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Fighting for a Level Playing Field: The Reality of Elite Women's Sports in Today's Modern Era

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Abstract

Sports makeup the very essence and lifeblood of American culture. In addition to being incredibly popular, sports dominate the mainstream media and are fiercely supported across all aspects of society. However, the gender hierarchy that exists in the United States subjects elite women in sports to a lesser status in which their abilities, strengths, and talents are seen as indefinitely inferior to their male counterparts. Exploring the reasoning behind these disparities is a major focus of my research in addition to showing how poorly women in sports are treated today.

Previous studies indicate that institutionalized forms of sexism, hegemonic masculinity, and the normalization of strict gender roles are some of the primary reasons behind this severe imbalance. While past research has been lucrative, there is a lack of current and expansive pieces of data. As a result, content analysis was used as the main methodology in which articles about women in sports were analyzed across various online platforms and organized by using thematic codes. This includes Instagram, ESPN, ESPNW, Bleacher-Report, *Just Women's Sports*, *The New York Times*, and *Sports Illustrated*. A total of 60 stories were collected and published between the years of 2021 and 2023. Going beyond the inequities that exist for elite female athletes, my research makes it explicitly clear that women's sports are prevented from making progress due to the sociocultural expectations and stereotypes that are placed on them. Not only do female athletes require more rights, but the world today needs to admit that it is actively and systematically sabotaging women in sports.

Introduction

Playing competitive sports throughout the course of my life has had a major impact on my growth and development as a person. Sports encompass a vital aspect of my identity, and without them I would not be the confident and disciplined woman that I am today. Not only have sports informed my formative years, but they have directly shaped my conception of the world and how I fit into it. As I grew up and established myself as an athlete, I learned very quickly that my male peers were automatically seen as more adept and skilled at sports. Regardless of how much I proved myself on the field, I existed in a perpetual state of never being good enough. In addition to having my accomplishments and talents discounted, my status as a seasoned athlete was consistently questioned. Even though my athletic career has come to an end, my experiences as a woman in sports have remained with me into adulthood.

My research is intrinsically aimed at the world of elite sports and how female athletes are treated once they reach the highest levels of their craft, as well as what can be done to better support all women in sports. There are four chapters that cover the entirety of my research. Chapter One features a literature review and examines the previous research that has been done about women in sports. Chapter Two discusses the methodology of my research and its objectives. Chapter Three analyzes the data that was gathered, explores its significance, and applies prominent sociological theories to the data. Chapter Four highlights the successes and limitations of the research, identifies areas of future research, and makes recommendations that can be used for the overarching advancement of women's sports.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Sports are one of the most prominent aspects of society at large. Not only are sports extremely exciting to both play and watch, but they have grown to become an integral and fundamental part of American culture. As people grow up and learn to become functional members of their communities, they are socialized to root for specific sports teams and to dislike others. Sports ultimately represent a microcosm of society and can be used as an incredible tool to help explain social phenomena and human behavior. Going beyond individual games or tournaments, people heavily rely on sports today and often include them in the makeup of their identities. Highly publicized games such as the Superbowl, World Series, Wimbledon, and NBA Championships are some of the most celebrated and recognizable events in the world today. In addition to garnering a tremendous amount of capital, these games have developed a relentless following and are seen as extremely important traditions. Life in the United States revolves around sports and Americans are greatly protective when it comes to watching and engaging in forms of competition. However, it will become evident that sports are incredibly flawed and have evolved into a severely problematic and toxic facet of society.

Even though sports are inherently supposed to be a fun and an enjoyable form of entertainment, they are taken very seriously and are significantly competitive in today's day and age. As a result, covering sports has become a highly profitable business in which athletes and the sports they play are constantly being analyzed in the public sphere. Whether it be through different sports networks or social media outlets, sports are everywhere and cannot be avoided. Not only does this place elite athletes on a pedestal to constantly be perfect, but it is highly

damaging when they have to see their performance and who they are as people placed under a microscope. American society heavily relies on sports networks and social media when it comes to gathering information and staying up to date on sports-related events. Regardless of its increased degree of accessibility, these channels have intensified the world of sports and created a community that puts an immense amount of pressure on its athletes to perform and succeed no matter the cost. Despite the increased amount of inclusion that viewers are able to feel, elite athletes are forced to endure a culture where they are seen as a product that can be judged in whatever manner the audience sees fit.

As the drawbacks of elite sports begin to become clear, it is of the utmost relevance to note that male sports get more benefits in comparison to women's sports. Not only are elite male athletes considerably more famous and popular, but they are given much more attention and are seen as more athletic than their female counterparts. The gender hierarchy within America's larger culture has seeped into the world of sports, subjecting female athletes to an inferior status in which they are always seen as less than. Female athletes deserve the same distinction and esteem that is automatically afforded to male athletes, so I plan on exploring the various injustices against women in sports and proving that today's society needs to make progress when it comes to amplifying the voices and talents of elite female athletes. Throughout the course of this reading, it will become apparent that women in sports are not given the same amount of praise as male athletes and have to work twice as hard in order to showcase their abilities and demonstrate that they are worthy of being placed on a level playing field.

As it was explained earlier, sports are one of the most powerful aspects of American society. It is critical that the experiences of elite female athletes are given the spotlight because they are a tremendously misrepresented and undervalued group in the United States. The unwillingness of American society to fairly depict women in sports burdens female athletes with more obstacles to overcome and places them in a position in which they have to constantly defend their talents. Even though it is obvious that women in sports should be given the same benefits as their male counterparts, the intricacies of this disparity must be explored in order to elicit any true change and ensure that the elite female athletes of the future are truly appreciated for their craft. The following chapter is going to highlight the history of Title IX, gender and how it plays out for women in sports, the role mass media plays when it comes to its portrayal of female athletes, and the relationship between women in sports and society at large on a theoretical level.

Brief History on Title IX

Before examining the relationship between gender and athletics, it is necessary to provide a brief history of Title IX. A part of the Education Amendments of 1972, Title IX essentially prohibits discrimination based on sex or gender in any educational program or activity that receives federal financial assistance (Cooky et al., 2012). While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 only prevents discrimination on the basis of race, religion, and national origin, Title IX fills the blatant absence of gender and covers a variety of subjects to ensure that girls and women are fairly represented in all aspects of society (Galles, 2004). Title IX mandates equal admission to

educational institutions and job opportunities, an equal amount of accessibility to all classes or academic interests, and equal funding when it comes to programming and athletic endeavors (Galles, 2004). Even though Title IX is predominantly associated with sports today, its overarching purpose is to secure an equitable playing field for girls and women across all facets of life (Galles, 2004). For instance, Title IX vigilantly protects the access that women have to higher education, vocational education, and their ability to pursue any major or career path (Galles, 2004). The creation of Title IX opened so many doors for women in American society, as well as demonstrated the importance of including women and allowing them to lead their lives as they see fit. Not only did Title IX finally give girls and women the chance to engage in the same academic and athletic endeavors as men, but its passage showed that women are more than worthy of having equal rights and that their gender should not hinder them from achieving their goals.

In terms of its direct history, the creation of Title IX can be attributed to Patsy Mink. A Congresswoman from Hawaii, Mink promoted Title IX due to the immense amount of discrimination and prejudice she experienced upon attempting to go to medical school (Bell, 2022). Determined to make sure that no woman was ever barred from achieving her aspirations, Mink played an integral role in the creation and passage of Title IX (Bell, 2022). The growth of female sports was an unexpected and positive outcome of Title IX, for women's teams now had unquestionable access to equal funding, equipment, and facilities. Even at the high school level, there was a dramatic increase in the number of girls who decided to play sports. In 1972, less than 300,000 girls participated in sports. In 1999, there were more than 2.8 million girls playing

sports (Galles, 2004). Not only did Title IX help build a strong foundation for women's sports, but it created a path for young girls to eventually pursue athletics at an elite level. In addition to allowing girls to be athletes, Title IX proved that women can play sports and are more than capable of competing on the biggest stages.

However, there have been numerous attempts from organizations like the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the College Football Coaches Association to weaken Title IX. In one such instance, the College Football Coaches Association went to Congress in both 1993 and 1995 to try to amend Title IX. This particular group argued that the implementation of Title IX reduced opportunities for male athletes to compete (Galles, 2004). The various efforts of the College Football Coaches Association were rejected, for it was ruled that schools must offer athletic programs that distribute opportunities and funding equitably between all of its athletes (Galles, 2004). Even though all attempts to dismantle Title IX have failed, they show that American society in and of itself is still not ready to accept female athletes or truly give them a chance to prosper in sports. Title IX is a historic and significant step in the advancement of gender equality, but it will continue to become evident that there is still much to be done when it comes to the legitimization of elite women in sports.

The Role of Gender in Elite Sports

Within the competitive world of sports, gender as an institutionalized construct significantly impacts female athletes who perform at the most elite levels. For instance, the wide-spread stereotype that black women are inherently aggressive has negatively influenced the manner in which Serena Williams, the most prominent figure in tennis, has been treated

throughout her career (Prasad, 2018). For example, Williams has been subjected to the most “random” drug tests than any other elite tennis player (Martin, 2019). Due to her body type and great skill set, Williams has continuously been assumed to be taking performance-enhancing substances (Martin, 2019). Not only that, but Williams has faced backlash from the tennis community as a result of what she wears during matches. Williams’ notorious “catsuit” has been deemed an extremely disrespectful form of attire, for its tight fit is seen as an improper ensemble for playing tennis (Martin, 2019). Despite her status, Williams is not immune to the extreme amount of scrutiny and harassment that women in sports are forced to endure. Additionally, transgender athletes like Lia Thomas, a highly accomplished swimmer, have been prohibited from competing due to the notion that transgender women possess an advantage over cisgender female athletes (Bonesteel, 2022). Thomas has faced an immense amount of retaliation from swimming communities across the country, and she has also been abandoned by many of her teammates who refuse to support a transgender athlete (Bonesteel, 2022). Most significantly, the National Collegiate Athletic Association mandates that Thomas has to have her testosterone levels tested and examined in order to compete (Bonesteel, 2022). Not only are Thomas’ rights being violated, but she is not being seen as a true woman who should be able to compete in the division that applies to her. Thomas’ experience shows that American society does not care about inclusion when it comes to athletics. It becomes evident that gender vastly influences the manner in which women in sports are judged, as well as determines how even the most celebrated female athletes behave both on and off the field.

Throughout the course of history women have increasingly been able to participate in athletic activities in addition to reaching the highest level of their sport, but there is still much to

be explored in terms of the inequities and forms of discrimination that the best female athletes continue to face. In today's society that heavily relies on the media to spread information, it is of the utmost importance to examine the growing effect that gender has on women in sports who want to be respected for their hard-work and dedication to their athletic endeavors. As a result, the beginning of this research paper will be recognizing the works of previous scholars who have already examined some of the ways in which gender directly plays out for highly-accomplished women in sports. The first section is going to discuss the ways in which women in sports are expected to adopt traditional masculine characteristics during play. Within the American world of sports, being feminine is paradoxical to being athletic (Clasen, 2001). In this sense, it is necessary to examine how female athletes cope when it comes to displaying themselves in the athletic arena. Afterwards, the expected forms of femininity off the field are going to be looked at. In order to continue and sustain their careers as elite athletes, women in sports have to be hyper-feminine off the field and play into the belief that female athletes are naturally inferior to men. Maintaining this balance is extremely difficult, and it will become clear that women in sports have to maneuver through a culture that is unwilling to change such a sexist precedent.

Expected Forms of Masculinity On the Field

One of the most common findings from previous scholars stems from how women in sports present themselves during and after play. The nature of westernized culture in the United States associates sports and intense forms of athleticism with masculine qualities, while femininity is viewed as its total opposite (Clasen, 2001). In other words, women are socialized to portray masculine characteristics while on the field in order to be seen as legitimate athletes.

Despite its outdated nature, sports are traditionally understood to be a masculine domain. As a result, sports are used as a tool to communicate masculine roles in society and to validate the patriarchal makeup of the world (Clasen, 2001). Most importantly, sports are an outlet for men to prove that they are strong, powerful, and tough individuals who fit the definition of masculinity and should not be associated with more feminine qualities. Not only is femininity looked down upon among men in the world of sports, but female athletes in and of themselves are seen as a social anomaly.

Patricia R. W. Clasen focuses on the dualisms found in being a female athlete, as well as examines how women in sports have no choice but to change their persona depending on whether they are currently playing. Clasen brings to light the harsh reality that including women in sports threatens the meaning of masculinity and the distinct separation of the sexes (Clasen, 2001). Female athletes are ultimately expected to perform according to masculine traits, or they face patronization and being seen as inferior. As Clasen mentions, being an athlete “. . . is defined as masculine; thus, one cannot be both a female and an athlete because one negates the other. This paradox is fundamentally grounded in the traditional Western binarism of masculinity/femininity” (Clasen, 38). Clasen highlights the paradox of being a female athlete, for women have to emphasize stereotypically feminine qualities in order to be accepted into the world of sports, but must also become extremely masculine and powerful while playing in order to be respected as athletes (Clasen, 2001).

Femininity contradicts the idea of being athletic, so women in sports must perpetuate this paradox compared to actually conquering it. In the United States, masculinity and femininity are seen as total opposites and are associated with completely different sets of characteristics. Since

elite sports are considered to be the realm of men, women are inherently told that they do not belong in sports or have what it takes to be highly skilled athletes unless they perform and act like their male counterparts. Integrating women into the world of sports goes against the understanding of what it means to be a woman in society, for female athletes must adhere to the masculine status quo in order to gain access to the same opportunities. Not only are women in sports forced to present a false persona while playing, but they are clearly expected to obey absurd standards to preserve the male ego. In one striking example, Clasen calls attention to Willye B. White, a five-time Olympian who once described her own experience with this paradox: ““All female athletes have the same problem. . . . As an athlete, you take on certain masculine qualities on the field. Off the field you have to be feminine. . . . A female athlete is always two different people. A male athlete can be the same all the time’” (Clasen, 39). White shows from her experience that women in sports are required to follow the societal norm of being conventionally feminine individuals off the field and being more aggressive or forceful while playing. Not only do female athletes have to justify their feminine qualities to society at large, but they are held to a much higher standard when it comes to their physical appearance. In order to gain any semblance of respect or admiration from viewers, elite female athletes have to demonstrate beyond a doubt that they conform to what is expected of them. Instead of having the ability to be unapologetic in who they are, women in sports are relegated to a role in which they have to constantly monitor their behavior and seek out the approval of others. White’s story greatly contributes to the conversation that surrounds women in sports, for she demonstrates the social climate that female athletes exist in, as well as the rigid expectations that are placed on them simply due to their gender. More specifically, women in sports have to overcome a variety

of obstacles to make a name for themselves in the world of elite sports and are subjected to a degrading position where they have to alter who they are in order to be taken more seriously.

As it becomes evident that women in sports are subject to a variety of sexist expectations, it is also relevant to make note of the frailty myth, another biased assumption about female athletes that influences how they are perceived. The frailty myth posits that women are physically inferior to men and are not capable of living up to the strength and athletic prowess that men naturally possess. Not only has the frailty myth completely bled into the world of sports, but it has been used to justify the notion that women in sports are less entertaining and should stay in the role that the patriarchal system has assigned them (Burnett, 2001). Cora Burnett states that the frailty myth “. . . is particularly evident in the world of sport, where the ‘gender logic’ is consistent with the dominant representation of masculinity in the media. . . . The structural, cultural, and social consequences of patriarchal power relations in society. . . contribute to the relatively low ‘symbolic capital awarded to women’” (Burnett, 72). Women in sports are not awarded the same degree of respect or prestige compared to male athletes, making them an extremely underrepresented group that is prevented from reaping the financial benefits that are often associated with being an elite athlete. As a result of being forced to comply with male hegemony, female athletes remain marginalized and cannot truly surpass the barriers that restrict them from being equal to male athletes. Framing sports as a male institution removes female athletes from the mainstream culture and devalues their athletic expertise. Women in sports are inevitably trapped in a male-controlled society in which their athleticism is invalidated and constantly compared to that of their male peers.

Exaggerating Feminine Characteristics Off the Field

While female athletes are socialized to display masculine characteristics on the playing field, they are equally expected to stress their femininity off the field. Not only does this create a severe double-standard for women in sports, but it tells women that their femininity is much more valued than their athletic abilities. In addition to what Clasen discussed, female athletes also endure microaggressions and stereotypes that are designed to enforce the restrictive gender roles that they are placed in. Emily R. Kaskan and Ivy K. Ho both explore the impact that microaggressions and gender-based biases have on women in sports, as well as how female athletes are perceived if they do not fit the traditional feminine model. Gender-based microaggressions are essentially premeditated or subconscious attacks that undermine women and place them in a position of inferiority (Kaskan et al., 2014). Kaskan and Ho have an extremely well-developed argument and help prove that women in sports are given an excess amount of attention for sexist and ill-intentioned reasons. Microaggressions are immensely demeaning and alienate the group or individual that they are being directed at. Women who play at the highest level of their sport are inevitably going to experience microaggressions both on and off the field due to their already contradictory status of being a female athlete.

One profound example of a microaggression stems from telling female athletes that they should smile more. When it comes to being hyper-feminine, women in sports are supposed to maintain a lady-like and innocent presence. In one such instance, after two American women won the long jump event at the 2012 Olympic games, an interviewer asked them where their beautiful smiles were hiding (Kasken et al., 2014). Not only was this a degrading and irrelevant question, but it told these two women that their athletic status falls second to their gender. This is

a prime example of a microaggression, for the accomplishments of these two athletes were undermined for the sake of ensuring that they were friendly, nice, and respectable women.

Another example of a microaggression can also be seen through the lens of objectification and sexualization. For instance, Kaskan and Ho agree that female athletes are continuously expected to conform to the idealized notion of femininity and attractiveness in the United States regardless of their athletic capacity (Kaskan et al., 2014). Going deeper, Kaskan and Ho argue that women in sports are seen as more worthy based on their sexual desirability. While female athletes are told to behave like proper ladies, the rest of the society reduces them to their basic body parts. This implies that the sole purpose of being a woman in sports is to fulfill the sexual desires of men, rather than being a talented athlete. In their research, Kaskan and Ho have found that female athletes are taken less seriously when they are depicted in sexual ways. For elite female athletes that play volleyball, wearing bikinis “. . . highlights players’ physical attributes in terms of sexuality rather than athleticism, and could therefore undermine the goal of drumming up true respect for the sport” (Kaskan et al., 238). Two important points become clear here in that female athletes are expected to use their sexuality to garner attention, but cannot be too promiscuous without putting the respect of their sport at risk. In other words, the worth of women in sports is measured by their ability to be feminine and desirable, but also by their capacity to go along with traditionally patriarchal values (Kaskan et al., 2014). Women in sports have to balance an extremely fine line, but the lack of clearly defined boundaries leaves them at the mercy of a judgemental and misogynistic society. Not only does American society clearly struggle when it comes to supporting female athletes, but it views the presence of elite women in sports as emasculating. It becomes evident that today’s society targets and objectifies female

athletes in order to preserve the gender hierarchy and ensure that women in sports have no chance of attaining a sense of equity.

In addition to being trapped within an impossible standard, female athletes have no choice but to navigate a system that is extremely subjective, opinionated, and abusive. For female athletes who are able to excel and succeed at their sport, they are ultimately labeled as deviants who still do not compare to their male peers (Burrow, 2016). As Sylvia Burrow mentions, female athletes who flourish too much “. . . are often labeled as queer, regardless of their actual sexual identity, and are thereby subject to heterosexist discrimination” (Burrow, 2016, p. 77). Even when female athletes follow the rules for behaving off of the field, they can do no right and are perpetually stuck in an unfair sports environment. In an effort to compensate for their own shortcomings and to combat the successes of women in sports, men clearly feel the need to categorize female athletes as lesbian. Not only does this perpetuate homophobic stereotypes, but it tells women in sports that every step forward they take will be shutdown and slandered by a society that cannot handle their accomplishments.

Women's bodies are incredibly fetishized within the realm of sports, making them objects that the rest of society can comment on. Not only are the clothes that female athletes wear constantly examined, but their muscular physique is something to be gawked at (Martin, 2019). While male athletes are admired and paraded for their physical attributes, female athletes are held to a much stricter standard and must have a balance between desirability and being innocent (Kaskan et al., 2016). The bodies of female athletes are heavily policed, which inherently tells women in sports that they cannot be independent individuals, but must rather alter who they are in order to appease society at large (Martin, 2019). Not only does the athleticism of elite women

in sports continue to be ignored, but it becomes clear that society at large would rather see a woman that accepts the status quo than one that pushes against it.

With the emergence of mass forms of media that spread information all over the world, depicting women in sports as hyper-feminine individuals has become much more accessible. Most importantly, exploiting the bodies of female athletes and portraying them in a highly-sexualized way off the field reinforces the social organization of gender roles where men dominate. In support of this, the radical feminist perspective asserts that female athletes who display sexualized versions of their bodies prevent their athletic achievements from being recognized (Carty, 2005). While post-feminists believe that it can be a liberating and empowering experience for female athletes to show off their bodies, women in sports are still existing within a male-dominated field that prefers to see them for their feminine traits than their skills (Carty, 2005). As Victoria Carty mentions, elite female athletes are often marketed as the epitome of the male fantasy and endure an immense amount of pressure to not only be the image “. . . of health, vitality, and physical attractiveness but also of feminine beauty and obedience to traditionally feminine standards of behavior” (Carty, 139). Male athletes have the privilege of being unconditionally accepted into sports, but female athletes are forced to rely on their sex appeal in order to promote themselves. While this can be seen as an outlet for women to reclaim their agency, female athletes should not have to exploit their bodies for the sake of making societal advancements. Not only does this perpetuate sexism, but it sustains a social structure in which women in sports must have the approval of men in order to be viewed as a true athlete. In one striking example, female athletes who pose nude for the media ultimately play into expectation that they have to be sexy and irresistible to gain the same sense of prestige that male

athletes are given automatically (Carty, 2005). Possessing a seductive and alluring persona is just one more requirement that women in sports must fulfill to be recognized as athletes and gain access to all of its financial benefits.

Kaskan and Ho also feature the potential consequences of microaggressions when women in sports are constantly told by their peers, family members, coaches, or significant others off the field to act in a hyper-feminine way: “Female athletes may internalize these stereotypes and engage in apologetic behavior such as emphasizing their heterosexuality or ensuring they maintain a feminine appearance. . . . Evidence suggests that not only do female athletes feel pressured. . . to engage in such behaviors, but that they become more accepted as athletes once they do so” (Kaskan et al., p. 279). Figure skating can be seen as a prime example. One of the most popular sports today, figure skating emphasizes beauty, innocence, and ladylike behavior. Even though there is no direct rule against competitors wearing pants, female skaters are seen as too masculine if they wear anything but a dress (Fetters, 2018). Out of the fear of losing points, female skaters choose to stick with gender-coded costumes to ensure that they are not seen as less feminine or defy the traditional qualities of being a figure skater (Fetters, 2018). Even though skaters often report that wearing pants is considerably more comfortable and efficient during practice sessions off the competition stage, they feel compelled to justify their femininity away from the ice and are encouraged to do so by coaches and peers (Fetters, 2018). Kaskan and Ho bring to light the unfortunate reality that women in sports cannot help but feel pushed to take on an extremely heteronormative persona in order to comply with the cultural norms and avoid being coded as too masculine or nonconforming.

The pressure female athletes have to succumb to mainstream ideas of femininity can also cause physical, cognitive, and emotional harm. These gender-based microaggressions against women in sports can result in the development of chronic stress and anxiety due to the fear of seeming less feminine (Kaskan et al., 2014). Not only that, but living in a constant state of worry can interfere with a female athlete's ability to perform and succeed in her given sport (Kaskan et al., 2014). Another serious consequence for female athletes derives from the development of body image issues. Since women in sports are constantly instructed by society at large to appear traditionally feminine and not masculine or muscular, female athletes can become extremely self-critical and may even limit themselves in terms of how toned their bodies are (Kaskan et al., 2014). This tells women in sports that their physical attractiveness is more important than thriving in their sport, which ultimately delegitimizes the athletic aptitude of women and emphasizes male hegemony. Kaskan and Ho have an extremely well-developed argument and help prove that women in sports are given an excess amount of attention for sexist and ill-intentioned reasons. Microaggressions directed at female athletes are inherently problematic, for they tell women that being athletic is wrong, as well as reinforces the threatening notion that women in sports are naturally inferior to their male counterparts.

Intersectionality

The term intersectionality essentially refers to the various aspects of a person that make up their identity. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality represents the convergence of different social categories and how they constantly overlap with one another (Carter-Francique et al., 2016). In other words, it is impossible to separate the different parts of a person that make

them who they are, for they inevitably interact with each other and influence the lives people follow and the experiences they have. When it comes to women in sports, it is of the utmost importance to fully consider and understand intersectionality and the fact that every woman possesses a unique identity and history. Some of these social categories revolve around race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or religion. Not only can women in sports face forms of discrimination as a result of any of these factors, but the way they present themselves in the public eye can vary.

For example, female athletes who identify as lesbian have completely different experiences than female athletes who identify as straight. Not only are lesbian women in sports often afraid to come out, but they are at a significant risk of losing fans and coverage if they decide to be open with their sexuality (Burrow, 2016). Most shockingly, lesbian women in sports are also subject to a greater amount of sexual assault by other athletes or coaches than their heterosexual counterparts (Burrow, 2016). Going against the heteronormative nature of American society clearly puts elite female athletes in a dangerous position where they can be stigmatized and targeted (Blinde, 1992). Lesbian women in sports are dealt an additional set of hurdles that they have to overcome as elite athletes, for their sexual orientation places them in the minority and gives those who already diminish women's sports more ammunition to humiliate and debase them.

In another scenario, black women who play elite sports have to constantly confront biases and forms of prejudice that white athletes never have to face. Due to racist stereotypes and ideologies, black women are typically framed as the main aggressors in sports who prey on their white opponents (Carter-Francique et al., 2016). While white women are typically seen as

innocent, dainty, and delicate, black women are placed into roles in which they are classified as innately violent and uncontrollably angry. Not only does this cast black female athletes in a negative and unfavorable light, but it perpetuates such a derogatory narrative that people of color are wildly aggressive and should be feared. Coming from a historical perspective, it is also important to note that institutionalized forms of racism have seeped into the world of sports and further inhibit women of color from progressing their careers as elite athletes. With racism still being a drastic and profound societal issue, it is being used as just another tool to target and undermine women in sports.

It becomes strikingly apparent that intersectionality is a quintessential concept and will play a key role in the function of this paper, for it helps illustrate the fact that female athletes are not all uniform with each other, but rather have numerous characteristics that influence who they are and how they are perceived by the world around them. It is of the utmost importance to recognize the things that make people different in order to truly dismantle the harmful and insensitive stereotypes spread about them. For women in sports specifically, intersectionality is even more necessary simply because there is more work to be done in terms of accepting and appreciating female athletes and the unique attributes that they bring to their craft.

Role of the Mass Media

The mass media is one of the most prominent institutions in today's world. Not only does the media control the type of information that people receive, but it manipulates how all people perceive and communicate with the world around them. In other words, the mass media plays a key role in shaping how knowledge is consumed. When it comes to women in sports, mass

media outlets greatly impact how much information is spread about them and how fast that same information is distributed. As Vivian Roesse states, one major aspect of the mass media revolves around its shareability: “. . . the user is an active carrier of information, engaged in sharing and recommending content to friends in their network. It is the user, as some sort of private gatekeeper, who decides how newsworthy and shareworthy a piece of information in their newsfeed is” (Roesse, 315). Since women in sports are significantly underrepresented in the media, it is extremely difficult for their stories to be shared and gain some semblance of recognition (Burrow, 2016).

This marginalization of women in sports limits their ability to be seen as genuine athletes who are worthy of being celebrated for their talents. Sarah Scire describes one shocking example in which the authors of a 30 year study found that 80% of the televised sports news had zero stories on women in elite sports (Scire, 2021). This same study also discovered in 2019 that 95% of the sports coverage focused on men’s sports (Scire, 2021). It becomes apparent that the mass media completely disregards female athletes, and this lack of representation prevents them from truly being seen as equals to their male peers. The rest of this section will feature some current events that display the inadequate amount of media coverage on female athletes, as well as how the media distorts the image of women in sports.

Three prominent examples about women in sports who are not given proper and fair media attention revolves around Brittney Griner, Sha’Carri Richardson, and Serena Williams. While each of these women possess different stories and play different sports, they all show how the media negatively impacts and portrays elite female athletes. For example, WNBA superstar Brittney Griner was detained in Russia because vaping cartridges that contained hashish oil were

found in her luggage while she was attempting to come back to the United States (Lewis, 2022). In addition to playing in the WNBA, Griner has played in Russia for years in her offseason since she made significantly more money overseas (Lewis, 2022). The media depicted Griner as someone who broke the law and deserved to face the consequences of her actions (Lewis, 2022). However, various media outlets neglected to highlight the fact that Griner had no choice but to play basketball in Russia since she was severely underpaid as a highly accomplished athlete in the United States. While she only earned \$221,450 while playing for the WNBA, Griner was paid \$1 million dollars per season to compete in Russia (Hill, 2022). Griner highlights the stark reality that female athletes are not valued in the United States, which proves that women in sports have to go to extreme lengths in order to make the same living as their male counterparts. Not only do American media outlets fail to recognize the reasoning behind Griner's stay in Russia, but they continue to fail when it comes to taking action on her behalf and showing the public the major role that sexism plays in American sports.

In a similar sense to Griner, Sha'Carri Richardson has endured an incredible amount of sexism and has garnered negative media attention due to her stint at the US track and field trials for the Tokyo Olympics. Despite her historic performance at the trials, Richardson was barred from further competition simply because she tested positive for using marijuana (Deng, 2021). Richardson uses marijuana to cope with her depression and the loss of her biological mother, but she was cast off by the media as a young woman who decided to throw her career away for drugs (Deng, 2021). Not only was Richardson unable to go to the Olympics, but her reputation was destroyed and will now forever be associated with her marijuana use. Due to her status as a black woman, Richardson is constantly at risk of being scrutinized as a result of the stereotypes that

surround black people. This includes being seen as naturally deviant, violent, and connected to drug use (SevenSix Agency, 2021). While Richardson was criminalized for her utilization of marijuana and seen as a disgrace to the track and field community, many white athletes are able to promote the use of marijuana and get away unscathed. For example, soccer legend Megan Rapinoe has been on a campaign to market her CBD products (SevenSix Agency, 2021). While Rapinoe is applauded for using CBD as a part of her recovery and decompression process, Richardson is ridiculed and denied the opportunities that she worked hard for. Richardson's story brings to light a double standard in which black female athletes are not allowed to make mistakes and must be perfect on and off the field, or they run the risk of ruining their future in the sports industry. While white female athletes are able to slide by and are given much softer portrayals in the media, people like Richardson are villainized and looked down upon.

One of the most well-known female athletes in today's day and age is Serena Williams. Not only is Serena Williams a tennis icon, but she has had a tremendous impact on the game itself. Even though Williams is arguably the best woman to have ever played tennis, she has endured her fair share of sexism and harmful media coverage. For instance, the 2018 US Open Finals match between Williams and Naomi Osaka features a variety of instances in which Williams was demonized in the public spectrum. At the beginning of the match, Williams was accused of receiving coaching from her player's box (Martin, 2019). This was an extremely absurd penalization because most coaches in the world of elite tennis violate this rule without receiving a punishment from the chair umpire. Video evidence has even shown that Williams was not even looking at her player's box at the time the accusation was made (Martin, 2019). Not only did the chair umpire insult William's character, but he labeled her as a cheater. In another

instance, Williams was cited by the chair umpire for breaking her racket in a moment of frustration. Despite the racket being her own, the chair umpire penalized Williams for destroying tennis equipment (Martin, 2019). While male athletes such as Novak Djokovic and Tom Brady are often applauded for their emotion and passion while they play, Williams was chastised. As the match continued to intensify, Williams only became more irritated because all of her actions were under an extreme and overzealous amount of inspection. The final straw occurred when the chair umpire awarded a full point to Osaka, sealing the match in Osaka's favor. As a result, Williams stormed the chair umpire and called him a thief (Martin, 2019). Many media outlets and fellow tennis players such as Roger Federer stated that Williams' actions and words were uncalled for, which ultimately painted Williams in an unfavorable manner (Martin, 2019). Williams was completely maltreated during the match, but she was still looked upon with a sense of hostility and disgust by society at large. This demonstrates the fact that even the most celebrated female athletes are still expected to maintain a degree of decorum and will be admonished if they stray from the status quo. Instead of defending Williams, the media turned its back on her and created a narrative in which she was the problem, rather than the entire institution of sports itself. It becomes evident that female athletes are constantly villainized for their actions, when in actuality American society at large has established a destructive culture that casts out those who oppose the standard way of living. The experiences of Griner, Richardson, and Williams help show that the injustices women in sports face span across a variety of elite sports and are not isolated events.

Theoretical Role Between Women in Sports and Society at Large

Social media and gender clearly play a profound role when it comes to shaping the lives and behavior of elite women in sports. In this sense, it is also necessary to examine the theoretical role between female athletes and society at large. Not only can sociological theory provide a much broader context in terms of how the media directly impacts female athletes, but it can also help explain the social hierarchy that exists within sports. A variety of theories are going to be presented that can in turn be applied to the idea that highly skilled women in sports are underappreciated and mistreated by the entirety of society. These theories include social role theory, framing theory, dialogical self theory, and dramaturgical analysis.

Social role theory was developed by Alice Eagly, who essentially argues that socialization and gender stereotypes each impact how men and women behave and display themselves to their communities. As Mary Lou Sheffer summarizes, social role theory “. . . suggests that certain expectations exist between the roles men and women portray and that there are certain traits and behaviors that are desirable for each gender” (Sheffer, 33). Eagly asserts that society as a whole has distinct expectations for men and women, as well as that there are specific characteristics that go along with them. For instance, women are considered to be passive, emotional, sensitive, reserved, polite, and friendly (Sheffer, 2020). Within the world of sports, women are inherently depicted as less competitive and more gentle (Sheffer, 2020). On the other hand, male athletes are seen as aggressive, independent, ambitious, and strong (Sheffer, 2020). Eagly points out the fact that women are expected to participate in more refined athletic activities that rely on beauty and grace, while men are supposed to engage in rougher sports that have an intense physicality. Not only does this regulate how women and men are supposed to

play sports, but it plays into the idea that male athletes are more entertaining. Eagly's theory on social roles ultimately demonstrates how women and men in sports are separated and given opposing expectations simply due to the societal assumption that they are only capable of exhibiting specific characteristics that agree with their determined role.

Moving on to framing theory, Erving Goffman contends that the manner in which information is presented to the world greatly influences what people believe. Framing theory essentially impacts the larger culture of society because a misleading image is often created that is in turn absorbed by everyone who sees or hears it. Sheffer mentions, framing “. . . shapes the public's perception of reality. . . and can be presented as expressions, keywords, sentences, sources, or visuals. . . media professionals frame their coverage by choosing which facts to include, the context along with the language and visuals used to describe the subject” (Sheffer, 33). It becomes apparent that framing can be used to construct compelling stories about people, regardless of whether they are true. Especially when it comes to the media, framing is used on a daily basis to influence the public's attitude toward female athletes. For example, Sheffer has found that photographs predominately misrepresent women who play elite sports. When they are shown in the media, female athletes tend to be depicted in highly sexualized and noncombatant positions (Sheffer, 2020). This completely trivializes women's athletics and sends a message that female athletes are better off as sex symbols than legitimate athletes. It is also important to note that female athletes who are mothers are shown in a drastically different light than male athletes who are fathers. Once they have children, the familial life of female athletes becomes the overarching focus of their careers (Sheffer, 2020). Not only are female athletes placed into the

motherhood category, but they automatically lose their sex appeal. On the other hand, male athletes are applauded for being fathers and deemed more attractive as a result (Sheffer, 2020).

Framing theory is extremely relevant when it comes to sports coverage, for female athletes receive significantly less attention. Even with the gradual growth of women's sports, female athletes are not covered nearly as much as their male counterparts (Sheffer, 2020). As a result of a clear lack of coverage, society at large is inherently told that female athletes are less important and do not deserve the same amount of recognition that is given to male athletes. In one striking example, ESPN's famous show *30 For 30* is supposed to highlight the milestones and remarkable stories of well-known athletes. However, the premiere of the series only included two stories about women in sports out of thirty (Dunja et al., 2020). By focusing the large majority of episodes on male athletes, ESPN tells its audience that men in sports have more accomplishments and have overcome more obstacles than that of women in sports. The staggering lack of coverage on female athletes from one of the largest sports networks informs its audience that female-led sports are unpopular and cannot match up to how exceptional male athletics are. Women in sports are framed as a completely subordinate group to male athletes, which establishes the societal narrative that female athletes are a joke and that it is not a worthwhile experience to watch them play.

While framing theory argues that the way knowledge is introduced can impact an audience's grasp on what is true, dialogical self theory posits that human beings inherently shift positions when they encounter and adapt to change (Coche, 2017). Developed by Hubert Hermans, dialogical self theory essentially proposes that “. . . each position of the self is endowed with a voice. . . . As voices evolve, influenced by externalities, a fluid hierarchy of

positions comes into place, so a neglected position can quickly move up to the forefront. . .” (Coche, 91). It becomes clear that people actively choose to present themselves to society in different ways simply based on where they are, what they are doing, and which audience they are interacting with. Not only does dialogical self theory demonstrate that people have specific characteristics and traits that align with each voice, but that most people need to switch personas in order to fit in and be accepted. When it comes to women in sports, Roxane Coche explores how social media allows female athletes to tap into multiple voices at the same time in an effort to attract many audiences (Coche, 2017). As a result of social media, female athletes have the ability to quickly jump between positions and display themselves in relation to what each group of spectators demands. For instance, Coche notes that female athletes utilize social media to highlight their athletic careers, familial relationships, and feminine qualities all at the same time (2017). By displaying all of these voices to the world, female athletes adhere to the male hegemonic status quo in addition to showing off their prestige as elite athletes. It becomes apparent that elite women in sports must straddle a variety of personas on social media platforms in order to legitimize their athletic accomplishments and prove that they are still conventional women. In one striking example, Christie Rampone’s Twitter profile demonstrates her status as an athlete and as a mother. During Coche’s research, Rampone’s biography described her many achievements on the women’s national soccer team and the medals she won at three Olympic games and two FIFA World Cups (2017). However, Rampone’s pictures only feature her role as a mother and wife (Coche, 2017). Combining both of her voices into one social media page allows Rampone to be celebrated as an athlete, as well as solidifies her position as a proper woman.

Dialogical self theory illustrates how women in sports can take advantage of social media to heighten and validate both sides of who they are.

Dramaturgical analysis is the last theory that will be examined in this section. Created by Goffman, dramaturgical analysis is essentially a model of action that helps articulate how people orient themselves in the world around them. In simple terms, dramaturgical analysis is the idea that people's lives can be understood as a performance for various audiences. According to Goffman, life resembles that of a series of performances that revolves around the subjective and objective (Chriss, 1995). While an individual's objective persona is who they are offstage without an audience to perform in front of, the subjective persona is when someone presents a different version of themselves to the public (Chriss, 1995). As James J. Chriss explains, "Goffman's actor 'works the system for the enhancement of self' through self-presentation and impression management" (Chriss, 553). In comparison to the previous theories that have been discussed, dramaturgical analysis explains human behavior as a reaction to the world and a specific presentation of the self on a case by case basis. Not only can dramaturgical analysis be used to showcase the many selves people possess, but it also demonstrates the fact that people perform for the sake of belonging. In one such example, women in sports portray themselves in contrasting ways when they are on and off the field respectively. On the US women's national soccer team, Megan Rapinoe notes that many of her lesbian teammates were scared to come out in the public eye and decided to keep their lives private. While Rapinoe's teammates presented themselves as strong, tough, and fierce athletes while playing, they struggled internally off the field as to whether they should come out and be who they are (Bazaar, 2021). Not only does Rapinoe highlight the objective and subjective personas that women in sports have, but she also

shows how female athletes are expected to perform and succeed regardless of what they endure in their personal lives. It becomes clear that dramaturgical analysis can be applied to women in sports simply because female athletes must have a hard exterior during play in order to perform and entertain, while also ignoring their private lives and proving that they fit in with their peers.

After examining the various factors that come into play for women who compete in elite sports, it is hopefully beginning to become clear that female athletes exist in a culture in which they are perceived as lesser than their male counterparts. In conjunction with being seen as inferior, women in sports have no option but to go along with the norm and present themselves in different ways both on and off the field. Not only does American society fail to accept female athletes for who they are, but women who play elite sports are the sole group that truly suffers as a result of the sexist nature of the United States. With the growth of the mass media, the stark differences between men's and women's sports become even more heightened and demonstrate that female athletes are inherently at a greater risk of facing condemnation than their male counterparts. The image of female athletes constantly hangs in the balance, and they have no choice but to adhere to sexist stereotypes in order to advance their careers. Since women in sports are seen as secondary to their male counterparts, they have to navigate a social system that has not been designed for them. Even though women in sports should not have to withstand such cruelties for the sake of their craft, they exist at the mercy of a culture that will only accept them as long as they play by the rules in an incredibly sexist and impossible game.

There is a lot of information and knowledge on the fact that women in sports are unfairly represented, but there is still much to be explored when it comes to the current perception of female athletes and what the direct public thinks about them. In other words, the core of this

research project is going to be investigating the prominence of stories that revolve around female athletes on different sports networks and social media outlets, as well as explore the very things that people write and say toward them. The next section will be discussing the methodology and overall structure of the research.

Chapter Two: Methodology

The focus of this chapter is to explain the research methods that will be used to analyze the stories of current women in sports. Instead of conducting interviews or engaging in forms of participant observation, this project will be utilizing an unobtrusive research method. Since the information that sports networks and social media outlets produce is the main source of investigation, content analysis is the best possible method that can be used. Content analysis is essentially the study of human stories that have been recorded (Babbie, 2016). This includes books, websites, paintings, magazines, or even laws. With the rapid growth of mass media in recent years and the clear impact that it has on the world of sports, content analysis fulfills the purposes of this research. Content analysis allows for a large breadth of data to be explored, rather than having to tediously conduct intrusive forms of research that can be extremely time-consuming. Content analysis ultimately ensures that a large sample size can be achieved, making it a more reliable method that goes hand in hand with the overarching goals of the research.

When it comes to organizing all of the data, a google form has been created and will be used when each source is being analyzed. This establishes a sense of cohesion among all of the sources, as well as creates a stable foundation for the study. The process of coding is extremely

important to this research, for it systematically organizes the data and makes it ready for an equal analysis (Babbie, 2016). Additionally, both manifest and latent content is going to be examined in this research and included in the google form. While manifest content is the surface level information that is overtly communicated, latent content is the underlying meaning and significance of the source material (Babbie, 2016). Some of the manifest content in the google form includes the physical appearance of the athletes, the number of likes and comments on a particular post, comment examples, whether there was a comparison between male and female athletes, and key phrases that were used in each story. On the other hand, the latent content concerns the relevance of each story to sports and what can be deciphered from how each athlete and their experiences are presented. See **Appendix A** for the totality of the google form.

In terms of how the sample is going to be collected, there will be an inherent focus on sports within the last three years solely in the United States. One of the main goals of this research is to keep it as current as possible and to showcase what women in sports are going through now. By highlighting these recent events, this research will be able to make a stronger argument about the injustices that female athletes continue to face. As a result, this research will be using non-probability sampling, or purposive sampling to be specific. Since this research is directly targeting stories about women in sports, it makes the most sense to use purposive sampling simply because it allows sources to be selected on the basis of which ones will be useful and representative (Babbie, 2016). Within the time frame that I laid out, all stories about women in sports will be taken into consideration in order to prevent an unfair or preferential selection and to ensure the validity of the data. Elite female athletes are one subset of sports, so purposive sampling allows for this specific population to be picked out. To summarize the

methods that have been discussed, content analysis is the main research tactic and purposive sampling is how the data are going to be collected.

Chapter 3: Data Analysis

The use of content analysis and purposive sampling proved to be an extremely successful avenue for data collection. The google form currently features 60 stories about women in sports. The stories themselves come from a variety of sources, including ESPNW, ESPN, Bleacher-Report, *Just Women's Sports*, *The New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, and Instagram (**Figure 1**). It is important to note that the majority of the stories found on Instagram come from accounts that are run by ESPN (6 posts), ESPNW (10 posts) and Bleacher-Report (3 posts). Instagram was an extremely fruitful source, making up the majority of stories at 31.7%. Following closely behind is *Just Women's Sports* at 25% (15 articles), and *The New York Times* at 21.7% (13 articles). My overarching goal was to collect an equal amount of data from each of the sources, but that ultimately proved to be difficult as some sites produced more content than others. It will be elaborated on further, but these disparities demonstrate how unwilling the media is today to post about women in sports and stay consistent with news stories that revolve around the lives and achievements of female athletes.

While ESPN, ESPNW, and *Sports Illustrated* are some of the most well-known producers of sports-related content, they were futile when it came to providing substantial pieces of data. The website for ESPN supplied 13.3% (8 articles) of the data and *Sports Illustrated* contributed 6.7% (4 articles) of all the stories that were collected. While ESPNW produced numerous stories on Instagram, its website was significantly less useful and only makes up 1.7% (1 article) of the

data. Throughout my research on ESPNW, I noticed that the articles were all out-dated and recounted events that did not occur within my predetermined time-frame. This seems to be due to the fact that ESPNW is not independent from ESPN. While I attempted to view articles through ESPNW, I was always redirected to ESPN as the main source. Not only does this give reason as to why ESPNW was unsuccessful as its own source, but it becomes clear that ESPNW is not being utilized as an outlet to promote women in sports. As it was mentioned earlier, I also wanted all of the stories to be as recent as possible. All of the posts and articles have been published within the last three years. The range of dates spans from March 2021 to January 2023, and notice in the visual representation that the darker colors represent multiple stories that have been published on the same date (**Figure 2**).

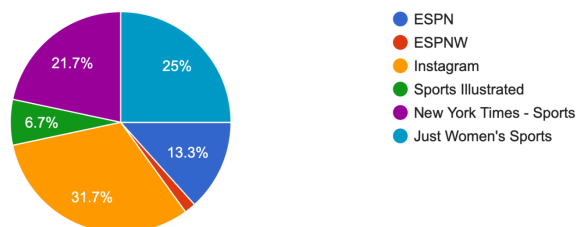


Figure 1: Percentage of the total amount of stories that come from each individual source

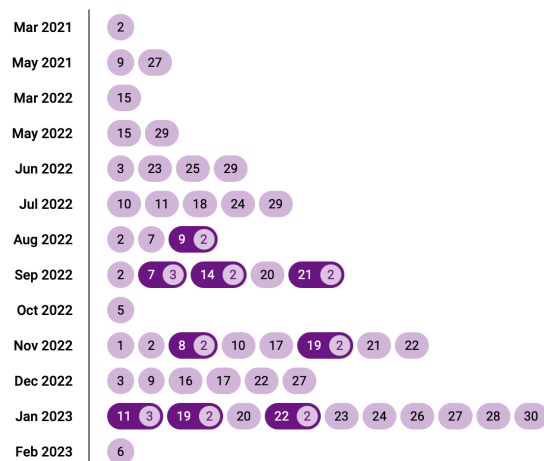


Figure 2: Publication month and date of each story about women in sports

Regardless of how lucrative each of the sources were, the vast majority of the stories were relatively easy to find (**Figure 3**). While only 3.4% (2 stories) of the data were extremely difficult to find, an overwhelming number of 42.4% (25 stories) were tremendously easy to locate. This will be discussed further, but I learned very quickly that there are countless stories about elite women in sports as long as I looked in the right places. Surprisingly enough, scrolling on social media pages proved to be one of the best and most effective strategies in terms of locating stories. I initially thought that it would be tedious work to endlessly browse through different pages on Instagram, but the search on websites was actually very hard at times because I had to be specific enough with my search words in order to find a wide breadth of information.

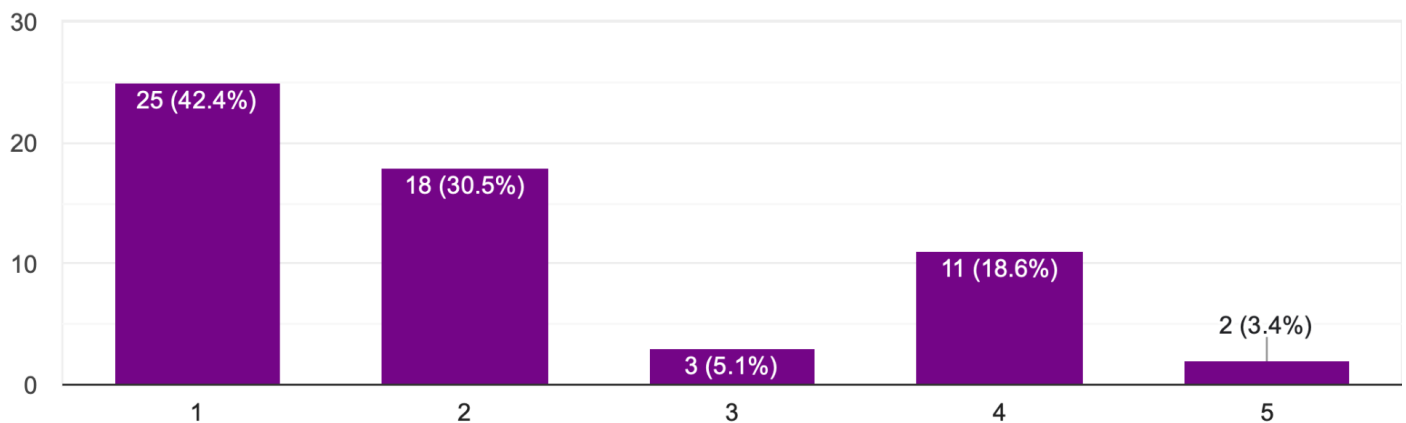


Figure 3: Level of difficulty or ease in finding stories about women in sports

In terms of comparisons being made between female and male athletes, the data reflect an even split of 50% (**Figure 4**). Throughout the course of my research I was shocked to see that the stories with comparisons between female and male athletes did not completely dominate those that had no comparisons. This may be a testament to the progress that women in sports are making, but it must be remembered that my data collection only represents a small portion of the stories that exist in the United States. There are far more than 60 stories in the world about elite women in sports, so this facet of my research must be kept in mind. It is also necessary to note that many of the comparisons were not overt, but rather implied the various inadequacies that existed for women in sports. Instead of being explicit or direct in the sexism, many of the stories utilized passive-aggressive tactics to target and demean women in sports. This includes statements that tell women to go back into the home and the assumption that male athletes are more physically fit than their female counterparts.

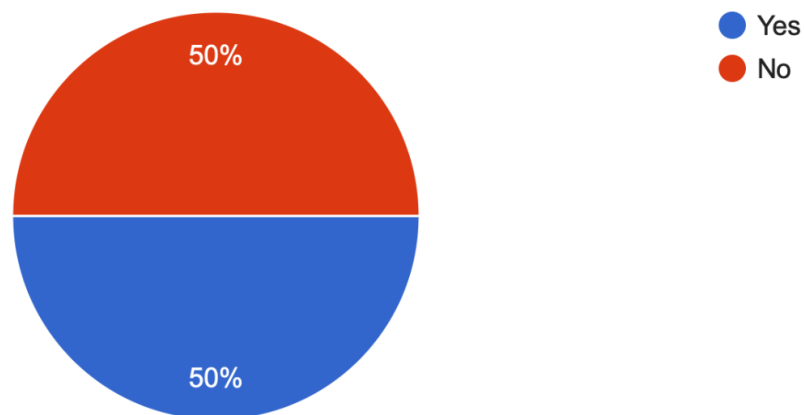


Figure 4: Percentage of stories that made comparisons between male and female athletes

When it comes to the sports that have been given the most attention, basketball garnered the most amount of recognition at 51.7% (31 stories). Following closely behind is soccer at 23.3% (14 stories), college athletics at 15% (9 stories), and tennis at 10% (6 stories). On all of the social media platforms that were utilized, the WNBA and its players received the majority of the attention. I was not shocked at the prevalence of basketball, but I did find it slightly peculiar that there were not more stories about women in tennis simply because it is arguably the most profitable sport that elite female athletes play (**Figure 5**).

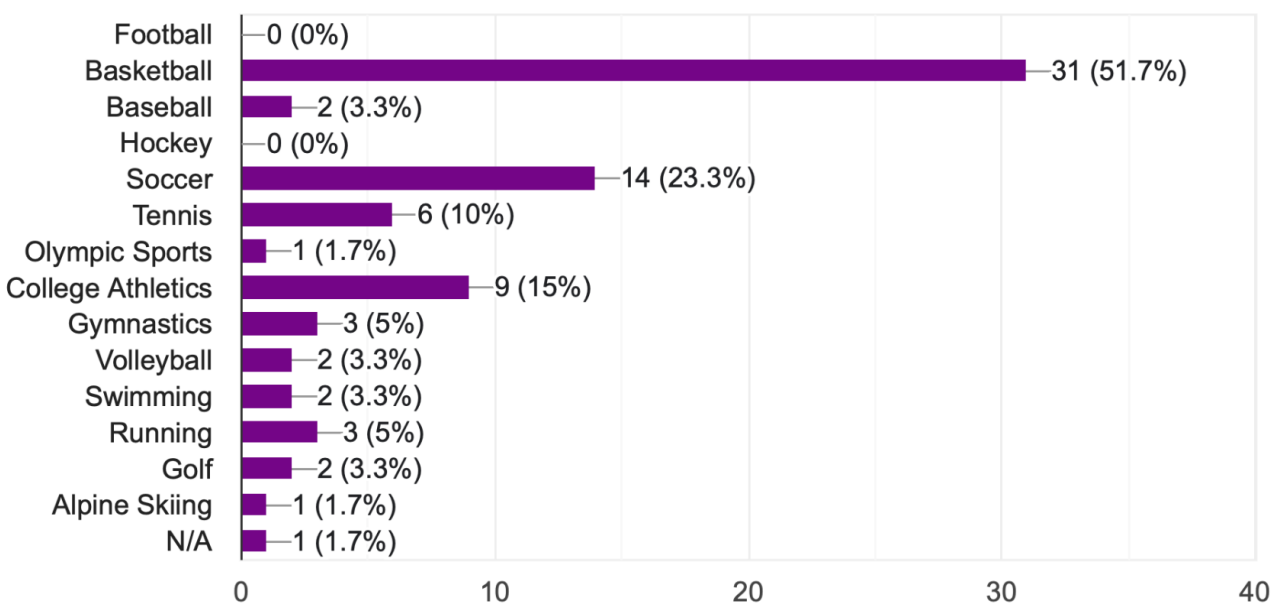


Figure 5: Numerical representation of the sports that have received the most attention

In my research there were also a variety of factors that I was looking for in each of the stories (**Figure 6**). There were 15 possible categories in total: race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, religion, (dis)ability, body type, age, relationship status, family status, fashion, physical appeal, profitability, skill set, and abuse. My overarching goal was to quantify how often these categories applied to each of the individual stories, as well as to see which factors received the most attention based on what source I was looking at. This aspect of my research will be discussed further, but I do want to describe the categories that frequently applied. Unsurprisingly, stories that involved gender occurred the most at 58.3% (35 stories). Gender was typically associated with some of the other categories, but I felt it applied when the status of the athlete as a woman was clearly mentioned and described in comparison to their male counterparts. Body type and abuse are another set of categories that tie in with one another. Body type and abuse were included in 13.3% (8 stories) and 6.7% (4 stories) respectively. These articles revolved around the emotional, mental, and physical abuse that female athletes have experienced from their coaches and those in authoritative positions to lose weight, perform better, and look a certain way in order to appeal to spectators. Not only did it become clear that women in sports are more likely to be manipulated by those who are supposed to support them, but that female athletes are not free from the confines of gender role and appearance expectations.

In a similar sense, relationship and family status were both categories that I anticipated would come up. While family status applied for 15% (9 stories) of the data, relationship status applied for 5% (3 stories) of the data. Compared to that of elite male athletes, the private lives of women in sports are constantly being placed under a microscope. I noticed that famous and

highly skilled women in sports often received attention when they had children, got engaged, or discussed the difficulties of balancing home and work life. Instead of focusing on their athletic milestones, elite women in sports were presented as symbols for the nuclear family.

Some of the categories that were given little to no attention include race and religion. Race encompassed 8.3% (5 stories) of the data. Stories that revolved around race typically discussed the barriers that black women in sports have had to overcome in order to reach an elite level of athletics. Most importantly, these stories also explored the ways in which black female athletes are often placed into boxes when it comes to the sports that they are capable of playing and how they are expected to present themselves during play, especially in regards to their hair. I was disappointed that there were not more stories on race and the nuances of the experiences that elite black women in sports have had throughout their careers. While I was able to garner some stories that incorporated race, I was not able to find any stories that discussed religion. It was astonishing to me that none of the sources I examined reported on anything that had to do with religion. This may be due to the belief that religion is far too contentious of a subject to talk about, but I still found it surprising that religion and even its relation to gender was never brought up on these sports sites. Overall, each of the categories that I examined allowed me to examine the elite world of women's sports from different angles. In order to get into the specifics of each data source and what I discovered from each of them, I will be discussing them separately.

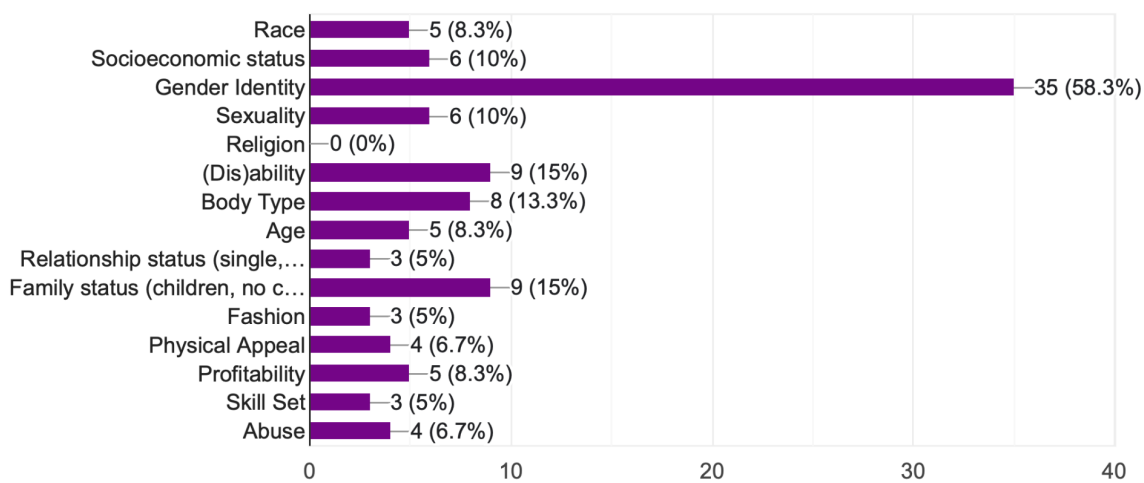


Figure 6: Numerical representation of the categories that are given the most attention

ESPNW

I was initially excited and eager to explore ESPNW, especially its website. ESPNW is supposed to be a separate entity from ESPN that is dedicated to telling the stories about women who play sports at the highest levels. Not only was I able to look at sports and statistics from games, but ESPNW also focuses on women's voices, style, and culture. These tabs on the ESPNW website give readers the ability to explore the status of their favorite teams in addition to what is trending among elite athletes and staying updated on the push for gender equality in elite sports. Even though ESPNW seemed extremely promising on the surface, I found it difficult to find any relevant stories that were as current as possible. I wanted to focus on women in sports and what they are doing today, and ESPNW was far more likely to have stories that occurred outside of my time frame. ESPNW as a website was not as lucrative as I originally thought it

would be, which could be due to the fact that it is not placed on the same level of importance and immediacy as ESPN.

The best article on ESPNW that I could find was about Rachel Luba, who discusses her struggles with food and body image while being immersed in the world of elite gymnastics. Published in 2021, Luba discusses her collegiate career and how her body was constantly at risk of being criticized. Not only was she encouraged to lose weight, but Luba was trained to believe that she would perform better if she was smaller and lighter. In addition to developing an eating disorder, Luba and her teammates were trapped in a culture in which it was normal to be criticized and take on dangerous eating habits in order to do better in a competition. This verbal and mental abuse was predominantly committed by Luba's coaches and those who claimed to act in her best interest. Instead of putting her health on the forefront, Luba's coaches taught her that winning was the most important thing in her life and that it was better to make those who trained her happy. At one point, Luba only weighed 89 pounds, stopped getting her period all together, and had to start shopping in the children's section at stores (Mendoza, 2021). Luba's story reflects the mental toll that comes along with being a female athlete, for women in sports are placed under an immense amount of pressure to look and behave in a certain way and are told that they cannot reach success unless they do as they are told. Not only was Luba manipulated to the point of self-destruction, but she was pushed to please others and disregard her own well-being for their sake. While Luba's experience sheds some light on how destructive elite gymnastics can be, it is incredibly disappointing that it was the most relevant story I could find.

As it was mentioned previously, ESPNW was a much better source when I was examining the network's Instagram account. Not only were the stories much more accessible and

easier to find, but stories are constantly being rolled out and posted. In my research I was able to examine 10 stories posted on Instagram from ESPNW. Before discussing a few of the most interesting posts, it is important to note that ESPNW and ESPN post a lot of the same stories and use similar pictures and captions. However, I only associated stories with ESPNW if I found them off of their account. Additionally, one interesting aspect of using Instagram was my ability to read the comments on all of the posts and to see how many likes each respective post received. Being able to read the comments presented another aspect of insight into the realm of women's sports. I was able to see how people truly felt about what was being posted and the content that was being produced. The identities of the commenters all remain anonymous, but it was necessary to feature them in my research because it helps illustrate how female athletes are perceived by those who completely support them and those who view them as inferior. While I was not shocked at how demeaning and rude some of the comments were, it was still disheartening and shows how women in sports continue to not be taken seriously and are seen as a joke in comparison to their male counterparts.

One compelling post revolves around Sabrina Ionescu and her engagement announcement. Ionescu is one of the most electrifying players in the WNBA, so I was quite surprised to see that an account dedicated to sports was commending her on her engagement. The post itself garnered 81,941 likes and 475 comments. While I was able to find a few nice and congratulatory comments, most of them mocked Ionescu and the post itself: "Who is she? Tennis player?" ; "Who is she? Good for them I guess?" ; "Most unrelated sports page of all time" ; "She likes men!" (Instagram, 2023). There are a few interesting things here from the comments that I want to note. Many of the commenters have no idea who Ionescu is, and those who do

automatically assumed that she was lesbian due to her status as an elite athlete who plays in the WNBA. This helps demonstrate how women's sports are seen as irrelevant in the United States, as well as that female athletes who excel in sports are seen as sexually deviant. ESPNW is simply celebrating Ionescu on her engagement, but the commenters clearly cannot help themselves when it comes to degrading a woman in sports who has achieved an immense amount of success on and off the court. However, this post has no connection to sports whatsoever. This post has an extremely nice sentiment, but it does not do anything to advance Ionescu's status as an athlete or even to promote the entirety of women's sports. In this sense, the post does not accomplish much other than projecting a heteronormative relationship and displaying a woman in sports who is still a part of the norm.

Compared to Ionescu's story, ESPNW predominantly posted stories about what was currently going on in elite women's sports. Some of these stories are inspiring and empowering, while others are tainted by the inequities that still exist for female athletes across all kinds of sports. One such story is about Magean Wolf, who became the first woman to ever pitch for the Savannah Bananas in 2022. The Savannah Bananas are a semi-pro baseball team that is also known for its entertainment exhibition games in the off-season. ESPNW posted a video of Wolf in her very first appearance in which she struck out a member of the opposing team. The post received 6,305 likes and only 22 comments. The caption also featured a hashtag, #ThatsaW. This hashtag was repeatedly used by ESPNW when a female athlete appeared to break a boundary or do something that has never been seen before in women's sports. In terms of the comments, there was a pretty even split amongst those who congratulated Wolf and those who believed that the male batter was letting her succeed: "bro was paid not to hit that" ; "hitting that ball 500 feet" ;

“Thanks for making me like your team even more!” ; “Good for her!” ; “That was Bananas!” (Instagram, 2022). Comments posted to Instagram in response to Wolf’s unprecedented achievement undermined and diminished her abilities as an athlete by claiming that any man would be able to hit off of her. Not only does this reduce Wolf’s historic accomplishment, but it demonstrates the harsh reality that today’s society is still not ready to see a woman who can best a man in sports. Wolf proves that she is more than capable of competing with men at an elite level, but her experience also showcases the fact that women in sports will always be seen as inferior in today’s world due to a social construct that defines men as the better athletes.

In a similar sense to Wolf’s story, ESPNW posted about golfer Lydia Ko and one of her experiences after a tournament in 2022. In a post-round interview, Ko is asked questions about her self-care and physical therapy routine after having endured a grueling day out on the green. Ko responds honestly and says that her needs as an athlete are constantly fluctuating, especially as a woman who has her period. Not only did Ko completely catch the interviewer off-guard, but she provided some insight into the various factors women in sports have to consider while they attempt to perform well. The post itself received 22,353 likes and 282 comments. The comments were overwhelmingly positive and all agreed that the bodily functions of women’s bodies should be normalized in the world of sports: “Why are men so scared of periods” ; “We should all be talking about them. It affects my performance as an athlete too!” ; “[The interviewer] needs a new job if he can’t handle a simple answer involving a . . . period!” (Instagram, 2022). The commenters all commended Ko on her ability to be open about her personal experiences while being an elite woman in sports. Discussing menstruation cycles openly can be such a taboo topic that is looked down upon and often seen as inappropriate, but Ko proves that they should be

accepted as the natural course of events that all women encounter in their lives. Not only is this post highly relatable for all women in sports, but it demonstrates the complexities of being a woman in sports and how female athletes should not have to hide or be embarrassed by their periods during play.

Another story that completely stood out in the data set revolves around the Las Vegas Aces, a WNBA team whose story is featured after they won the 2022 WNBA Finals. This was a monumental win for the Aces as it was the team's very first appearance in the finals. Not only that, but this is the first major win that Las Vegas has ever seen for any of its male or female sports teams. As a result, ESPNW posted a video of the Aces at their parade celebration. The post itself received 99,252 likes and 1,459 comments. The comments presented a mix of opinions in regards to how substantial and significant the championship win truly is: "Good for them. They put in hard work just like every other athlete to win their championship. Go Aces" ; "It's like 8 people there at best" ; "The WNBA is not a major pro sport" ; "It's the WNBA. . . nobody cares" ; "All these men [are] crying. Congrats on a great season ladies!" ; "Bunch of lame (especially dudes) in the comment section talking trash when there is a 99.9% chance they never competed at this level. Enjoy hating from your couch" (Instagram, 2022). There is an apparent sense of camaraderie and agreement amongst some of the commenters because they appreciate what the Aces were able to do in addition to commending the women who compete at the highest level of their craft. Most notably, some of the commenters even denounced those who were making cruel statements about the Aces and the WNBA as a whole. This was refreshing to see and provides a small semblance of hope that women's sports will continue to grow regardless of what the sexist commenters say.

The battle to acknowledge women's sports can also be seen from a story about Kelsey Plum, who is actually one of the members of the Aces that led the team to its first WNBA Final. ESPNW posted an interview with Plum in which she explained the imminent need to expand the WNBA and ensure that WNBA players get the same percentage of revenue shared as their NBA counterparts. Plum believes that WNBA players should be able to get a cut of the profit whenever any merchandise is sold that has a player's name on it or when their likeness is associated with a product. As it stands currently, WNBA players get no percentage of revenue shared at all. In order to make major men's and women's sports more equitable, Plum explains that this is a critical first step in the advancement and promotion of female athletes. The post received 549,155 likes and 19,000 comments. Out of all of the Instagram posts that I examined, this post generated the most likes and comments. Plum is speaking about a contentious topic in elite sports, for there has always been a debate as to why female athletes make significantly less money than their male counterparts.

Plum is not the first WNBA player to present this solution, but she was immediately placed into the spotlight after openly discussing it. An overwhelming majority of the comments were discouraging and many commenters even defended the pay gap between the WNBA and the NBA: "The WNBA is not profitable" ; "Blame women. They aren't supporting the WNBA by watching or attending games. They would rather watch men's sports" ; "I don't even know who she is. Why is she crying? Go find another job" ; "NBA players are paid from NBA profits. WNBA players are paid from the charity [of] the NBA because the WNBA loses \$15 million a year. Who covers those losses? The NBA" ; "Pay these women the same percentage of revenue. Right is right" (Instagram, 2022). It is difficult to comprehend the rationale of the commenters,

for they appear to blame women and the WNBA for its lack of revenue. The problem is not only deemed a women's issue, but the WNBA is depicted as a league that feeds off of the charity and good graces of the NBA. If the NBA was struggling financially, it is easy to imagine that many of these same commenters would rush to support their favorite teams and players. While I was able to locate one unbiased comment, it becomes evident that society as a whole views women in sports as pity athletes who will never be truly accepted or integrated into the realm of elite sports.

ESPN

As it was mentioned previously, ESPN provided a much larger breadth of data compared to that of ESPNW. ESPN makes up one of the largest and most popular sports broadcasting networks in the world, so it makes sense that its website is constantly being updated and possesses a significant amount of stories. While ESPNW's website came off as undeveloped and inactive, ESPN has a lively website in which articles are published on a minute by minute basis. Not only that, but ESPN features 30 different sports tabs. This made navigation and accessing potential stories much easier. Throughout my research I was able to find 9 worthwhile articles that discussed a plethora of factors involving women in sports. One of the most fascinating articles revolved around Adia Barnes, Candance Parker, and Kerri Walsh Jennings. All of these women play elite sports: Barnes is currently coaching the women's basketball team at the University of Arizona, Parker currently plays in the WNBA for the Aces, and Walsh Jennings is an Olympic beach volleyball player. The article focuses on these women and what it is like to be a mother who both works and plays within the world of elite sports.

Unsurprisingly, the article recognizes the double-standard that is inevitably placed on female athletes to be able to perfectly balance their families and careers. Barnes, Parker, and Walsh Jennings all agree that mothers who play elite sports are often burdened with the expectation that they will put their careers aside once children come into the picture. While male athletes are not asked about who is taking care of the kids, female athletes are automatically looked down upon when their children are not seen as the main priority. Parker describes how difficult it was for her when she first had her daughter: “The biggest thing that I noticed when I started embarking on this motherhood journey was the amount of questions I got that were different from my male counterparts. . . It was like, 'Well, who's watching your kids when I'd be on the road?' They don't ask LeBron that” (Roy, 2021). Just as Parker articulates, women in sports who have children defy the status quo when they choose to continue their athletic careers. Instead of being applauded for juggling work and family, today’s larger society effectively tells female athletes that it is impossible for them to have both. It becomes evident that career-minded women continue to be seen as members of the deviant culture in the world today, especially women in sports who have an identity outside of being a mother.

Another article that centers on the differences between male and female athletes surrounds the strict dress-code that Wimbledon has enforced for hundreds of years. Wimbledon is the oldest tennis tournament in the world and is known as the most prestigious tournament that any athlete could participate in. One of the hallmarks of Wimbledon is its requirement that players wear all-white attire. Instead of focusing on what players are wearing, the All England Club wanted spectators to be entirely concentrated on the tennis. However, the All England Club just recently decided in 2022 to slightly alter its rules in order to best support its female

competitors and make them as comfortable as possible when they are on their menstruation cycle (ESPN News Services, 2022). It became clear that the concept of wearing all white clothing was an extremely anxiety-inducing thought for many elite female tennis players. In addition to having to prepare for the biggest tournament of their lives, female tennis players also have to take their periods into account and whether they might bleed through their uniforms. Not only could this take a toll on a woman's ability to play to her full capacity, but this is an additional amount of stress that is not necessary or conducive when it comes to playing such a demanding sport like tennis. Even though the All England Club claimed it would make extensive rule changes, the organization simply stated that its female participants may wear solid and dark colored undershorts beneath their white skirts (ESPN News Services, 2022). In reality, this is not a monumental change to the dress-code requirements and does not erode or distinguish the anxieties that many female tennis players associate with white clothing. While the All England Club attempted to make a change, it becomes apparent that maintaining tradition and precedent is still more important than listening to the needs of an entire division that participates in its tournament.

While these first few articles discuss female athletes in relation to the sports that they play, ESPN also highlights what life is like for women in sports outside of their respective arenas. In one such article, it becomes clear that brands would prefer to sponsor a female athlete who is attractive, rather than someone who has a lot of accolades. When Sorana Cirstea was approached by Adidas to form a sponsorship, she came to realize that the company was only eager to work with her due to her looks: "I remember, for example, when I had a contract with Adidas, considering that I look fairly good for an athlete, they were telling me that it's better to

look good and be in the top 20 than to not look that good and be No. 1. . .” (Reuters, 2022). Adidas is obviously more concerned with the physical attributes that their athletes have and completely disregard those who are highly ranked and may not fit in with the conventional beauty norms in the process. This tells the world that the only female athletes who are worth talking about are those who are traditionally pretty, as well as that the value of any woman in sports solely stems from her appearance. In addition to being completely shallow, it becomes evident that our society views women in sports as marketable objects as long as they belong to the mainstream culture and represent pre-determined beauty standards. This illustrates a sad reality for elite women in sports, for their looks and degree of attractiveness are always going to be seen as more important than their talents and ability to achieve greatness.

In a similar sense, ESPN seemed to really enjoy discussing the fashion trends that were currently popular for elite women in sports. One such article examines the best looks from the 2022 WNBA season. While the beginning of the article briefly makes note of the team rankings in the WNBA playoff games, the main purpose of the article is to showcase players’ outfits. Coined as the “pregame runway,” ESPN gives a long rundown of the most notable clothes and accessories that WNBA players have worn throughout the course of the season. Athletes such as Sue Bird, Kelsey Plum, A’ja Wilson, and Dearica Hamby are all mentioned for their exquisite sense of style. The article also features images of these outfits as the players are walking into their respective stadiums. Plum is wearing a low-cut, leather green jacket, while Wilson is wearing a neon orange mini track-suit. Hamby is wearing a mesh top along with a pair of tight-fitted leather pants, and Bird is wearing a floral-themed outfit (Ricks, 2022). Fashion has clearly become a large part of the WNBA culture, but the “pregame runway” has become the

focal point of the league itself. Instead of commenting on the playoff games at hand, attention is only given to the players when their outfits are deemed glamorous enough. Rather than placing value on the skills and abilities of WNBA players, their worth is derived from their capacity to assemble impressive outfits. Not only are these women hyper-feminized as a result, but it enables society at large to sexualize them when they are taken out of their uniforms and depicted in a more conventional context. Even though the article applauds the outfits that the athletes are wearing, it becomes evident that their clothing choices are perceived as a much more pivotal point of conversation compared to that of their fight to win the WNBA championships.

In addition to what ESPN published on their website, there are a few significant posts that the company posted on its Instagram account. For the most part, ESPN focused on posting exciting and thrilling highlights from women's games. Even though ESPN was clearly hoping to show its followers that female athletes are just as sensational as male athletes, the posts felt performative and staged. Not only did I find myself scrolling for long periods of time to find a story, but I noticed that there is an astounding discrepancy in the amount of content that is dedicated to male and female athletes respectively. One of the posts that I was able to find highlighted Sabrina Ionescu's amazing performance in which she scored 31 points in just three quarters of a game. ESPN made this post in 2022, and it garnered 117,549 likes and 1,692 comments. Ionescu completely dominated her opponents and proved why she is one of the best players in the WNBA. While ESPN commends Ionescu on her efforts, many of the commenters felt differently and did not want to see content about the WNBA: "She tuff, but Klay [Thompson] has this and more in 1Q" ; "Y'all are trying to force the WNBA down our throats" ; "I did that at the YMCA post better content" ; "These highlight sets [are] boring" (Instagram,

2022) These commenters disregard Ionescu's game-time statistics and believe that any NBA player or even a man who is not an elite athlete could score the same amount of points in less time. Not only that, but the commenters feel as if the WNBA is being forced upon them and is too boring to be considered a form of worthy entertainment. ESPN posts the bare minimum when it comes to women in sports, and these comments demonstrate that our society as it stands now is virtually incapable of accepting and uplifting female athletes who succeed at their craft.

While there were some positive comments, these individuals incorporated sexist themes in order to make sense of Ionescu's performance: "She learned from the best! #mamba" ; "Not only is she fabulous looking but she got the whole package. Footwork and the handle OMG" (Instagram, 2022). These comments particularly stood out because Ionescu's skills as an athlete are attributed to her mentor, the late Kobe Bryant. Most importantly, Ionescu is perceived as having the whole package because she is beautiful and attractive in addition to being a good athlete. Even if these comments were not ill-intentioned, they read as insincere and imply that Ionescu's gender was an obstacle that she had to overcome in order to thrive as an athlete. Ionescu is an incredible athlete who commands the court whenever she plays, but it becomes evident that her gender hinders her from being seen on the same level as her male counterparts.

Another post on ESPN's Instagram showcases a phenomenal beach volleyball game between the United States and Ecuador. ESPN posted a video of just one point in which the players on both teams demonstrated their endurance, grit, and determination all the while playing in the blistering heat. All four of the women exude athleticism and make beach volleyball look easy, even though they are playing on hot sand and in incredibly uncomfortable conditions. ESPN posted this video in 2022, and it generated 757,462 likes and 7,213 comments. Compared

to the post about Ionescu, the athletes in this video received an enormous amount of praise and admiration: “I don’t mess with volleyball but that was like watching LeBron dunk on someone” ; “Crazy athleticism” ; “No lie, beach volleyball is one of the most challenging sports period!” ; “Impressive is an understatement” ; “Imagine what they could do with proper clothes” ; “Better than a WNBA game that’s for sure” (Instagram, 2022). Some of the commenters recognize these athletes and the immense amount of athleticism and hard-work that is required of beach volleyball players, but it is also important to make note of those that are harmful. One commenter acknowledges the absurdity of the uniforms that the women are wearing. Despite clearly playing in the heat, the women are subjected to wearing bikinis that are revealing and provide no protection from the sun. Although it is not explicitly mentioned, this could be one reason as to why the video became so popular and acquired a considerable amount of likes and comments. Not only is it easy to sexualize these women when they are wearing nothing more than bikinis, but their bodies are clearly being put on display and ultimately become something for viewers to focus on.

In a similar sense, it is necessary to think about the athleticism of these women and why they received so much more attention compared to that of female athletes. While Ionescu was put down and labeled as a less skilled athlete than NBA players, these volleyball players are wholeheartedly supported and respected as athletes. Volleyball has historically been seen as a sport that only women play, while the NBA is interpreted as more masculine as it has existed long before the creation of the WNBA. Not only is volleyball viewed as more feminine, but it is stereotyped as a sport in which women wear tight-fitted clothing that is appealing to the male gaze. This implies that women in elite sports are only promoted when they stay within the

confines of the sports that they are expected to play. The efforts of these athletes are not to be discounted, but it is of the utmost importance to think about how gender role expectations influence how female athletes are perceived based on what sports they play.

There is one last post from ESPN that I want to discuss and also relates back to the stories that have been previously mentioned. The WNBA All-Star game gathers all of the best players in the league and gives them the opportunity to show off their abilities in addition to being honored for their accomplishments. At the 2022 WNBA All-Star game, Kelsey Plum shined and scored 30 points, which ties the legendary Maya Moore for the most points scored in All-Star history. Most importantly, Plum was named the most valuable player of the game. ESPN shared this historic moment on Instagram, but the post reflects some ongoing disparities between the WNBA and the NBA. For instance, a variety of the comments condemn the WNBA for the meager trophy that Plum receives for being the most valuable player: “And all she gets is a dollar store trophy c'mon WNBA” ; “My elementary trophy was bigger than that” (Instagram, 2022). The majority of the comments shared similar sentiments, for Plum’s tiny trophy was an insult to her efforts and status as an All-Star athlete. Not only does this insinuate that the WNBA is a joke and something to be mocked, but it contributes to the belief that women’s sports are inconsequential and unworthy of having the same amount of viewership as men’s sports.

Apart from these comments, there are a few more that overtly demonstrate the presence of sexism in elite women’s sports: “Steph Curry somewhere watching this: ‘rookie numbers’” ; “Most beautiful woman in the WNBA” ; “What does this have to do with ESPN?” (Instagram, 2022). While some commenters speak on the inequities between men’s and women’s sports, other commenters enforce it. Just like the post that was dedicated to Ionescu, Plum’s

achievement is diminished when the commenters question her relevance to ESPN and compare her to Steph Curry. Plum is an individual and she has her own set of skills and assets, but she is automatically compared to Curry and seen as not good enough. Instead of being able to admit that Plum is an accomplished athlete, commenters cannot help but say that a man has done it better. This is deeply rooted in sexism and the viewpoint that women cannot possibly be better at sports than men. Plum's story is relevant and monumental, but members of our society cannot accept her as an elite athlete due to sexist and misogynistic ideologies. Other than being seen as insignificant, Plum is highly sexualized. Plum's physical attributes have been the focal point of her career, rather than her skills as a basketball player. Throughout the course of my research on Instagram Plum was constantly being objectified by commenters. In addition to thinking she is attractive, many commenters see her as a sex symbol. Not only is it unfortunate that Plum is seen for nothing more than her body, but her abilities are clearly not as important as her looks. This exemplifies the fact that women in sports are only popular when they are considered to be sexually appealing. Plum's story demonstrates a variety of nuances that exist for women in sports and the numerous obstacles that they have to overcome in order to be taken seriously.

Bleacher-Report

Bleacher-Report is a digital media company that is focused on producing sports-related content. Compared to that of brands like ESPN, Bleacher-Report is directly geared toward young fans who want to be entertained in addition to staying updated on the latest sports news. Instead of just commenting on sports, Bleacher-Report is known for producing creative and unusual content in order to get a reaction out of fans and followers alike. In this sense, I felt that it was

important to examine Bleacher-Report because its creators have a considerable amount of free-range in regards to what they can report on and post. I decided to specifically investigate Bleacher-Report on Instagram since the company's page is relentlessly active and receives a lot of engagement from its supporters.

As I was expecting, most of the content on Bleacher-Report was dedicated to men's basketball and football. In addition to posting highlights, there were a large number of comedic videos and images that made light of athletes and individual moments from games. With the few posts I was able to find about women in sports, this same nonchalance was applied and translated into how the posts themselves were received. In one striking example, Bleacher-Report posted a video of the Las Vegas Aces twerking and dancing after they advanced to the WNBA Finals. The video received a lot of attention at 249,088 likes and 6,874 comments. This video was not posted on ESPNW or ESPN, most likely because it was seen as inappropriate content. Compared to Bleacher-Report, ESPNW and ESPN have a standard to uphold and are limited when it comes to what they are allowed to say. Since Bleacher-Report posted this video, its commenters clearly got the impression that they could voice their opinions freely and without an repercussion: "This might double the yearly viewer count" ; "WNBA trying to get their ratings" ; "Do this in a game and I'm tickets" ; "This why we don't watch the WNBA" ; "Might reconsider my opinions of the WNBA" (Instagram, 2022). These commenters allude to the fact that the WNBA would only be worth watching if its female players performed explicit styles of dance for the crowd. Not only is this highly degrading, but it tells WNBA players that their value is tied to sexual exploitation. Bleacher-Report is supposed to be an innovative and fresh brand, but its creators have failed when it comes to building a brand that empowers young fans to respect female athletes. Instead

of taking advantage of a severely underreported population, Bleacher-Report falls back on sexist tropes that typecast elite women in sports as a laughing stock.

When the Aces eventually won the WNBA championship, Bleacher-Report posted photos from the team's parade celebration in Las Vegas. The first few images feature Kelsey Plum smoking a cigar, while the rest of the images showcase A'ja Wilson and Chelsea Gray spraying champagne with their teammates in a state of pure joy and ecstasy. The post obtained 497,867 likes and 3,637 comments, making it one of the more prominent posts about women in sports on Bleacher-Report. The photos do not make any particular statement about the athletes, but the nature of Bleacher-Report establishes an avenue for its followers to make crude and distasteful comments: "Kelsey Plum [is] gonna make me start watching the WNBA" ; "I'm trying really hard to appreciate Kelsey Plum's basketball abilities" ; "Here for Plum" ; "I never wanted to be a cigar more in my life" (Instagram, 2022). As it has been mentioned previously, Plum is being hyper-sexualized and all of her actions are being constructed as sexual innuendos. Since women in sports are already seen as inferior and less talented, those who follow sports evidently believe that female athletes can be degraded to the status of mere objects. The accomplishments of the Aces are overshadowed by such obscene and appalling comments, which in turn demonstrates that women who play elite sports are still struggling to be respected as athletes. Not only is it disgraceful that Plum continues to be targeted as a sexual device, but it is an embarrassment that women in sports are expected to withstand such vulgar comments. This kind of behavior is unimaginable in men's sports, for elite male athletes are presented as masters of their craft who are untouchable. At this rate, women in sports are never going to be fully accepted into the world of elite athletics and are always going to be treated as vessels for sex.

There is one last post that I was able to find on Bleacher-Report that was recent enough and fit within my time-frame. The post revolves around Sue Bird, her retirement, and what she has accomplished in her career. Bleacher-Report calls Bird “One of the best point guards of all time” and lists some of her achievements: 4x WNBA champion, 13x All-Star, 5x Olympic gold medalist, 2x NCAA champion, and 5x Euroleague champion. Compared to the other posts from Bleacher-Report, this dedication to Bird only received 200,313 likes and 1,700 comments. This helps demonstrate what followers actually value on social media, especially when it comes to women in sports. Instead of interacting with a post that recognizes the career of a WNBA legend, those who subscribe to Bleacher-Report would rather engage with a post where the women who are depicted can be sexualized. There were a few sincere comments that congratulated Bird on her legendary career, but the majority were negative and dismissive: “Well there goes the only WNBA player I know” ; “Net worth still the same as an NBA bench player” ; “I’m fine with you guys posting this stuff, but please from now on stop forcing the WNBA down our throats” ; “Now she can get a real job” ; “On everything she can’t guard me” ; “One of the [league’s] best point guards not the games” (Instagram, 2022) A common pattern becomes prevalent in that any time an elite woman in sports is being recognized for her accomplishments there are always commenters who cheapen them by making superficial comparisons to male athletes. Sue Bird is arguably the most successful woman to have played in the WNBA, making it extremely disappointing that those who follow Bleacher-Report cannot respect or tolerate a post that is doing nothing more than appreciating an athlete for her craft. It becomes strikingly evident that society today is incapable of admiring female athletes and would rather keep them in a place of inferiority than give them an ounce of approval.

Just Women's Sports

In the beginning of my research it was difficult to find a set of sources that would be the most beneficial in regards to producing current and reliable stories about women in sports. In my preliminary search for sources, I was lucky enough to come across *Just Women's Sports* simply because ESPNW featured a few of the site's articles. As it declares in its name, *Just Women's Sports* is a platform that is solely dedicated to female athletes and is designed to bring attention to all facets of life for women in sports. In addition to discussing the performances of specific athletes and any milestones that they have achieved, *Just Women's Sports* sheds light on the ongoing problems that exist for women in sports today. I greatly enjoyed my exploration of *Just Women's Sports*, for there was a constant influx of articles and what felt like an endless supply of stories. Compared to that of the other sources that I examined, *Just Women's Sports* is a vital part of my data because it is an unapologetic platform that is not afraid to highlight the inequities that are a substantial part of elite women's sports.

There were a variety of captivating stories that I found on *Just Women's Sports*, and I am going to provide an in-depth analysis of some of the most impactful and memorable articles that I found on the website. One such article gives an overview of the weight-shaming culture that has historically been a major part of the NWSL (National Women's Soccer League). Published in 2022, this article focuses on the mistreatment and harassment of NWSL players on the part of their coaches and those in authoritative positions. Not only have players been encouraged to lose extreme amounts of weight, but coaches have notably prioritized the appearance of their athletes over their performance. While fitness, nutrition, and balanced eating habits are an integral part of elite sports, coaches in the NWSL have taken advantage of their power and abuse their players

by obsessing over weight and being overly occupied with food. For players in the NWSL, the culture of systemic weight-shaming was often seen as something that they had to deal with in order to compete at the highest level in women's soccer. Coaches like Farid Benstiti had a reputation across the league for excessively humiliating his players and criticizing them for not meeting arbitrary weight standards: "One player reported that Benstiti told players, 'If I see you eat snacks, I will kill you.' Another player said that, during the 2020 Challenge Cup, Benstiti was 'already hiding food under the table he didn't want girls to eat.' She also said that Benstiti 'was always commenting on food and women and their weight'" (Watkins, 2022). Benstiti clearly exerted an immense amount of control over his players, which reflects a severe amount of emotional abuse and maltreatment. Instead of teaching his players how to positively take care of their bodies, he used his jurisdiction as a coach to threaten them into adopting practices that were not conducive to a healthy life both on and off the field.

In a similar instance, Paul Riley was yet another coach who inflicted a tremendous amount of harm on his players. Riley also concentrated on weight and looks, but his actions became exponentially more aggressive that culminated in sexual harassment. While initially building a rapport with his players, Riley would slowly subvert their confidence by making hurtful remarks about their weight. Kaleigh Kurtz, who plays for the North Carolina Courage, describes how Riley drove her to develop an eating disorder. After seeking professional help, Kurtz realized that she was being groomed and was destroyed both mentally and emotionally in preparation for sexual abuse (Watkins, 2022). Riley broke the boundaries that coaches are required to stand by, virtually putting all of his players in harm's way and endangering their careers as a result. Riley and Benstiti are just two examples of the many coaches who have

damaged athletes in the NWSL and used weight as a form of manipulation. This story demonstrates that the generalized abuse of women is such a normalized aspect of society, as well as that women are still seen as objects that can be exploited to the benefit of those in power and without consequence. Even in elite sports, female athletes are at risk of being pulled into abusive and harmful power dynamics by male authority figures who would rather dehumanize them than establish an uplifting culture that promotes their improvement and empowerment as athletes. In retrospect, elite women in sports are incapable of making social progress and advancing their careers when they continue to be subjected to unreasonable expectations that are detrimental to their physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

In addition to having issues with coach conduct and upholding the rights of its athletes, the NWSL has also failed when it comes to providing resources for players who are mothers or want to become mothers. The 2023 article predominantly focuses on Alex Morgan, an acclaimed member of the U.S. women's national soccer team, and her recent efforts to advocate on behalf of mothers in the NWSL who need far better maternity services and forms of support. Being a new mother herself, Morgan recounts how motherhood was often looked down upon in the NWSL and was perceived more as a financial hindrance to those who were in charge of the athletes: “‘The understanding between us just was not there, and I felt that,’ she wrote. ‘They always made me feel like it was a negative thing that I had a baby’” (Watkins, 2023). Morgan's child was clearly seen as an unwelcome burden that her soccer club had to pick up the slack on. Not only did Morgan get the impression that her child was not accepted, but she could tell that her team viewed motherhood as a liability. As it was mentioned previously, women in elite sports are expected to choose between their careers and having a family. When a woman decides to

become a mother, it is automatically assumed that her career will suffer. On the other hand, female athletes are not seen as “true” women when they delay motherhood. While male athletes are applauded for being amazing athletes and attentive parents, our society believes that it is impossible for women to truly succeed at both.

Morgan shows that it is possible for women in sports to balance motherhood and their careers as long as they are properly supported and given everything that they need to care for their children. Some of these suggestions include: providing single hotel rooms for mothers and their children on away trips, guaranteeing living accommodations for additional caregivers on away trips, providing meals for the children and caregivers on away trips, and providing a private space for the children and caregivers at games (Watkins, 2023). Morgan is not making any monumental or unfeasible recommendations, but she is rather imploring the NWSL to do more than the bare minimum when it comes to supporting its players who are mothers. Being a parent can be an extremely stressful time for elite athletes who have to stay committed to strict training regimens and game schedules, and knowing that they will be fully supported emotionally and financially can positively impact their ability to play and their relationship with their club overall. Just like any other men’s sports league, the NWSL has a duty to care for its players and to ensure that every athlete gets what she needs to help her perform to the best of her ability. Morgan’s story exemplifies the fact that female athletes cannot separate themselves from their lives off the field, so it is of the utmost importance that mothers are acknowledged by those who have access to services that can uplift them as parents and sustain their careers at the same time.

There are a few other articles that discuss the lack of accommodations for mothers who take part in elite sports. For instance, Fiona English brought attention to the Boston Marathon's negligence when it comes to including fair and equitable policies for its pregnant runners. English qualified to run in the 2023 Boston Marathon when she found out she was pregnant. With her due date just a few days before the race, English knew that it would be too dangerous for her to run. Despite explaining her situation to the Boston Athletic Association and asking to defer her spot for a year, English was rejected and ultimately told that she would have to go through the qualification process again (Hruby, 2023). It is by no means an easy feat to qualify for the Boston Marathon, for it takes years of training and runners have to be able to meet a time that is constantly fluctuating based on how many runners achieved that time in previous years. Most importantly, it is extremely difficult for elite runners to stay consistent on a yearly basis as they get older.

This was devastating for English because all of her hard work was discarded based on circumstances that were outside of her control. English describes the absurdity of this policy: "As it stands, the Boston Marathon does not offer any deferral option for women who are in this position – the option is either to run the race whilst pregnant or forfeit your hard-earned place altogether. . . . Frankly I am disgusted by this policy. . . it makes me so angry and I feel like I'm being punished for getting pregnant" (Hruby, 2023). English reflects similar sentiments to those of Alex Morgan, for both women felt that they were being penalized for getting pregnant and wanting to start their respective families. For English specifically, she illustrates a distinctly sexist precedent that discriminates against pregnant runners. Not only did the Boston Athletic Association act cruelly against English, but it is astonishing that even one of the most prestigious

and renowned marathons in the entire world repeatedly fails its female runners and refuses to meet their needs when it would be unsafe for them to compete. It becomes apparent that all elite sports in some shape or form contribute to a social culture that limits female athletes and creates unnecessary barriers to their success. Even if the Boston Athletic Association made its deferral policy without ill-intent, it indirectly impacts pregnant runners who have already proven that they deserve to run the race. Not only is this policy severely outdated, but it embodies a much larger problem in that women in sports are still seen as second-class citizens who have to work exceedingly hard to navigate a field that was not designed for them.

Dearica Hamby is yet another example of an elite athlete who was treated unethically as a result of her being a mother. Even though Hamby was a crucial part of the Las Vegas Aces and the team's 2022 WNBA championship title, she was traded to the Los Angeles Sparks just hours after her pregnancy announcement on social media. Hamby's level of commitment to the Aces was attacked by team personnel and her character as an elite athlete was criticized. Since her pregnancy was also unplanned, the Aces' management staff claimed that Hamby's pregnancy was a tell-tale sign of her not taking her job in the WNBA seriously. Hamby describes how appalled she was upon learning that the Aces did not want her to get pregnant under her current contract: "I was told that 'I didn't hold up my end of the bargain' (because no one expected me to get pregnant in the next two years'). . . . I was asked if I planned my pregnancy. When I responded, 'no,' I was told that I 'was not taking precautions to not get pregnant.' I was being traded because 'I wouldn't be ready and we need bodies'" (Hruby, 2023). Not only was Hamby ridiculed for unexpectedly getting pregnant, but she was being told by those in charge of the Aces that her body is under the jurisdiction of the team's organization.

In other words, Hamby was expected to give up the autonomy that she has over her body for the sake of winning basketball games. When Hamby suddenly became unable to perform for the Aces, she was clearly seen as a worthless and burdensome individual who needed to be discarded. Hamby's private life and personal decisions should not have to be made privy to those in the WNBA, but she should rather be provided with the services that she needs to ensure that she is healthy and fit both as an athlete and mother. Hamby's story demonstrates the harsh reality that women's sports leagues play a major role in the degradation and humiliation of elite female athletes. Instead of supporting her through her pregnancy, the Aces acted unprofessionally by faulting Hamby for getting pregnant and leaving her in a vulnerable position during a period of time that is already exhausting and stressful. Not only did the Aces organization cross a line, but the team clearly cares more about trophies and making money than the well-being and happiness of its players. The WNBA is one of the most well-known women's sports leagues, and it is extremely disturbing that teams such as Aces are not reprimanded or condemned for treating its players like pieces of merchandise that can be controlled and disposed of when they are no longer lucrative. Hamby's experience shows that women's sports will continue to struggle when the leagues that are supposed to be dedicated to the empowerment and progression of female athletes perpetuate a culture that disregards a woman's right to have agency and a sense of self-ownership over her body.

While motherhood obviously has a serious impact on women who participate in elite sports, it is also important to explore the financial difficulties of women's sports and its overarching relation to the visibility and marketability of female athletes. In one staggering example, Breanna Stewart discusses how WNBA teams are restricted from chartering private

flights when they have to travel for away games. Compared to that of the WNBA, the NBA has no such limitations and allows the teams to individually choose how they travel. For a league that makes significantly less money than its male counterparts, chartering private flights for all 12 WNBA teams could cost up to \$30 million a year. This would put a significant financial strain on the WNBA, especially when the league already struggles to adequately pay its players (Yanchulis, 2023). Interestingly enough, Stewart also makes note of the fact that she traveled on private flights while playing college basketball for the University of Connecticut (Yanchulis, 2023). This also holds true for popular WNBA athletes like Kelsey Plum, Natasha Cloud, and Diana Taursi (Yanchulis, 2023). It is outrageous that college teams are given the funds to charter private flights, while the WNBA is incapable of providing its highly-talented and dedicated athletes with a basic luxury that is a given in the NBA. WNBA players have made it into the highest level of basketball in the United States, so it is a grave disservice to their years of hard-work and diligence to be treated in such an offensive manner. Apart from the appeal of flying privately, commercial travel can take a huge toll on athletes and their ability to physically and mentally prepare for a game. WNBA players will be able to perform much better when they can prioritize their physical well-being and mental state in a sheltered and peaceful environment (Yanchulis, 2023). Stewart ultimately calls attention to a pressing issue and exemplifies the fact that the demands of athletes off the court are not any less important than their needs on the court. For female athletes in particular, it becomes evident that WNBA players are not given the accommodations that they rightfully deserve as elite and accomplished athletes. Instead of elevating the status of women in sports, society as a whole continues to be told that female

athletes are not entitled to even the most basic forms of comfort that are given to all male athletes without a second thought.

Pushing the boundaries of women's sports and fighting for an increased amount of prestige is also at the forefront of A'ja Wilson's platform. Coming off of a sensational season in the WNBA, Wilson is blazing the trail for elite women in sports and believes that female athletes are an untapped source when it comes to advertising and promotional efforts. In addition to seeing more coverage on women's sports, Wilson maintains that it is critical for female athletes to be endorsed and publicized in non-sports settings. As it stands now, the WNBA season is glaringly shorter than that of the offseason. This gives the WNBA an opportunity to generate a sense of interest and demand for the league, as well as force its athletes into the mainstream culture. Wilson describes how important it is for the WNBA to take advantage of spaces that go beyond the basketball court: "I think we need to see more of the WNBA teams and more women's sports teams in airports and different situations for people to support, even though we might not be in season. . . . Let them buy that jersey. Let them buy that t-shirt. That's how we push it. If you can see her, you can be her" (Hruby, 2022). Wilson touches on a major issue and shows that women's sports is lacking when it comes to infiltrating community-wide spaces that would propel the growth of female athletes and spread the word about women's sports leagues. In other words, elite women's sports must be normalized and advertised as the standard for any genuine progress to be made. By actively demonstrating to members of society that women's sports matter off the court and field of play, elite female athletes will gain support and continue to challenge the limits that are placed on them. As Wilson also alludes to, being able to see the successes of women in sports shows young girls that they have the ability to be great too.

Without having accomplished and experienced women in sports to look up to, our society fails all of the young girls who aspire to be athletes and are instead told that they will never be good enough. Making advancements for women in sports is clearly not an isolated phenomenon, but it is rather one crucial step in building a new sports culture in which all athletes are represented and celebrated.

Wilson is not alone in her efforts by any means, and she actually reflects a much larger campaign when it comes to properly honoring women in sports in their respective disciplines. Apart from winning a championship, one of the most prominent awards that an elite athlete can receive is an ESPY, which stands for Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly. An ESPY is presented to an athlete in order to recognize their individual and team achievements. Receiving an ESPY is an immense feat, for athletes are nominated by their peers in the sports world in addition to going up against other elite and highly-respected athletes across various sports. However, the 2022 ESPYs embody the inequities that exist for women in sports today and how female athletes are perpetually rejected at every turn in their careers. Many female athletes who were nominated for impressive and exciting awards did not receive invitations to the ceremony. Aliyah Boston, who was nominated for Best College Athlete, was never sent an invitation to the event. Despite leading South Carolina to its March Madness tournament win and being named NPOY (National Player of the Year) and DPOY (Defensive Player of the Year), Boston was excluded from the invite list.

Caprice Dydasco, who was up for Best NWSL Player, was also left off the invitation list in addition to all of her fellow nominees from the NWSL. Diamond Shields was nominated for Best Comeback Athlete, which is a category that includes both male and female athletes.

Regardless of her being nominated, Shields was initially not listed as a nominee on Google. While Joe Burrow, Klay Thompson, and Trey Mancini were all recognized under the category, Shields was clearly forgotten. After calling out the search engine, Shields was immediately added and the problem was fixed. Even though Shields eventually received the acknowledgement that she rightfully earned, she should never have been overlooked in the first place. The experiences of Boston, Dydasco, and Shields exemplifies the fact that female athletes are still denied a seat at the table despite having proved themselves time and time again. While it is discouraging to read malicious and cruel comments about women in sports on social media, it is even more dismaying when such extreme forms of rejection come from those who are supposed to be leaders and fair representatives in the world of elite sports. It is an undeniable fact that women in sports are trivialized in society at large, but it becomes clear that these inequalities are perpetuated and normalized by those who hold the most powerful positions in sports and have the ability to control what viewers believe.

The New York Times

While my research is predominantly focused on sources that are sports-forward, I also wanted to include a more reputable, respected, and wide-reaching source of authorship that writes about more than just sports. I ultimately decided to use *The New York Times* because it is an incredibly famous company that is dedicated to producing great and high quality forms of journalism. *The New York Times* proved to be an extremely valuable resource that enhanced and elevated my data. Overall, I noticed that *The New York Times* was not afraid to comment on and expose the inequities that currently exist for elite women in sports. The vast majority of the

articles condemn society at large for how female athletes are treated and show that very little has been done to sincerely advance women's sports.

I want to begin by highlighting a few pivotal articles that overtly demonstrate how women in sports are seen as inferior and secondary to that of male athletes. Sedona Prince, who played on the women's basketball team at the University of Oregon, produced a viral video that displayed the staggering amount of disparities between the men's and women's NCAA March Madness basketball tournaments. Prince originally created the video in 2021, when sports all across the country were playing under restrictions from the Covid-19 pandemic. Not only did Prince prove that women's sports are still treated as an afterthought, but that female athletes are also explicitly disadvantaged and given less resources than men who play at the same level. Despite working all year to make it to the tournament and enduring stringent pandemic protocols, teams were met with “. . . inadequate food, continued isolation, daily virus testing, makeshift practice and workout facilities, and some venues that were no bigger than high school school gyms. Even the gift bags were meager compared with what was given to the men” (Witz, 2022). In addition to being a blatant insult to the participating athletes, the NCAA glaringly showed that it does not care about adequately providing for and caring about women's sports. This disregard of the women's tournament made other forms of negligence more clear. While 68 teams were able to compete in the men's tournament, only 64 teams were allowed into the women's tournament. In a similar sense, 11 staff members were permitted to join each of the men's teams, with only 7 staff members for each of the women's teams. There was also a severe spending gap between each of the two tournaments, which exceeded \$35 million during the 2021 season (Witz, 2022). Although these disparities were remedied after having been exposed by

Prince, the NCAA was getting away with substantial inequities that explicitly defy Title IX. Even at one of the most celebrated and public tournaments in sports, female athletes continue to be relegated to a subordinate status. Prince's video clearly demonstrates that our society is incapable of putting elite women in sports on a level playing field and giving them a fair shot at being successful.

Prince highlighted the discrepancies that exist between men's and women's basketball teams at the college level, but female athletes are still fighting for representation at elite levels and across all sports. For instance, *The New York Times* reported on the fact that tennis is the only sport where women have been able to reach the same amount of acclaim as their male counterparts. Comparatively, other women's sports such as basketball and soccer are stuck in the shadows and never receive the same amount of coverage or respect as the men who play those sports. The article ultimately argues that women's tennis has been able to maintain its popularity since players submit to a male-dominated status quo and are less vocal about societal or political issues. On the other hand, we still “. . . live in a world where strong, powerful women who break the mold struggle for acceptance. Consider the W.N.B.A., stocked with outspoken women, a majority of them black, who have shown a communal willingness to take aggressive stands for L.G.B.T.Q. rights, reproductive freedoms, and politics” (Streeter, 2022). Not only does the article claim that female tennis players adhere to social and gender norms, but that women's tennis remains far more successful than other women's sports simply because its athletes do not actively fight back against inequities. It is also important to note that tennis is more stereotypically feminine and ladylike, while basketball and soccer are inherently contact-sports where athletes have to be ruthless and rough in order to win. Our society as a whole cannot

fathom the possibility of supporting women's sports when there is any degree of physicality involved. Women's sports are in turn only endorsed when they emphasize hyper-feminine qualities and cast female athletes as elegant, graceful, and stylish players. The preeminence of women's tennis overwhelmingly shows that female athletes are only rewarded a certain amount of prestige as long as they present themselves as delicate and gentle women who are completely separated from masculine attributes.

Apart from the articles that focused on the inequalities between men's and women's sports, *The New York Times* also stressed the objectification and sexualization of elite female athletes. One such article talks about Olivia Dunne, who is a gymnast at Louisiana State University and the impact of a new rule in collegiate sports in which athletes can make money off of their name or image. Dunne has gained a tremendous social media following and is able to make a profit through modeling and sponsoring beauty products. The gymnast was even expected to make more than \$2 million throughout the course of the 2023 season. While this increase in publicity can be both lucrative and empowering for women in sports, athletes like Dunne use their physical appeal to earn money online: "But the new flood of money – and the way many female athletes are attaining it – troubles some who have fought for equitable treatment in women's sports and say that it rewards traditional feminine desirability over athletic prowess" (Streeter, 2022). Allowing female athletes to sell their image and likeness ultimately forces them to play into heteronormative expectations and to cater to the male gaze. It is also necessary to note that race and sexual orientation play a major role as well. Dunne, who is white and heterosexual, is one of the top-earners in women's college sports. Women of color and those who belong to the LGBTQ community are far less likely to generate a massive audience

(Streeter, 2022). Not only is this a step-back for the entirety of women's sports, but this story shows that society as a whole still places a lot of emphasis on how women look, how attractive they are, and whether they belong to a dominant group. Women in sports should be proud of their bodies and who they are, but they should never have to exploit their sexuality in order to make a living. This article illustrates what today's society truly values in female athletes. Instead of promoting and funding their skills as athletes, we breed a culture that relies on shallow beauty standards and dismisses those who are any different.

In addition to being overly sexualized on social media, female college athletes are also pressured by their coaches to lose weight and adopt life-threatening eating habits. Even though these toxic body image expectations were discussed previously, it is beneficial to reiterate simply because women in sports endure these conditions across all sports and levels. For example, *The New York Times* investigated the reliability of body composition tests at the collegiate track and field level. Body composition tests are supposed to measure an athlete's fat and muscle mass in order to determine how well an athlete is training, eating, and regulating their bodies (Thames et al., 2022). In reality, many coaches have abused the purpose of body composition tests by encouraging and manipulating their athletes to lose as much weight as possible and to have the lowest body fat percentage. Audra Koopman, who competed at The Pennsylvania State University, had a debilitating experience with the body composition tests: "The upperclassmen told [Koopman] to stay away from the dessert table at team banquets. Coaches, they cautioned, would be watching. . . . and over time the tests distorted her relationship with food. But as she ate less and her body fat dropped, she wasn't running any faster" (Thames et al., 2022). Koopman's coaches reflect the stress that is already placed on women to be thin, and the body composition

tests only exacerbate the pressure since they are inherently designed to put an athlete's body on display for others to judge.

Christine Williford had a similar experience at Arizona State. Not only was Williford subjected to body composition tests, but her coaches intensified her health issues and a pre-existing eating disorder. Williford was coaxed into believing that she would feel better about herself if she ate less food and lost weight. Williford started vomiting daily, losing hair in large amounts, misusing painkillers, and was contemplating suicide (Thames et al., 2022). Koopman and Williford were taught to hurt themselves mentally and physically to win, but the body composition tests did nothing more than put their bodies on display for coaches to inspect and comment on. Supplemented by incredibly revealing uniforms and the societal pressure to be skinny, female track and field athletes are pushed to become emaciated in an effort to please those who will never be satisfied. It becomes evident that women in sports are expected to fulfill an impossible standard in which their appearance is deemed more important than their health, emotional stability, and balance as athletes. The stigma around weight has bled into the world of sports, and female athletes are preyed on and systematically dehumanized as a result.

As it has already been touched upon in my research, there is a heated debate about whether transgender women should be allowed to compete against cisgender athletes. I feel that this is important to discuss because transgender athletes only face pushback when it comes to competing in women's athletics, not men's sports. This severely one-sided dispute is transphobic, as well as implies that women are naturally weaker than men and need to be separated from those who may possess even the smallest inkling of an advantage. Lia Thomas is currently at the center of this division, as she is a transgender woman who swims for The Pennsylvania State

University. Thomas has endured an immense amount of hate upon coming out and deciding to swim for the women's team from fans, parents, and teammates alike. While many people support transgender rights and want transgender individuals to have equal access to housing, education, employment, and healthcare, the concept of permitting them to compete in the category that aligns with their gender identity is completely off the table (Powell, 2022).

Even though there are not a lot of transgender female athletes who play at elite levels, they are assumed to be taking over the world of women's sports. Society at large preaches equality and fairness in sports, but including transgender athletes is seen as the exception. FINA, which is the overarching body that governs swimming, even proposed that an entirely separate category should be made for transgender and non-binary athletes (Longman, 2022). The simple solution is to let athletes compete in the division that best represents them, not to alienate them altogether and make them out to be a spectacle that the rest of the world can gawk at. Not only would this be humiliating, but it is highly discriminatory and reminiscent of segregation laws. Comparatively, this debate also stems from an outdated and sexist viewpoint of what cisgender women are capable of achieving (Powell, 2022). Instead of undervaluing the potential of cisgender female athletes, we should teach women that they can compete against and keep up with any opponent regardless of who they are. The ongoing fight to include transgender women in athletics is just one more phase in the evolution of sports, but it becomes evident that the world today values winning more than it does equitable treatment, fair representation, and the competitive spirit.

Race is another critical factor of sports that has an impact on female athletes and how they are perceived by the world around them. Gymnastics is stereotypically denoted as a white

sport in the United States, even though there have been various high-achieving black gymnasts such as Simone Biles, Gabby Douglas, and Jordan Chiles (Williams, 2022). Not only are gymnastics programs usually created at predominantly white institutions, but black women are more commonly associated with sports like basketball. Black women are continuously seen as the minority in gymnastics, so Fisk University decided to rewrite the narrative. Fisk is the first HBCU (historically black college or university) to institute a gymnastics program (Williams, 2022). Even though this is a landmark moment for women and girls of color in gymnastics, it is incredibly overdue and demonstrates how black women have been expected to operate and function in a white-dominated world.

Derrin Moore, who founded Brown Girls do Gymnastics, campaigned on behalf of Fisk to get the gymnastics team approved. Moore describes her personal experience of being the only black girl in her gymnastics class: “Moore remembers being a young gymnast in the 1980s and seeing the disgust on her white teammates’ faces when oils from her hair would leave the vinyl mats slick. She remembers coaches who criticized her body and the way she danced during her floor routine, enlisting another girl to show her how to do it the ‘right way’” (Williams, 2022). In addition to being seen as an outsider, Moore’s identity and attributes as a young black girl were viewed with disgust. Although an immense amount of progress has been made and was spearheaded by Fisk, so much more needs to be done to elevate the needs and voices of black gymnasts to show them that they matter as athletes. In other words, it is essential that gymnastics becomes far more welcoming to people of color and women of all backgrounds. Without diversity, inclusion, and a sense of intersectionality, gymnastics will only stagnate and become a dull sport that is incapable of growth.

Brittney Griner's story has been a recurring theme throughout the entirety of my research, and *The New York Times* has been no different when it comes to reporting on Griner's detainment and its effects. One powerful article discusses the strength of Griner and WNBA players who advocated for her release and freedom, as well as what Griner's imprisonment symbolizes through a sports lens. WNBA players and its supporters became a fierce force and never gave up on fighting for Griner to be returned home. Not only did Griner's fellow athletes rally around her, but they showed that Griner's ordeal may never have had to happen if WNBA players were simply paid more money (Lowe, 2022). The NBA owns 40% of the WNBA and has the capacity to support its female counterparts, and yet the men's league does very little to promote and advertise its colleagues.

Cathy Engelbert, who is the WNBA commissioner, has attempted to uplift the league and provide more for her players: "Since Engelbert became the commissioner in 2019, she has focused on adding sponsors and developing new ways for players to earn money. . . . But increasing the league's profile and revenue has been a challenge in the face of a sports ecosystem that is mostly blind to female athletes because of its overwhelming focus on men's sports" (Lowe, 2022). No matter how hard the WNBA tries, it continues to lag behind the NBA in terms of fans and profit. This gives some reason as to why Griner went abroad to play in the first place, for female basketball players overseas make significantly more money and are respected as athletes (Lowe, 2022). It becomes apparent that sports in the United States facilitates a culture that limits women in sports to the point of forcing them to leave in order to make a livable wage. Griner's story is horrifying and disturbing, but it proves that elite women in sports are gravely undervalued and are left to fend for themselves in a society that does not care about them.

Sports Illustrated

The last source that I examined was *Sports Illustrated*, and I decided to include it in my data collection because the sports magazine is widely famous for its swimsuit issue. Not only has *Sports Illustrated* historically been known for its overly sexualized photoshoots of female athletes, but it creates unrealistic expectations for women and tells them that they will only be accepted if they appeal to physical standards that are set through highly modified and misleading images. Most importantly, *Sports Illustrated* puts all women at risk of internalizing a negative self-image simply because the magazine depicts such a narrow-minded idea of female beauty, strength, and fitness. In this sense, I was extremely curious to see how *Sports Illustrated* would talk about women's sports and whether its website would even attempt to talk about the gender inequities that exist in elite sports. Similarly to ESPN and ESPNW, I found it really difficult to locate current and relevant articles that would contribute worthwhile information. Rather than being able to click on a link that would direct me to specific sports on the website, I had to search for stories about women's sports. The vast majority of the top articles were about men, so I had to manually scroll for stories about female athletes. As a result, I located three stories that offered interesting and new pieces of knowledge to my data set.

One of the first articles that I found revolved around Breanna Stewart's impending free agency. Seen as the biggest story of the off-season, Stewart's decision to sign with a new team could completely shake-up the WNBA and change which teams are predicted to make a championship run. Instead of getting a comment from Stewart herself, *Sports Illustrated* interviewed Kevin Durant and got his take on what Stewart should do. Durant, who played for the Brooklyn Nets at the time, was messaging Stewart in an attempt to convince her to sign with

the New York Liberty. The article even discussed Durant's enthusiasm about the mere possibility of Stewart coming to New York: "Durant is excited about the team that the Liberty are assembling. 'They [are] cooking man, they [are] doing their thing,' he said. 'They [are] bringing the best talent to New York'" (Chavkin, 2023). I found it fascinating that Durant was asked to share his thoughts on Stewart's possible move to New York, compared to that of actually going to the source herself. Durant is probably one of the most seasoned and popular players in the NBA, and *Sports Illustrated* seems to have used him as a ploy to generate some interest for the WNBA and its players. Even if *Sports Illustrated* wanted to present a sense of camaraderie between the two leagues, it came off as a hand-out. While the article itself did not have a lot of substance, it demonstrates that society at large is resistant to taking women in sports and their endeavors seriously unless it is coming from a man with a favorable status. Stewart did eventually decide to join the Liberty, but highlighting Durant's perspective cheapened an important milestone in her career and profiled her as a woman who followed the influence of a man.

Elite female soccer players who represent the US women's national team have had a long and hard battle for equal pay, and *Sports Illustrated* makes note of a huge win that finally gives women in sports fair compensation. The House of Representative passed The Equal Pay for Team USA Act, which was officially enacted at the end of 2022. The bill mandates that all athletes who represent "... the United States in global competition [will] receive equal pay and benefits in their sport, regardless of gender. It covers America's 50-plus national sports and requires the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee to handle oversight" (Associated Press, 2022). This act signifies a critical step forward for all of women's sports, as well as exemplifies

the efforts and determination of the US women's national soccer team to never stop pushing for equal pay. While I do believe that this act is an amazing step in the right direction, it is dramatically overdue and demonstrates how reluctant our society is to accept change. The US women's national soccer team began the legal battle for equal pay in 2016, meaning that it took six years for the inequities between the men's and women's teams to be remedied (Associated Press, 2022). Not only is it appalling, but it plainly shows that the United States as whole does not care or respect women in sports nearly as much as it should. We are so enthralled by men's sports as a society that we leave female athletes to pick up the scraps and expect them to be content with it. Although the women's team is far more likely to win and stay at the top of its game compared to that of the men's team, we continue to push them aside and tell them to do better. It is important to remember that women in sports have fought for years for equal rights, and one victory is not going to solve the systemic and institutional issues that exist.

The very last article that I examined in *Sports Illustrated* was dedicated to Allyson Felix and her many successes as a track and field athlete. Felix ran for The University of South Carolina, and the school honored her by renaming its track field after her. Not only that, but Felix is the most decorated American track athlete in Olympic history with 11 total medals (Selbe, 2023). Felix made her mark on the track and field community, and she proved that women in sports are capable of far more than they are given credit for. In addition to dominating track and field, Felix cemented her place in history by having her name associated with her alma mater. I ultimately decided to include Felix's story because it demonstrates what women in sports can achieve as long as they are given the chance and are provided with the same resources as their male counterparts. Felix's story exemplifies the fact that elite women in sports play at the highest

levels of their craft for a reason and have so much to offer to their spectators and fellow athletes. Instead of working to dismantle or put down women in sports, it is far easier to celebrate them and create a culture that is built on embracing differences and the skills that every athlete brings to the table. In other words, Felix's story serves as a stark message and a reminder that women in sports have the fortitude to be great athletes and are not lesser than men simply due to their gender. Coming from a feminist's perspective, our society desperately needs to empower women in sports and allow them to thrive as athletes. My analysis shows that not much progress or effort has been made since the initial introduction of Title IX, as well as that today's world has not evaded the immediacy of these inequities in sports. Whether we want to admit it or not, it is a fact that women in sports are undervalued and accepted as second-class athletes.

Discussion

The expansive content analysis that I conducted brought about the results that I expected, but it is necessary to compare my findings to that of previous research and the sociological theories that can be applied to women in sports. As it was explained in the beginning of my research, I chose four theories that could be used to help illustrate the relationship between women in sports and society at large. I am going to apply Eagly's social role theory, Goffman's framing theory, Herman's dialogical self-theory, and Goffman's dramaturgical analysis to my findings.

First, social role theory asserts that men and women are socially and culturally expected to possess certain characteristics that are implicitly associated with each gender (Sheffer, 2020). My research agrees with Eagly's theory and proves that women in sports are assumed to be

characteristically different from their male counterparts. One common pattern throughout my data was that female athletes were constantly seen as weaker, more emotional, and less aggressive than their male counterparts. Especially on Instagram, any story that was posted about a female athlete was immediately met with the presumption that she was less skilled or naturally substandard in some shape or form. When Sabrina Ionescu scored 31 points in just three quarters, she was immediately compared to NBA players who have supposedly scored more points than her in less time (Instagram, 2022). Ionescu is expected to always lag behind NBA players, for that is her designated role as a woman in sports who lives in today's society. In another striking example, ESPN highlighted Adia Barnes, Candance Parker, and Kerri Walsh Jennings as they navigated the world of elite athletics and motherhood. Even though all three of these women are incredibly accomplished athletes, they are still primarily seen as mothers first (Roy, 2021). Women are stereotypically placed into the role of a caregiver and nurturer, and this is no different for elite female athletes. Barnes, Parker, and Walsh Jennings all proved that they are automatically differentiated for being mothers, and because they defy their socially accepted role they are looked down upon as a result. Eagly's social role theory can be applied to my data, and it shows that women in elite sports are affected by socially constructed expectations and gender roles.

Second, framing theory posits that news postings have the ability to dictate what people believe simply based on how that information is presented (Sheffer, 2020). In addition to shaping reality, framing theory creates a consensus among members of society in terms of what is considered true. On social media specifically, commenters and followers all assumed that women in sports were incompetent athletes and less entertaining. Men's sports received far more

coverage than women's sports on ESPN and Bleacher-Report. Underreporting on women's sports clearly gave viewers the impression that female athletes were not as talented as their male counterparts. As a result, many commenters felt justified in slandering the posts that featured women and believed that they should only be seeing content about men's sports. When ESPN commended Kelsey Plum on tying Maya Moore for the most points scored in a WNBA All-Star game, commenters were not afraid to vocalize their discontent and claimed that women's sports were being forced upon them (Instagram, 2022). Most significantly, the vast majority of commenters felt that ESPN was spending too much time on Plum and not enough on the sports that really mattered. On *Just Women's Sports*, A'ja Wilson demonstrated the need for increased coverage and visibility off the court. Wilson describes how there is no available merchandise that advertises and promotes women in sports (Hruby, 2022). Not only does this make female athletes virtually invisible, but it tells society at large that women's sports are of little importance. Framing theory is directly applicable to my data and supports the notion that women in sports are not adequately included in the overarching makeup of reality. By excluding female athletes from general knowledge, they are clearly forgotten and will continue to go unwanted.

Third, dialogical self theory states that each aspect of a person's identity has a specific voice, and when confronted with different situations the required persona comes to the forefront (Coche, 2017). The various voices that women in sports need in order to function as athletes and as individuals became apparent in my research. Not only were the voices fluid with one another, but many athletes utilized more than one voice at a time. For instance, Alex Morgan used her position and experience as a mother, activist, and respected soccer player in order to advocate for the needs of players who have children (Watkins, 2023). By combining the influence of her

voices, Morgan proved that women in sports who are mothers cannot separate their identities from each other and should have access to resources that will support them as working parents. Similarly, the gymnasts who compete for Fisk University demonstrate the importance of uplifting black women in sports (Williams, 2022). The gymnasts at Fisk use their voices and experiences as black athletes to further prove that women of color who play sports deserve equal representation and are just as talented as their white counterparts. Compared to the theories that have already been discussed, dialogical self theory is not as strong or effective. I believe that this is primarily due to the fact that I investigated women in sports from secondary sources, rather than conducting personal interviews with athletes that would allow me to specifically ask about the different fronts they project to the world. However, the theory does allude to the significance of intersectionality and how social categorizations are interconnected and influence one another (Carter-Francique et al., 2016).

Fourth, dramaturgical analysis is similar to that of dialogical self theory, but Goffman's second theory claims that all people have a subjective and objective persona (Chriss, 1995). While someone's subjective persona is how they present themselves to the public, the objective persona is the true self as there is no audience to perform in front of. While I completely agree with the theory of dramaturgical analysis, it was difficult to decipher the objective persona. Since my research stemmed directly from the media, it would be impossible to genuinely understand an athlete without there being some semblance of a performance. Since the great majority of the female athletes that I investigated are in the public eye, who they really are as people is always going to be skewed and inaccurate. However, the subjective persona is applicable and shows just how much women in sports behave based on where they are and who they are with. For example,

Olivia Dunne puts on a performance everyday for her followers in order to make money. Dunne presents herself as a carefree, inviting, and amusing person to tell a story and appeal to her audience. Despite admitting to having fabricated an image on social media, Dunne knows how to capture the attention of her viewers to make a living (Streeter, 2022). Ionescu has even presented multiple personas in the public spectrum. During a basketball game, Ionescu is aggressive, energetic, and confrontational with opponents (Instagram, 2022). On the other hand, Ionescu can be seen in a more loving, gentle, and giddy manner after her engagement (Instagram, 2023). Ionescu adopts characteristics that are appropriate for each moment and audience. While dramaturgical analysis proved to be less successful, women in sports consciously play into it in order to properly perform in every setting.

Chapter 4: Conclusions

My exploration of elite women in sports was both an eye-opening and revealing experience. Not only did this study prove that women in sports are underrepresented and mistreated through a variety of different factors, but that today's world needs to work much harder when it comes to elevating female athletes. This study covered a wide breadth of sources and accumulated an abundance of diverse stories. One of my primary goals was to showcase the intersectionality of women's sports and how female athletes are not isolated from the individual aspects of their identities when they step onto the field, but rather how they carry every facet of themselves into the athletic arena. In addition to displaying the reality of being a female athlete, this study reinforces the fact that women in sports are constantly faced with barriers to their success.

In terms of limitations, I was the sole analyst. This made the process of collecting data difficult as it was extremely tedious and took a long time to comb through each source. In the future it will be extremely useful to have additional forms of help for the sake of gathering data, but also to get multiple perspectives on the stories. Most importantly, this data can become even more reliable with increased sample size. This expansion would still focus inherently on current stories, but getting primary data from interviews and personal accounts would only enhance my overarching argument. Hearing directly from women in sports is critical to the continuation and quality of this research. It would also be interesting to compare men's stories in elite sports to that of women's experiences. While I recognize the presence of comparisons between male and female athletes, supplementing this facet of my data with men's stories can be utilized as a source of evidence to prove that male athletes are not subjected to the same confounding hindrances as female athletes.

While I presented various inequities in women's sports, it is necessary to offer possible solutions to such a tremendous problem. It is obvious that women's sports require more coverage from social media and sports broadcasting networks, but those who work for these institutions must set an example for their viewers to follow. In order to make the greatest amount of change, women's sports have to be promoted by individuals who hold the most powerful positions in the world of sports and have a considerable influence over society at large. No change will happen overnight, but highly revered members of society have the ability to sway the opinions of those who look up to and respect them. This includes former athletes who have become sports analysts and even current athletes who have generated a large following. Fans look to these

individuals for sports news and often see them as role models, making their opinions greatly malleable and subject to change based on what famous athletes or sports commentators say.

Compelling athletes and sports analysts to dedicate more attention to women's sports and to denounce those who degrade female athletes can completely shift how women in sports are received. Discussing women's sports on primetime channels will help generate a collective interest, as well as show viewers that female athletes are a part of the mainstream and established culture. I refrain from suggesting different forms of incentivization because sports broadcasting networks should not receive any financial compensation for covering women's sports. Not only would monetary pay-offs defeat the purposes of this research, but it gives the impression that people need to be paid to both watch and comment on women's sports.

In a similar sense, social media platforms like Instagram have to take accountability for the negative and demeaning content that is posted about female athletes. Allowing commenters to say whatever they want about women in sports establishes the belief that that is acceptable behavior. Condemning those who are complicit in the degradation of female athletes and creating more stringent expectations for users like ESPN and Bleacher-Report will create a better and safer environment for women in sports. Public forms of action must be taken by social media conglomerates to combat the humiliation and unjust forms of treatment that women in sports are subjected to. Banning users who make vulgar and hurtful comments is one possible solution, as well as requiring accounts to make posts that prohibit such forms of malicious and sexist behavior. It is of critical importance that social media accounts speak out on these injustices, for remaining silent only standardizes the suppression of women in sports.

Finally, Title IX needs to be updated to ensure that the sports world is abiding by the law and no longer goes unchecked. Under Title IX, women's sports are required to be equal to that of men's sports. While the compliance procedures at schools and universities should be updated and undergo constant inspections, women who play at elite levels have nothing to fall back on and are often forgotten. The needs of elite women in sports are just as important, and society at large cannot continue with its complete rejection of female athletes. The United States allows young girls to participate in sports in which their skills can be fostered and nurtured, but more has to be done for the women who are able to reach the top levels of their sport. In other words, Title IX is virtually meaningless if society as a whole stops caring about women in sports and refuses to allocate them their rights as soon as they achieve an elite level. Not only is this absurd, but it contradicts the entire purpose of creating Title IX in the first place. More policies must be put in place that protect elite women in sports and guarantee them their financial, physical, and personal liberties as athletes. For elite women in sports to be truly seen as the gifted and accomplished athletes that they are, our society is in great demand of a total cultural reset in which we are all taught that anyone can be an athlete regardless of their gender and at any level.

Appendix A

Content Analysis

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