

Societal Analysis of Online Discourse Surrounding Female Athletes

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SOC 490: Senior Project

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May 8, 2023

Abstract

This study investigates the sociological issue of gender inequality as it is portrayed in social media. Specifically, the study examines the relationship between social media and sports by analyzing the online discourse relating to the inequitable treatment of women athletes. A research question was constructed to narrow the scope of the analysis; do online Twitter threads differ based on the gender of the athletes? To answer this question, a research design was created which is best described as a qualitative form of content analysis, as various data in the form of online comments from WNBA and NBA ESPN Twitter posts were systematically gathered to be analyzed from a sociological perspective. Several pertinent themes were uncovered as a result of this method, including the gendered financial social discourse in sports, the posting of misogynistic statements/jokes, the dismissal of women athletes' social relevance, the sexualization of these same athletes, and other supportive or non-gender specific discourse. Besides the last, each theme shows multiple forms of gender-based oppression encountered by female athletes, reinforcing the idea that the online Twitter threads do differ based on the gender of the athletes.

Introduction

This paper uses a qualitative form of content analysis to focus on the sociological based question of if Twitter threads differ based on the gender of an athlete. Furthermore, the paper will demonstrate the inequitable amount of online abuse that Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) athletes endure in comparison to their National Basketball Association (NBA) counterparts. When considering traditional sporting events, it is not uncommon for the spectators to be expressing disdain for a particular athlete or team through booing or jeering.

These expressions have been socialized to include both acceptable and unacceptable things fans are allowed to say (Litchfield, Kavanagh, Osborne & Jones, 2018). In other words, there are aspects of accountability ingrained into in-person public events.

Social media has had a significant impact on the traditional methods of fandom and the resulting interactions (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). No longer are there societally formed norms and values generally keeping the public from expressing their full disdain for the athletes. Social media provides fans with a platform that is largely unregulated, with a fan being able to post anything and everything with little to no real-life repercussions. Because of this, it is vital to understand social media so that we may understand underlying societal values that otherwise might not have been expressed in a more public setting with those potential repercussions. Through this understanding, society may be able to strive for more equitable gender treatment.

Gender equality matters. There are many potential benefits to equalizing the gender gap within our society; the following are some of the more prominent reasons. First, the elimination of violence. Four main driving factors of violence against women include: thinking it is socially acceptable to be violent towards women, men's perception and/or need to be in control of decision-making as well as limiting women's independence, rigid gender roles and stereotypes, and male relationships that emphasize aggression and disrespect towards women (Victorian Government, 2021). There should be societal moral obligations to eliminate these driving factors. In addition, gender equality has been found in Australia to be economically beneficial as Australia's GDP would potentially increase by 11% if the gender employment gap was closed. Furthermore, the Australian economy would gain \$8 billion if women transitioned from tertiary education into the workforce at the same rate as men. The potential for more women in the workforce means that businesses are more likely to be profitable as those with at least 30%

women in leadership positions have higher rates of profitability. Not only do women increase revenue but they also make up most of the unpaid labor work. This is important as the unpaid labor economy in Australia is nearly six times larger than the paid counterpart (Victorian Government, 2021).

Overall, it is clear that there are several large, societal-level benefits to equalizing gender inequality. The continued division of gender will only serve to hurt societies in these contexts with every day causing a lack of women's safety and detrimental economic loss. In these power struggles, there will be many ups and downs. Conscientizing men about gender equality must include familiarization with things such as participating in traditional household work, taking care of children and their everyday needs, pushing to support women in both business and government, and being active in the fight against domestic violence. This is founded on imagining a different order of living and changing cultural interactions between women and men in addition to contesting women's structural subordination and men's social power. Overall, it becomes clear that it is impossible to try to work on gender equality without placing a focus on politics and further societal emphasis (Ratele, 2014). Therefore, this paper will prove that online Twitter threads differ based on the gender of the athletes, expressing gender inequality to be prevalent in society.

Literature Review

To get the most out of this paper it is pivotal that the reader gets an adequate understanding of some influential background information. Because this study is looking at if online comments on Twitter threads differ based on the gender of the athletes, the following subtopics are deemed to be most necessary: The Rise of Social Media, The Use of Social Media

in Sports, Gender Roles in Social Media, NBA vs. WNBA by the Numbers, and Twitter Demographics. These topics allow the reader to understand the nuances around the topic, therefore making the paper easier to understand and more academically beneficial.

The Rise of Social Media

With the rise of the digital age and the resulting technological innovations, we have become reliant on our various digital devices to navigate our everyday tasks and activities (Litchfield et al., 2018). Specifically, the use of devices to access social media has become an integral part of society with it having a far-reaching sphere of influence. It has become one of the most popular forms of communication and ways of gathering information for consumers and distributors (Sveinson & Allison, 2022). This is largely due to the idea that consumers have a core desire to not only view created content but also contribute and take on an active role in various communal conversations (Zappavigna, 2011). From this, we can see how social media platforms such as Twitter rose to such a high level of popularity as they offer users the chance to instantly view and express their interests and opinions on topics that are of personal interest to them.

In response to this popularity, many distributors placed an emphasis on the way in which they brand and advertise the products that they desired to sell (Pegoraro, 2014). Because of this newly created marketing technique, consumers now found themselves holding a sense of power and influence that had previously never been seen at least on a scale as large as this. Furthermore, individuals now had a way in which they could communicate anonymously with little to no “real world” consequences as platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram typically don’t have rigid rules requiring a user to represent their real-life identity.

The Use of Social Media in Sports

With the rise of social media, there has also been a significant impact on the world of sports. Technological advances have changed the way in which sports are consumed by the general public. There is now an opportunity for individuals to participate in instant sports discourse, enactment, and coverage (Sanderson, 2008). Importantly, there is also now a new way for the sports teams themselves to use social media platforms to create interactive and participatory experiences (Litchfield et al., 2018). When these teams post breaking news, share stories, post live updates, etc. it allows sports fans to instantly respond with their own thoughts and opinions on what has just transpired. This increases the amount of fan and/or sporting encounters, leading to a greater overall societal connectivity in the world of athletics (Litchfield et al., 2018).

It is also important to note that some studies have found this increase in social connectivity to be one that is negative in nature. A study done in 2011 looked at sexism and homophobia in online interactions between fans who were discussing the sport of American football. They found that the amount of anonymity that social media platforms provide had resulted in several displays of themes such as homophobia, sexism, misogyny, and racism (Kian et al., 2011). Another study with a similar objective found that abuse within social media can be qualified into four main types. Those types are identified as physical, sexual, emotional, and discriminatory abuse, with the last having the potential to be further broken up based on gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, and disability (Kavanagh et al., 2016). Based on these findings and classifications, they go on to explain that social media has a strong potential to encourage abuse rather than act as a preventative influence. This would emphasize and validate narratives saying social media is very dangerous in relation to the overall safety and mental well-being of

those individuals who are involved within sports social sharing platforms (Litchfield et al., 2018).

Gender Roles in Social Media

Social media can be pivotal in influencing societal perceptions of gender and preconceived notions of what gender roles should look like in places like an average household or partnership. These influences heavily depend on the definition of gender created by cultural values and practices. Therefore, these created definitions of socially ideal masculine and feminine identity shape expectations about how individual men and women should communicate within social media sites (Wood, 2009, as cited in Rose, Mackey-Kallis, Shyles, Barry, Biagini, Hart & Jack, 2012). Although the rise of social media has allowed for an increase in professional opportunities as well as more media visibility for women, comments on these platforms often feature communication that is rooted in misogyny or other gendered abuse and harassment (McCarthy, 2021). Gendered language, comparisons, sexualizations, and stigmatization of non-normative femininities are referred to in McCarthy's study as "virtual manhood acts" or "VMAs". When individuals participate in these virtual manhood acts, they are often doing so to delegitimize women athletes and strategically elevate male ownership in sports fandom (McCarthy, 2021).

Because VMAs include the expression of masculine selves through displays of sexist and heterosexist ideals, there is an increase in the hate for women who are perceived as feminists, who are active in male-dominated spaces, and who are non-compliant with societal gender expectations (Sobieraj, 2018). For women athletes, these gender expectations often involve appearing feminine, attractive, and white (Markula, 2001). Those who have not met this criterion are subject to maltreatment in digital spaces. This can be viewed as a type of

cis-hetero-misogyny where the athlete is thought to be failing as a woman and therefore does not deserve to be classified as one. A discourse is then created regarding a sense of rejection and disgust around these athletes on social media platforms (Richardson-Self, 2019). Those athletes who are thought to be an acceptable type of femininity are often subject to experience online sexual abuse due to masculine ideals of dominance and control (Vaccaro, 2011).

Because the social media-enabled abuse of women athletes is seen all over the world, it is common to witness examples of this phenomenon in day to day life. One such example could be described by a particular BBC study, which found that a third of elite sportswomen have been trolled (intentional, antagonistic remarks posted by users with intent to create inflammatory, irrelevant, offensive comments, or other disruptive comments (Merriam-Webster, Inc)) on social media. Another found that professional tennis players are exposed to multiple forms of abuse on Twitter (Kavanagh et al., 2019; Litchfield et al., 2018). In 2017, one of Australia's popular news sources disabled comments relating to the women's Australian Football League due to “constant trolling, harassment, and disgraceful commentary” (Wood, 2020). Furthermore, emerging data tells us that online abuse disproportionately affects women with many calling for further research to understand the extent of online abuse and its effects on sportswomen (Kavanagh et al., 2019).

NBA vs. WNBA by the Numbers

Gender is not the only difference between the NBA and WNBA. There are many key differences in terms of how the game is played. For example, a regulation NBA basketball is one inch bigger and two ounces heavier than its WNBA counterpart. There are four quarters in both an NBA and WNBA game with the NBA quarters lasting 12 minutes compared to 10 minutes in the WNBA. A WNBA roster consists of a maximum of 12 players while the NBA has a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 15. The NBA has another league associated with it, the

G-League, where they are able to develop younger players. The WNBA does not have any affiliated professional leagues. Because of this, a player in the WNBA Draft must be 22 years old and the draftee does not get any contract guarantees. In comparison, a player in the NBA Draft must be at least 19 years old and have at least one year of post-secondary experience. The first two years of their contract are also guaranteed with teams having the option to keep them under contract for two more years after that. There is also a significant difference in the number of games played in a season by each team. Excluding the playoffs, the NBA plays 1,230 games a year between 30 teams compared to the WNBA's 204 played by 12 teams (Janvrin, 2023). Besides these differences, the leagues are very similar in regard to the rules of the game itself.

There are also considerable differences between the two in areas such as revenue, average salaries, ticket price, average attendance, and average viewership. In 2022 the NBA generated around \$10 billion in revenue with the WNBA reaching around \$60 million (Gough, 2023). The NBA distributes its revenue at a roughly 50% rate between the league and the players while the WNBA is estimated to be at close to an 80-20 split with the larger portion going to the league. Keeping with this same theme, the average salary of NBA players is \$9.6 million with the minimum salary being around \$838,464 to \$2.4 million. This is astronomically larger than the WNBA contracts as the maximum salary is only \$215,000 with the minimum being \$72,141. This is in part due to the average ticket price and attendance, with the NBA being at \$94 with 17,184 attending games and the WNBA at \$47 with 5,679. Viewership follows this same theme. During the 2019 WNBA Finals, the viewership came in at around 381,000. In comparison, the NBA Finals had an average of 15.14 million people watching in 2019 (Janvrin, 2023). Overall, it is worth acknowledging the inequitable numbers that represent the compensation associated with each league as well as the differences in viewership. These attendance/viewing differences are

comparable to overall societal popularity as more people watching suggests greater interest in the sport.

Twitter Demographics

It is worth stating that Twitter does not easily supply demographic information, as it is not readily available to users when looking at specific tweets. However, it is important to have a basic background knowledge of the potential users of the platform to be able to understand if the obtained sample is representative of the overall population or a particular subgroup. One study found that Twitter is popular among young adults, with those in the 18-24 age range being the most engaged in the platform (44%). They are followed by those in the age range of 25-29 and again by 30-49-year-olds (Chen 2020). This same study found that Twitter users in the United States are likely to have higher incomes at over \$75,000, hold college degrees, and live in an urban area (Chen 2020). Using this study, Twitter can be considered a platform largely dominated by young adults, seemingly giving those who analyze tweets an insight into where societies are headed ideologically as these people mature and grow into more power and influence.

Methodological Approach

This study aimed to examine the relationship between social media and sports by analyzing online discourse relating to the inequitable treatment of women athletes. More specifically, the study wanted to answer the research question of whether online Twitter threads differ based on the gender of the athletes. The research design is best described as a qualitative form of content analysis as various data in the form of online comments were systematically gathered to be analyzed from a sociological perspective. Qualitative content analysis is the

process designed to condense raw data into thematic categories based on the researcher's interpretation. Content analysis was chosen because this method is useful in documenting large amounts of tweets while also considering their messages, meaning(s), potential images, and surrounding social culture. Both manifest and latent coding was used so that the visible surface content of the tweet was considered and counted while also looking at the underlying, implicit meaning in the content of the text. It is important to implement both types of coding into this collection of data so that relevant social cultures, discourses, and histories with the potential to impact and change the meanings of the tweets are considered. Specifically, a coding system of instructions was created to analyze each tweet in the same way while emphasizing the previous important factors. This ensures intercoder reliability, meaning more consistency across the collection of tweets (Neuman, 2021).

The data that was collected is derived from the online discourse surrounding professional basketball leagues that are comprised of male and female athletes. The Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) was chosen for female athletes while the National Basketball Association (NBA) was used for their male counterparts. These are two of the more popular leagues in their respective genders making them the best representative of the online discourse surrounding their communities.

The tweets were analyzed on an individual level using the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) Twitter account as a medium. ESPN was chosen due to its large following of 45.5 million followers as of March 2023. In comparison, some of the next largest sports news accounts include Bleacher Report with 13.9 million, Sky Sports with 12.1 million, Fox Sports with 2.1 million, Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) Sports with 1.3 million, and The Sports Network (TSN) with 981.9 thousand also as of March 2023. As shown in the

follower count, ESPN has a much larger viewership compared to many of its competitors making it the ideal representative of the mass online discourse that occurs within sports.

Specifically, the data was gathered by sorting ESPN using the keywords “WNBA” and “NBA” as search parameters. By inputting the phrase “WNBA (from:ESPN)” the user is able to sort the ESPN account to only display posts containing the phrase “WNBA”. The same is true for the NBA as users may search using “NBA (from:ESPN)” to see only posts containing that keyword. This feature was used to gather and therefore compare data that is relevant to what this study aimed to analyze. To ensure a random sample was obtained, every third post was recorded to be studied. Within this post, the top three most liked comments were recorded and coded so that each may be looked at in the same manner. In addition, the codes were created in a manner that covers all the bases of potential discourse. This resulted in 40 posts and 120 comments being analyzed for each of the leagues with a grand total of 80 posts and 240 comments. The following are the codes implemented:

- I. For the original parent post (by ESPN) take note of:
 - A. The total number of likes.
 - B. The total number of retweets.
 - C. The total number of comments.
- II. For the comments underneath the ESPN original parent post take note of (quotations are real comments provided as examples):
 - A. The total number of likes.
 - B. The total number of retweets.
 - C. The total number of replies to the comment.

- D. If the commenter appeared to have a profile picture of themselves or an unidentifiable image. If any profile picture is unclear then do not record them as having an identifiable image.
- E. If the comment includes a GIF/image/meme used to express their thoughts/comments.
- F. If the comment relates to the general statements of “they make no money” or “they have no fans”, implying the sport is not financially important.
- G. If the comment contains misogynistic jokes such as “kitchen bound”.
- H. If the comments are dismissive of the sport or person’s social relevancy such as “don’t care” or “who?”.
- I. If the comment sexualizes the athlete or sport such as “She’s focusing on her OnlyFans career”.
- J. If the comment involves supportive statements relating to only the sport such as “Let’s go! Game 4 should be so intense”.
- K. If the comment contains socially supportive statements such as “I will never understand people that won't give women athletes credit for what they do in their sports if don't like what's posted then don't comment you know the saying don't have nothing nice to say don't say anything”.
- L. If the comment is a neutral, unrelated statement to the ESPN post or other non-gender specific discourse such as “candace parker threw”.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that this study only counted comments that were tweeted within the 24 hours following the original post. This timeframe was chosen to better represent the user’s immediate and unprompted reactions to the content of the original tweet. In addition,

the recorded comments came from public accounts as we are not able to see those tweets that are designated as private profiles. It would be impractical to attempt to follow these private accounts and wait for them to either approve or deny the request so that we may see their tweet. This study also wants to ensure that the tweets are reactions intended for general society and not catered towards a particular private audience of approved followers as this may influence what the user feels comfortable enough to express.

Finally, there was a primary ethical concern to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the users who had their tweets collected as part of the data set. The codes did not call for any personal information to be recorded such as usernames, profile images, or any other identifiable attributes. In addition, all text collected came from accounts that have enabled public access and viewing of their tweets. Therefore, this study has no way of confirming if the analyzed tweets come from users who fit the demographic profiles described above in the literature review. As a result, it is also worth noting that the scope of this study does not include other social issues such as race or sexuality in the evaluation of the comments due to this lack of available information. There was also an emphasis placed on tweets to ensure they were collected and interpreted with little to no outside bias. The researcher was not attempting to influence the results by spinning the interpretation of the text to fit one narrative or another. All interpretations were done in accordance with the codes which were written to be as specific as possible in order to encourage the least amount of conscious or subconscious bias.

Results and Analysis

Overall, there were several striking findings which are broadly summarized below in Table 1. By displaying the data in such a manner, it is possible to visually conclude that female athletes are likely to have increased amounts of online discourse within the subtopics of financial

social discourse, misogynistic jokes, dismissive of their societal relevancy, and sexualizing comments. These themes will be discussed and analyzed further within this paper.

	Identifiable Profile	Financial Social Discourse	Misogynistic Jokes	Dismissive	Sexualizing	Sports Supportive	Socially Supportive	Other
Women:	23	6	12	65	2	15	8	14
% of 120:	19.17%	5.00%	10.00%	54.17%	1.67%	12.50%	6.67%	11.67%
Men:	29	0	2	2	0	24	4	86
% of 120:	24.17%	0.00%	1.67%	1.67%	0.00%	20.00%	3.33%	71.67%
Total:	52	6	14	67	2	39	12	100
% of 240:	21.67%	2.50%	5.83%	27.92%	0.83%	16.25%	5.00%	41.67%

Table 1. These are the results summarized as the total number and percentage of tweets by subtopic/gender.

Financial Social Discourse in Sports

The first significant finding in this dataset would be the societal discourse surrounding the financial aspects of sports. Out of the 120 comments recorded for the WNBA, 6 or 5% were found to contain statements relating to the general statements implying the sport or athlete is not financially important. In contrast, the NBA had 0 out of their 120 comments containing any mention of this. Examples of the tweets found to fit this code include the following statements:

“This isn’t a civil rights issue they don’t make any money”

“This will generate tens and tens of dollars”

“The WNBA loses \$10 million per year. They’ve run at a deficit every year they’ve existed. In what galaxy does that justify chartered flights to games?”

“Look at all four of those fans”

It is telling of societal values that the above tweets were only given in response to the WNBA-related ESPN posts. Given these tweets, it is apparent that society has placed a large importance on the value of money and used this importance to conduct and justify the inequitable treatment of female athletes. For something to be considered important and therefore deserving of equal treatment it has to be making money. Because it is true that the WNBA does

not typically make significant amounts of money, the perception increases that female sports do not matter and therefore should not be treated in an equitable manner despite both athletes putting in the same time and effort into their sport.

Specifically, the statement in the first example tweet “this isn’t a civil rights issue they don’t make any money” is backing up this ideal as well as it is a good representative of the other 5 tweets. In this case, the original post made by ESPN is talking about the need for chartered flights in the WNBA during the regular season as all 12 of the teams currently have to fly commercially. In addition, there are images of both Kyrie Irving (a well-known NBA player) and Breanna Stewart (a well-known WNBA player) quoted advocating for both leagues to be deserving of the player health and safety benefits that these flights would provide. Irving also states he does not care how much it costs to make this happen. Despite these supportive statements, this user and many like him decide to tweet and like comments of the opposite nature seemingly because of the societal devaluation of women athletes as a result of the monetary value of the sport. These users are not considering the many other significant factors going into why the WNBA is annually making less than the NBA. For example, the WNBA was founded in 1997 while the NBA had its inaugural season conclude in 1950. That is an extra 47 years of development the NBA has experienced without any sexism impacting or delaying it at all.

Misogynistic Statements/Jokes

Another impactful finding within this dataset is the number of misogynistic jokes found in both the WNBA and NBA Twitter discourse. In the ESPN posts containing the WNBA keyword, misogynistic jokes were commented on 12 out of the 120 (10%) total comments analyzed. The NBA in comparison had 2 misogynistic jokes out of 120 (1.67%) with both instances being a joke about a woman who was breaking down an NBA controversy involving a

male owner who had been accused of racism and misogyny within his organization. Examples of the tweets found to fit this code include the following statements:

“Clinched a spot in the National Kitchen Finals”
 “i bet i could beat her in a 1v1 with my eyes closed” *Implying weakness/inability*
 “We could user her in the kitchen tho”
 “Kitchen bound”

One main takeaway from this set of data is that again all the comments are referring to a woman regardless of if they were posted within the NBA or WNBA keyword. Although these 12 tweets could be interpreted to be less of a statement and more of a joke, the overall meaning and impact they have do not change. The whole idea of these so-called “jokes” are rooted in a style of humor that belittles, stereotypes, and/or slanders an individual or social group. This is shown in the above examples, especially in those mentioning the kitchen such as “clinched a spot in the National Kitchen Finals” and “we could user her in the kitchen tho”. This type of language creates a narrative that justifies the inequitable treatment of women. It is designed in such a way that it demeans as well as categorizes the mistreatment of women as something similar to harmless fun. These styles of jokes insult and devalue while also reinforcing a power dynamic that benefits men. They are implying that women belong in the kitchen and/or in the home caring for the household needs and are therefore incapable of holding a job or other responsibilities on their own.

For those thinking that these are “just a joke” or other thoughts of that nature, it is important to consider how that statement is used to hide and reinforce prejudice. Although the jokes might not be creating an element of hostility towards women, they do reinforce gender stereotypes as well as prejudice where it exists elsewhere. This reinforcement comes from the idea that if someone tells one of these jokes and gets the positive attention they are looking for

(such as likes or laughs), they themselves as well as others see this as a go-ahead to continue this way of thinking as it is socially acceptable (Ford & Ferguson, 2004).

Dismissive of Social Relevancy

One of the largest findings from this study comes from the general theme of dismissing the sport or person's social relevancy. In reference to the sport or athlete, statements such as "don't care" or "who?" appeared in 65 of 120, or 54.17% of posts for the WNBA keyword, and 2 of 120, or 1.67% of posts for the NBA keyword. This is an extreme difference and significantly wider than all previous general themes. Examples of the tweets found to fit this code include the following statements (The first 2 are from the NBA keyword with the other 3 from the WNBA keyword):

"Who tf would watch this honestly"

"We don't care"

"Fun fact: Every NFL Preseason game had more viewers than this WNBA Finals game"

"Obviously we not watching"

"I assure you nobody cares"

This style of dismissive humor is extremely prevalent throughout the WNBA as shown by the percentage value stated above. Because there are so many examples gathered in this dataset, it is worth emphasizing the importance of this subtopic on the overall study as well as society. Therefore, to be that dismissive of an athlete's personal and/or sports relevancy is indicative of a large societal display of the "virtual manhood acts" or "VMAs" as described in the McCarthy study talked about above. To recap, these expressions of gendered language, comparisons, sexualizations, and stigmatization of non-normative femininities are referred to in the McCarthy study as "virtual manhood acts" or "VMAs". Those users who participate in these virtual manhood acts are often doing so to delegitimize women athletes and strategically elevate male ownership in sports fandom (McCarthy, 2021). Nearly all of the data placed into this

category can be described as a virtual manhood act. The overwhelming majority of these comments are within the WNBA keyword and are delegitimizing these female athletes by dismissing their right to be considered high-level professional athletes along with their male counterparts. By saying “we don’t care” or “obviously we are not watching” these users are asserting their male ownership claim over sports fandom.

Male fans have been the dominant group within sports fandom having the majority of related marketing being tailored to fit masculine interests. A 2021 study done by Katherine Sveinson and Rachel Allison found that within the United States Soccer Apparel promotions, there was a disproportionate level of options for men and women. Women had far fewer options with many of the specific items having been changed to pink to fit the societal stereotype that women won’t buy things unless they are feminized with certain colors or looks. Using this study, it can be gathered that when certain companies such as ESPN decide to promote female athletics, many appear to feel threatened or at the very least unnerved by the potential for the power dynamics to change. They then may feel the need to post how that particular sport does not matter and nobody cares to watch them, satisfying the urge to keep the power. It is also worth noting that many men may be doing this subconsciously or simply do not understand the harmful effects such as what was talked about in the misogynistic joke subsection.

Sexualizing Female Athletes

One of the more surprising findings within this dataset would be the lack of comments sexualizing female athletes. Out of the 120 total WNBA tweets, only 2 (1.67%) sexualized the female athlete in some way. There were 0 out of the 120 sexualizing the NBA tweets. This study expected there to be more athletes subjected to various online forms of sexualization with the

actual findings appearing to be a welcome surprise. Examples of the tweets found to fit this code include the following statements:

“Britney grinder”
 “She’s focusing on her onlyfans career”

The above comments were the only tweets found to fit the criteria for the sexualization code. “Britney grinder” is referring to a female WNBA player by the name of Brittney Griner. The sexualizing of her last name was interpreted as a user commenting on the societal stereotype that female athletes are considered more masculine in nature and therefore will be part of the LGBTQ+ community. The comment “she’s focusing on her onlyfans career” is referring to OnlyFans, a social platform primarily used by sex workers to produce pornographic content. The parent post created by ESPN was informing the public that WNBA player Liz Cambage would be stepping away from the WNBA to focus on “healing and personal growth”. The user’s response to this post implied a sense of expectation that women should be using their bodies to make their livelihood instead of holding a high-profile job such as being a WNBA player. Therefore, the fact that no NBA keyworded tweets held comments sexualizing them is telling of societal views of men and women athletes.

While both of these comments are perpetuating extremely harmful stereotypes and should not have been tweeted, this study did expect there to be a lot more within the dataset. One proposed explanation for this occurrence is the idea that female athletes have these gendered expectations often involving appearing feminine, attractive, and white (Markula, 2001). Those who have not met this criterion are subject to maltreatment through social media such as the athlete is thought to be failing as a woman and therefore does not deserve to be classified (or sexualized) as one. A discourse is then created regarding a sense of rejection and disgust around these athletes on social media platforms as seen in the other subtopics (Richardson-Self, 2019).

As seen with the tweets that did fit this category, the athletes who are thought to be an acceptable type of femininity are often subject to experience online sexual abuse due to masculine ideals of dominance and control such as with Liz Cambrage being compared to OnlyFans creators (Vaccaro, 2011).

Supportive Sports-Based Comments

For the supportive sports-based comments, 15 or 12.5% of the 120 comments with the keyword of WNBA were supportive in a purely sports-related manner. For the NBA 24 or 20% of the 120 recorded comments fit this coding category. These were relatively expected numbers, with the WNBA having fewer of these comments. Unfortunately, this would have been one of the only times it would be beneficial for the WNBA to have more than the NBA. Examples of the tweets found to fit this code include the following statements:

“She has game! 28 ppg scorer for a reason, can't wait to watch her in the WNBA”

“This was a no brainer. This kid is a monster”

“Steph Curry aka the Greatest player ever”

“I can't believe he was a 2nd round pic. Super happy for him”

Many of these comments consisted of the same general statements regardless of the WNBA or NBA keyword being applied. Both consisted of users expressing their fandom or appreciation for the talent being showcased by their favorite players or teams as well as other statements positive in nature. The only significant difference between the two would be the amount of each found within the 120 posts. The WNBA received less sports-related support although they did have an average of 180.375 total comments posted on each ESPN-created post. This in comparison to the NBA average of 241.275 could be one explanation as to why there was less support for the WNBA. In reality, it is more likely that due to the factors discussed above, male users are less likely to post supportive things underneath WNBA-related posts, therefore reducing the likelihood of positive messages being found.

Socially Supportive Comments

Unlike the supportive sports-based comments, there were more socially supportive comments posted for the WNBA keyword. The posts regarding the NBA had 5 of 120 (4.17%) be categorized as supportive social comments while the WNBA had more at 8 of 120 (6.67%). However, it is important to note that the socially supportive comments underneath the NBA post were not solely gender specific as they also contained positive sentiments towards social inequalities such as race and sexuality. Examples of the tweets found to fit this code include the following statements:

“I’m so sad that all these men that can’t stand successful women choose to have a voice today.

Good luck Maddy! You are going to be great. You are elite.”

“I will never understand people that won't give women athletes credit for what they do in their sports if don't like what's posted then don't comment you know the saying don't have nothing nice to say don't say anything”

“Okay...As long as every player who has ever uttered a racist, homophobic, or sexist comment is banned for life as well. It shouldn’t matter if you do it once or a hundred times. Wrong is wrong!”

“Replies full of misogynistic fragile ppl. Please keep doing what you're doing, @espn, it's good and needed.”

While it is encouraging that socially supportive messages are being shared on social media, they are vastly outnumbered by the other subtopics that were discussed above. To gain more replies such as these, there must be a further emphasis on conscientizing men about gender equality. Familiarization with things such as participating in traditional household work, taking care of children, supporting women in both business and government, etc. is vital in this fight. Keeping this in mind, there clearly needs to be a focus on politics as well as keeping each other accountable in the online spaces (Ratele, 2014).

Other Non-Gender Specific Discourse

Another significant finding coming from this dataset is in the coding category of other non-gender specific discourse such as a neutral, unrelated statement to the ESPN parent post. For the WNBA keyword, 14 of 120, or 11.67% fit into this category. The NBA had a significantly higher amount with 86 of the 120 (71.67%) being non-gender specific discourse. This is the largest individual percentage of all the possible categories, providing a notable societal implication. Examples of the tweets found to fit this code include the following statements:

“The Lakers are a mess. But hey LeBron scored points”
 “What exactly makes people think LeBron is better than Magic?”
 “candace parker threw”
 “Post Payton Pritchard dropping 92 points a year ago today”

The fact that the NBA's highest percentage category is the one that is most representative of general sports discourse is telling. This shows the current state of societal gender values as the discourse surrounding the NBA keyword is largely one of general sports talk and conversation. Any negativity that is commented is placed directly upon an individual player or team in the context of the sport they play professionally in. In other words, users tend to debate people and their performance rather than bringing in their gender and/or other defining identities. For example, the tweets "what exactly makes people think LeBron is better than Magic?" and "the Lakers are a mess. But hey LeBron scored points" are statements regarding the performance of an individual player and team with no gendered influences. These comments are found everywhere in the NBA ESPN posts while the WNBA largely experiences the opposite.

Profile Anonymity

The final prominent finding from the data collected in this study is in relation to if the commenter appeared to have a profile picture of themselves or an unidentifiable image. For the WNBA, 23 out of 120 (19.17%) of users had a profile picture with what appeared to be themselves while the NBA consisted of 29 out of the 120 (24.17%) being a recognizable image

of the user. Therefore, both keywords combined had 52 out of 240 (21.67%) commenters with what looked like a photo of themselves as a profile picture, making them recognizable. This was a significant finding as it meant that the vast majority of users do not want a recognizable image to be associated with their behavior online. The Prejudice Norm Theory as described by psychologists Thomas Ford and Mark Ferguson gives an explanation for why this might be the case. They argue that those with prejudice keep their views to themselves in the physical world out of fear of being judged and ostracized by other people. Their prejudice is only expressed when something gives them the feeling that they are safe enough to express these opinions without consequence (Ford & Ferguson, 2004).

It is incredibly easy for a user to create an account and express their thoughts and opinions with little to no real consequences. For example, if their account is banned all they have to do is create a new account with a new email address and they are right back to post whatever they want wherever they want. This gives them the feeling that they are safe to post what would potentially get them ostracized in the real world. It offers a further explanation of why this dataset ultimately gathered those numbers as well as gives more insight into the way in which a large portion of a society truly thinks behind the socially constructed boundaries of acceptable things to express.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, gender equality matters. It is extremely important to acknowledge, understand, and change the continued division of gender as it will only serve to hurt societies through economic and health-related factors. Combating these elements will create and/or increase power struggles in hierarchical contexts with the likely potential for many ups

and downs. Therefore it is important to always push to conscientize men about gender equality including familiarization with things such as participating in traditional household work, taking care of children and their everyday needs, pushing to support women in both business and government, and being active in the fight against domestic violence. This along with imagining a different order of living and changing cultural interactions between women and men in addition to contesting women's structural subordination and men's social power is vital so that true everyday gender equality may one day be accomplished.

By studying the research question of if online Twitter threads differ based on the gender of the athletes, this research paper repeatedly demonstrates through various subtopics how online environments, specifically on the social media platform Twitter, are a breeding ground for inequitable comments to occur due to the lack of social restrictions that are enforced on the site. Through the found information and resulting analysis, it is apparent that society still has a long way to go so that gender equality and its many benefits can be implemented. Financial social discourse, misogynistic jokes, being dismissive of societal relevancy, and sexualizing comments are all areas where female athletes face an inequitable amount of online abuse. Within sports specifically, it is in these areas that fans can and must be better. Therefore, this paper proves that online Twitter threads differ based on the gender of the athletes, expressing gender inequality to be prevalent in society.

It is important to acknowledge that this research also has a fair number of limitations. While the focus of the research was to consider gender, there are many other potential socially related areas that could influence the online discourse surrounding female athletes. For example, race and sexuality are both areas with the potential to influence online discourse that was not possible to be considered in this study. Race, sexuality, and other similar demographic

information of the users is not readily available to the public and therefore could not be obtained to study. Furthermore, this study only incorporated the social media platform Twitter. Other platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, etc. have the potential for different results to have been gathered. Twitter therefore might not be representative of society as a whole but of one particular subgroup of online users. Lastly, as with many research projects, there is always the potential for human error in the gathering of the data as well as the misinterpretation of a post. Overall, this is still a significant area of research that is important to be studied to further the equalization of professional sports.

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