will be benched.

Frequently, facts about the NFL as an organization were presented, providing a broader context for the league that Daniels and Mahomes are a part of. The facts discussed are similar to those about the specific athletes and teams, but many times compare the information to statistics from other teams, or specific athletes on other teams. In other words, data, statistics, scores, and plays from multiple teams are often listed for comparison:

[Article 25] Over the course of this season, we've seen Allen take a step toward Mahomes as a game manager. One key breakthrough for Allen was that it's not enough to simply make big plays. It's about avoiding negative ones. This season, the Bills QB has the fewest turnover-worthy plays (15) in his career and the lowest turnover-worthy percentage (2.4%). His big-time throw total (39) isn't as high as in previous seasons, but his big-time throw percentage (7.1%) is the second-highest of his career. That's a demonstration of his evolution as a decision-maker.

The act of factually presenting this information provides a larger context of not only Daniels and Mahomes but the NFL as a whole. The content of these facts places importance on football as a sport, effectively highlighting these male athletes as professionals in their field.

Opinions

Opinions from sportscasters are a common tactic used in sports journalism, and many can be found in articles about Daniels and Mahomes. All of the stated opinions are not about the two male athletes; however, when opinion statements occur concerning Daniels and Mahomes, it is generally to express personal feelings on how the athlete played and why the writer thought their performance was good or bad:

[Article 9] CHRIS MYERS' ANALYSIS: "I had the pleasure of calling three of Daniels' games during the season, including his first NFL win, and in speaking with him, he was more impressed after each time. His talent on the field speaks for itself, his smile and swagger don't speak loudly enough. He acts as if he's already been there, or maybe as if he knows he's going further. He passes with zip and accuracy. His running somehow combines being both wise and fearless.

Some opinions are also expressed directly by the athletes, but this can only be seen in one article. For context, the purpose of these opinions that come directly from Jayden Daniels is to give readers an idea into the direct line of thinking of the athlete during his preparation for eventual performance in a football game, as well as a deeper understanding of the relationship between players and the game they play with the specific coaches and teams they play for.

The vast majority of opinions featured emphasize the NFL itself. Whole teams are mentioned and analyzed by sportscasters, many times in comparison to other teams to help predict trends in future games. Analyses on the positioning of key athletes are a large topic of discussion, whether it be to share thoughts on the talent of a player, a recent play, or their forecasted performance based on past skill:

[Article 28] Jordan Love, Packers It was fairly clear, at the beginning of the year, that Love was battling through physical limitations, likely stemming from his knee injury. I can say that with confidence because of how different he looks right now: 1) passing with power and precision, 2) making sound decisions, 3) cleaning up his turnover-worthy plays. (He hasn't had one in six weeks.) The matchups against the Vikings (Week 17) and the Lions (Week 14) showed Love can hang with the best. But can he beat them? Both games were losses. Love may still be ascending, but I worry he's not there yet.

No matter who or what the topic of opinion is, the fact that many different voices took the time to analyze and form beliefs off on their findings on Daniels, Mahomes, or the greater NFL organization as a whole shines a light on the fact that many journalists care greatly about these male athletes.

Fan Impact

The theme of fan impact makes an appearance only once throughout the sample articles on male athletes. The purpose of its mention is to provide readers with a different perspective and allow them to see how others like them were reacting to a situation:

[Article 14] Fans at Ford Field were stunned after a season with such great promise ended with a five-turnover performance in the loss to Washington.

This presentation of fan behavior does not show a physical impact as much as an emotional and systematically interpreted one. This mention serves no insightful purpose, and is instead there to acknowledge fan presence and the community that sports foster.

Discussion

Interpreting Survey Results and Thematic Analysis Findings

Survey results and thematic analysis findings suggest that while male athletes are depicted and predominantly highlighted for their profession as athletes, female athletes are instead seen as people first and athletes second. When comparing the way that themes were presented between female and male athletes, the results directly aligned with survey respondents' wants and needs when it comes to these athletes' depiction in the media. As one survey respondent put it best, it's crucial to "focus on the fact [these women] are athlete[s], not the other aspects of their lives."

For instance, while female and male athletes are talked about for their athletic accomplishments, how they are presented differs. When it comes to female athletes, their accomplishments are used to provide an introduction or background information to the athletes. Rather than being the focus of the article, Clark and Wilson's accomplishments were listed in a way that provided context for their backgrounds, but the accomplishments were not often the central focus. Conversely, male athletes' athletic accomplishments often played an integral part in the development of their narratives. Survey respondents' opinions reinforced these observations. While many respondents agreed that the main focus of male athletes within the media was their athletic accomplishments, they were more divided on the focus of female athletes' media coverage.

While personal lives were talked about regardless of gender, the portrayals again differed. Female athletes' personal lives were often discussed based on their social media presence, their general lives outside their professions, or even more sensitive topics such as Clark's incident with a stalker. While male athletes' personal lives were also discussed, it was done so in a more positive and less sensitive light, often only discussing topics that the athletes brought up themselves. There were no mentions of Daniels or Mahomes' online presence or safety concerns unrelated to their sport.

Similarly, mentions of the lifestyle and appearance of female athletes were infrequently discussed, but when they were, there was no observable connection to the athletes' professions or their sports at all. This topic never presented itself within articles focused on male athletes. According to survey results, these differences in the depiction of personal lives, lifestyles, and appearances of female and male athletes are something that has been noticed by the public. Many

survey respondents noticed that female athletes are predominantly being highlighted for their personal lives in the media.

Female athletes were depicted expressing a wide range of positive and negative emotions, making them seem more relatable to the public. There was a greater focus on negative emotions concerning female athletes than male athletes, and many times when emotions were brought up about male athletes it was because other people were talking about their observations on the athletes. This combination led to the male athletes being depicted in a way that still highlighted their competitiveness and drive, rather than their emotional states as humans.

While media coverage of female and male athletes emphasized factual reporting, how these facts were presented differed. With a lack of narrative within their stories, female athletes' media coverage was driven by numbers and statistics. While numbers and statistics were also frequently shared within male athletes' articles, they would be accompanied by in-depth analysis of the athletes' performance, impact, or playing style. Based on survey results, many respondents noticed that female athletes' coverage lacked depth, which corroborates observations from the thematic analysis.

These styles of factual reporting also contributed to how opinions manifested themselves within the context of both female and male athletes. Opinionated content was sparse altogether, with a focus predominantly centered on Clark and no mentions of Wilson when it came to female athletes. When opinions were presented on male athletes, they covered a wide range of topics, including commentary on their respective sports teams or the broader NFL. This also highlights that oftentimes, other male athletes or sports teams were brought up. The purpose of this was to draw comparisons, but it's important to note that facts were presented as though audience

members were expected to know the team or athletes being mentioned, even when they weren't the focus of the article. This pattern didn't present itself in articles on female athletes.

Contrastingly, fan impact was a prevalent theme in the articles on female athletes, namely Clark. When the antics of fans were discussed about Clark, it was to reinforce the idea that she is a significant figure in women's sports. Male athletes also had mentions of fan influence, but it was presented more as the athletes' impact instead of a league-wide phenomenon.

Comparing Findings to Past Literature

A key finding from the thematic analysis was that male athletes are used as comparison tools to other male athletes, while female athletes aren't compared to each other in the same way. This implies that male athletes are the standard of comparison, especially since these male athletes are talked about with no context, yet audiences are still expected to recognize them. Similarly, Shifflet et al. (2016) found that men's sports are often considered the 'norm' or the standard. This means that women's sports are positioned to be of secondary importance. Shifflet et al. (2016) also found that media coverage of female athletes' athletic accomplishments was often brief in comparison to male athletes' coverage. This is directly supported by the current study, which found that female athletes' accomplishments were more often shared as background context, but male athletes' accomplishments played into their narratives whilst receiving in-depth analysis.

This inequitable coverage of female athletes' athletic accomplishments can also be seen in Olympic media coverage. Oftentimes, female Olympians are presented in ways that highlight their identity as women rather than athletes (Salid-Fernandez & Muñoz Muñoz, 2021). Even when these female athletes excelled in their Olympic events, it was framed as though they were winning because of their gracefulness, not their competitiveness and athleticism

(Salid-Fernandez & Muñoz Muñoz, 2021). This is similar to the depictions of Clark and Wilson, who faced media attention focused on a wide array of emotions and their personal lives. Male athletes also garnered attention for their emotions and personal lives on occasion, but even when this was the case, they were still displayed in a positive and heroic light.

Martinez and Bhalla (2023) also explored this overemphasis on female athletes' personal lives in their research. By learning how female athletes would prefer to be portrayed, it became clear that they didn't want the focus to be on their lives outside their careers but instead on their athletic competence (Martinez & Bhalla, 2023). According to past research, an emphasis on female athletes' lives and emotions outside their careers ultimately ends up humanizing them (Sun & Wang, 2023). Based on Sun and Wang's (2023) research study, female athletes are oftentimes depicted through the use of emotionally-driven diction, which in turn emphasizes their resilience and gratitude for what they have accomplished. This means that female athletes aren't reported on for their technical ability or competitiveness like their male counterparts. This study found that beyond female athletes wanting to be portrayed for their athletic accomplishments, the public would also like to see them highlighted in this way.

Furthermore, if female athletes want to create their narrative based on their athletic careers, this burden solely rests on their shoulders (McClearen, 2021). This can be seen through the media representations of UFC fighters, as female fighters were expected to promote themselves concerning their sport online (McClearen, 2021). Female athletes were expected to do so because traditional sports media was unable to give them the automatic visibility and recognition that male fighters automatically received (McClearen, 2021). Similarly, media coverage often framed Clark's visibility and impact as a product of enthusiasm. Instead of attributing Clark's attention to her athletic performance and other record-breaking successes,

many articles focused on her popularity as the reason for her media attention. Altogether, findings from the current study and previous studies suggest that male athletes are afforded mainstream media coverage no matter what, while female athletes must actively work to secure their own recognition in the media.

Practical Implications for Sports Media

The results and findings of this study revealed that there are many areas for improvement within the depiction of women in sports media. Concerning findings from the current study, it is clear that communication practices for sports media professionals can be improved to achieve more equitable coverage for female athletes. The following recommendations offer insight into the next steps in improving female athletes' representation.

1. Prioritize Athletic Accomplishments as a Component of the Narrative

The athletic achievements of female and male athletes were included within the sample articles, but how these accomplishments were framed was different. Male athletes' performance was a focal point for their narratives, while female athletes' accolades were shared as background information. More specifically, Clark and Wilson's achievements were included as supportive evidence or used to provide context. On the other hand, Daniels and Mahomes' accomplishments were celebrated, often the focus of the article.

To rectify these discrepancies, sports media professionals should focus on making female athletes' successes the primary focus of their stories rather than using achievements as a supporting detail. Even going so far as to highlight the specifics of the achievements in headlines may help to naturally make them the main idea of the article. By making these adjustments, female athletes will receive the recognition they are warranted, and they will also be seen as more legitimate competitors within their sports.

2. Deepen Analysis of the Performance of Female Athletes

Compared to male athletes, articles focused on female athletes also frequently lacked depth. Male athletes would be evaluated through a lens that directly focused on their skill, performance, and decisions, with journalists offering breakdowns of this information. On the other hand, female athletes rarely received the same level of attention and evaluation. Instead, their media attention was focused on disseminating information rather than analyzing the athletes' strategic and athletic impact.

To successfully improve this imbalance in the analysis of female and male athletes' media attention, journalists should provide the same level of attention when analyzing female athletes' performances as they do to male athletes. The addition of expert-level commentary from past athletes or other sports professionals would also be a useful way to boost credibility while also increasing the attention on the evaluation of female athletes. Not to mention, giving the same in-depth analysis of female and male athletes' performances, statistics, and successes, their athletic accomplishments will naturally become a central component of each article.

To provide useful analysis of female athletes, sports media professionals should also use statistical comparisons to other female athletes, just as they do with analyses of male athletes. Ultimately, no matter how it is done, the most important element to keep in mind for the successful evaluation of female athletes is framing them as athletes first and people second. This will allow these female athletes' successes and technical abilities to drive their narratives rather than external factors.

3. Limit Emphasis on Personal Life

Consistently, discussing the personal lives of Clark and Wilson took priority over discussing their careers. Things such as the athletes' social media presence and personal

challenges became the focal point of articles. Opposingly, Daniels and Mahomes were frequently highlighted for their athleticism. Based on past literature, it is clear that female athletes would prefer to be portrayed for their athletic ability, not their personal lives or emotions (Martinez & Bhalla, 2023).

To prioritize focus on these female athletes' performances, it is necessary to reduce coverage of other unnecessary details. Focusing on their personal lives when they are in no way relevant to the female athletes' sport removes the focus from their skill. Similarly, framing female athletes through their emotions, online presence, or other external factors removes their legitimacy and draws the audiences' attention away from what matters most: their skills and accomplishments. The best way to fix this problem is by applying the same editorial standard to stories focusing on female athletes as male athletes. This will prioritize consistency, all the while recognizing female athletes in the way that they prefer to be portrayed.

4. Contextualize Facts Without Previous Assumption of Audience Background Knowledge

In many articles on Daniels and Mahomes, they were compared to a variety of different male athletes in their sport. Whether these athletes were teammates, competitors, or historical icons, Daniels and Mahomes would be compared and analyzed against them with no true introduction or context on these male athletes. This idea presents a unique disparity between the media's portrayal of male athletes and female athletes because Clark and Wilson didn't receive this same comparison to other female athletes. This can be attributed to male athletes being seen as the standard in sports, and it is consistently assumed that the public will have previous background knowledge of male athletes before viewing sports media. These same assumptions are not applied to female athletes, so media attention on them is frequently centered around over-explanation to successfully brief ill-informed audiences.

To amend this imbalance of coverage for female athletes, sports media professionals must assume the same level of audience literacy for female and male athletes' media. This means they must either stop over-contextualizing female athletes or start doing so for male athletes as well. Intuitively, providing more equitable coverage to female athletes will start with assuming that these athletes don't have to be introduced to the audience. Providing female athletes with the same level of analysis and comparison as male athletes is easily achievable once female athletes stop being side characters in sports media. By treating them with the same credibility as male athletes, audiences will become more knowledgeable about female athletes, and the athletes themselves will be seen as mainstream icons in sports media.

Conclusion

As the popularity of women's sports experiences unprecedented and exponential growth, it becomes necessary to investigate the strategic communication efforts surrounding this phenomenon. Without timely examination, the increasingly widespread nature of women's sports may hinder effective influence as navigating the complexities of this expanding field becomes more challenging. The current project aimed to foster an environment for positive change for strategic communications in sports by recognizing the multitude of daily accomplishments achieved by female athletes, which often go unnoticed but significantly shape public perceptions of them.

The portrayal of females in the media is crucial for young women, and seeing yourself in the media can even contribute to the success of the organization. This topic can have immense power in and outside the sports world, drawing to light the areas where our current strategic communications systems can take a step back for reflection and reorganization.

There are areas for improvement to reach more equitable coverage of female athletes to portray them as athletes first and foremost. Instead of placing emphasis on aspects unrelated to their careers, more focus should be drawn from these female athletes' accomplishments. By further analyzing and explaining these accolades, female athletes will be recognized as respected professionals in their sports. Only by shifting the narrative to focus on female athletes' skills and achievements can they get the recognition they deserve.

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Appendix A

| Variable | % | Number |
|---|------|--------|
| How familiar are you with each of the following? (Out of 5 on a Likert Scale) | | |
| Caitlin Clark | | 3.85 |
| Jayden Daniels | | 1.79 |
| A'ja Wilson | | 1.35 |
| Patrick Mahomes | | 4.57 |
| Which athletes do you follow on social media, if any? | | |
| Caitlin Clark | 64% | 9 |
| Jayden Daniels | 7% | 1 |
| A'ja Wilson | 14% | 2 |
| Patrick Mahomes | 36% | 5 |
| Within the past three months, have you seen any of the following athletes in the media (print, digital, televised, social, etc.)? | | |
| Caitlin Clark | 93% | 65 |
| Jayden Daniels | 33% | 23 |
| A'ja Wilson | 20% | 14 |
| Patrick Mahomes | 100% | 70 |
| How would you describe the type of media coverage that you typically see for male athletes? | | |
| Focuses on athletic accomplishments | 75% | 54 |
| Focuses on personal life | 6% | 4 |
| Mentions lifestyle/appearance | 10% | 7 |
| Emphasizes emotions (positive or negative) | 1% | 1 |

| | | |
|---|-----|----|
| Content lacks depth | 8% | 6 |
| How would you describe the type of media coverage that you typically see for male athletes? | | |
| Focuses on athletic accomplishments | 40% | 29 |
| Focuses on personal life | 7% | 5 |
| Mentions lifestyle/appearance | 19% | 14 |
| Emphasizes emotions (positive or negative) | 14% | 10 |
| Content lacks depth | 19% | 14 |
| How often do you see female athletes receive coverage for their athletic accomplishments compared to male athletes? | | |
| Always | 6% | 4 |
| Often | 17% | 12 |
| Sometimes | 46% | 33 |
| Rarely | 32% | 23 |
| How would you describe the type of media coverage that you typically see for Caitlin Clark? | | |
| Focuses on athletic accomplishments | | 55 |
| Focuses on personal life | | 2 |
| Mentions lifestyle/appearance | | 3 |
| Emphasizes emotions (positive or negative) | | 4 |
| Content lacks depth | | 4 |
| Not familiar with athlete | | 4 |
| How would you describe the type of media coverage that you typically see for Jayden Daniels? | | |
| Focuses on athletic accomplishments | | 28 |

| | | |
|--|----|----|
| Focuses on personal life | | 1 |
| Mentions lifestyle/appearance | | 2 |
| Emphasizes emotions (positive or negative) | | 0 |
| Content lacks depth | | 1 |
| Not familiar with athlete | | 40 |
| How would you describe the type of media coverage that you typically see for A'ja Wilson? | | |
| Focuses on athletic accomplishments | | 10 |
| Focuses on personal life | | 5 |
| Mentions lifestyle/appearance | | 5 |
| Emphasizes emotions (positive or negative) | | 5 |
| Content lacks depth | | 2 |
| Not familiar with athlete | | 45 |
| How would you describe the type of media coverage that you typically see for Patrick Mahomes? | | |
| Focuses on athletic accomplishments | | 57 |
| Focuses on personal life | | 10 |
| Mentions lifestyle/appearance | | 4 |
| Emphasizes emotions (positive or negative) | | 0 |
| Content lacks depth | | 0 |
| Not familiar with athlete | | 1 |
| What percentage of media coverage do you think is dedicated to female athletes' athletic accomplishments compared to male athletes? (Your total should add up to 100%) | | |
| 0% female - 100% male | 0 | 0 |
| 10% female - 90% male | 25 | 18 |

| | | |
|-----------------------|----|----|
| 20% female - 80% male | 36 | 26 |
| 30% female - 70% male | 24 | 17 |
| 40% female - 60% male | 7 | 5 |
| 50% female - 50% male | 3 | 2 |
| 60% female - 40% male | 1 | 1 |
| 70% female - 30% male | 3 | 2 |
| 80% female - 20% male | 1 | 1 |
| 90% female - 10% male | 0 | 0 |
| 100% female - 0% male | 0 | 0 |

Appendix B

| |
|--|
| What changes (if any) would you like to see in how female athletes are portrayed in the media? |
| greater focus on athletic achievements and less sexualization |
| More coverage on female athletes. |
| I would like the expectations of female athletes to be both accomplished athletes and also be spokeswomen for feminism and activism to be lowered. This unfair expectation places a huge pressure and burden on the shoulders of young women, especially when considering how young these women are. Just because women's sports is a hot topic in discussions of race relations and feminism does not mean we should expect every female athlete to be both an athlete and an intellectual critic and activist. Especially when compared to male athletes, who are rarely asked to weigh in on social and political issues at the same rate, female athletes are expected to have well articulated responses and stances on all feminist issues, race relations, and LGBTQIA+ issues. Failure to do so is so often interpreted as 'racism' or 'sexism' or 'privilege' by sports media outlets. A great example of this is the outcry and speculation in the political opinions on the 2024 Election and racism in the WNBA by Caitlin Clark, whose comments in her Time magazine profile were highly scrutinised and picked apart by the world in a way that male athletes never have their personal opinions examined. |
| More focus on them in general as well as more focus on athletic accomplishments. |
| Less of the "catty-ness" between women during games. |
| Less focus on drama/emotions, more focus on the sport and technicality |
| All based on accomplishments, impact on the sport, impact on society |
| Focusing more on their athletic abilities and serious meaningful positive content, put them on commercials for all state like Patrick and all the male athletes. |
| More pay for the female athletes |
| I would like to see more women athletes portrayed as leaders |
| Give them attention and watch what they can do |
| Equality |
| Equal coverage |
| More coverage. |
| Less focus on style and looks |

| |
|---|
| I'd like to see a wider array of female athletes in social media. I feel like I always see the "up-and-coming" highschool male basketball, hockey, and football stars but nothing about the women. There are whole highlight reels dedicated to highschool mens basketball games but nothing for the women. |
| I would like to see less about the trans in the female athletics and more about the biological females' accomplishments. I would also like to see the media talk less about what race an athlete is and more about their abilities. |
| Title IV is important for the future of women's athletics. We should not let biological males participate in their sports. That will only diminish the accomplishments of true female athletes and in the long term will take the spotlight of women's sports. |
| Less emotion and more on athletic skills and competition. Also less focus on race. For example, Caitlyn Clark was sometimes shown getting fouled by black women and it was blown up by the media because it became a black vs white issue. |
| Just portrayed more, I only really know female olympians and Caitlin Clark. |
| Eventually gain more equitable coverage between female and male athletes. |
| Less focus on lack of sportsmanship which is more athlete based than press based but the press can drop story sooner |
| More coverage |
| It is improving but I would like to see more on their ability and not so much on appearance. |
| Females athletes be portrayed as just as successful and athletic as their male counterparts |
| Focus on the fact they are an athlete, not the other aspects of their lives |
| more about accomplishments |