Say Her Name: Examining Media Coverage in Women’s Professional Sports through an Intersectionality Lens

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When WNBA forward 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 identities (racial, sexual orientation) in sport (Melton, 2017; Walker & Melton, 2015). Past work also demonstrates that when women (particularly White women) conform to gender stereotypes in sport (present ultra-feminine), 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 identities influences the amount of recognition an athlete receives. This oversight is regrettable as scholars call for more intersectional research (Burton, 2015), and prominent athletes have begun pointing to disparities—noting how White and heterosexual women receive far more media attention (Rapinoe, 2020). The current study sought to remedy this shortcoming by examining news coverage of the 2020 WNBA season through an intersectionality theory lens. We chose this context for several reasons. The league has recently received more media attention than ever before (WNBA, 2020), is comprised of predominantly Black players, and has made a point to lift the voices of Black women and queer women (Walker & Davis, 2020). Thus, the purpose of this research was to examine the role of intersectionality (multiple marginalized identities) in narratives used within women’s sport media coverage. We drew from intersectionality theory (Collins & Bilge, 2020) and sports media literature (Cooky et al., 2015) to explore if there was an increase in representation of Black women athletes. Specifically, in terms of women’s professional sports, we asked whose voices were centered (RQ1) and if athletes’ race and sexual orientation (SO) influenced coverage (RQ2).

We used quantitative content analysis to analyze the narratives. The sample included WNBA articles from ESPN (N=391), CBSSports (N=106), Sports Illustrated (N=69), and WNBA press releases (N=32) posted online from one week pre-2020 WNBA Draft until one week post-playoffs. We coded total number of mentions, race, and whether the player was publicly out. We also included relevant player statistics and social media following in our dataset. Descriptive statistics reveal White women (M=251.58, SD=222.56) were mentioned more often than Black women (M=114.79, SD=73.28), heterosexual White women were mentioned the most (M=264.66, SD=275.50), and queer Black women were mentioned the least (M=112.40, SD=50.54). ANCOVA results indicate race significantly affected total media mentions (average points and social followers were controls), F(1,3)=8.38, p=.006. When mentions in WNBA press releases was the DV, neither race or sexual orientation were significant.

The findings suggest race influences which players receive recognition in the sports media and how central they are within the storylines. Encouragingly, league-controlled communications do not show a bias related to race. The study highlights how intersecting identities influence representation, and that there are spots of progress. Practical and theoretical implications will be further discussed in the presentation.