

FAIRER, NOT EQUAL: ELITE PROFESSIONAL FEMALE ATHLETES AND
WOMEN'S SPORTS COVERAGE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department
Of Health and Human Performance
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By

Raymond Daly

November 2016

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examines the perceptions held by elite professional female athletes in regards to the media coverage of women's sports and explores how these athletes view themselves as members of society. **Method:** Data were collected by individual semi-structured interviews between the primary researcher and 12 members of the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL). A qualitative descriptive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. **Results:** The athletes interviewed indicated being an elite professional female athlete has its challenges and sacrifices, but agreed they hold an important role in attempting to change society's view of female athletes and women's sports. **Conclusions:** The coverage of women's sports by media organizations, in general, is low and the athletes interviewed for this study feel those in society do not see them as athletes.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Definitions

Elite Professional Female Athlete: A female athlete who is currently playing at the professional level of their respective sport

Marketability: Attractiveness to potential employers or clients (Hornby, Wehmeier, McIntosh, Turnbull, & Ashby, 2005)

National Women's Soccer League: Professional women's soccer league based in the United States, established in 2012

Professional Women's Sports: Occupation in which female athletes who play sports as a career, obtain compensation for their participation

Qualitative Analysis: The range of processes and procedures whereby we move from the qualitative data that have been collected into some form of explanation, understanding or interpretation of the people and situations we are investigating (Lewins & Gibbs, 2010)

Reliability: The extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable (Joppe, 2000)

Social Media Networks: Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2010)

Sports Marketing: Consists of all activities designed to meet the needs and wants of sports consumers through exchange processes (Hardy & Sutton, n.d.)

Thematic Analysis: A method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Validity: Determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are (Joppe, 2000)

Women's Sport: Sporting activities that usually are focused and made for female competitors (i.e. softball, women's basketball)

Introduction

Women's sports in the United States have seen tremendous growth over the years with notable leaps in participation since the passage of Title IX. In the 2014-2015 school year, 3,287,735 girls participated in high school sports across the United States ("2014-15 High School Athletics", n.d.). This remarkable amount of participation has been coupled with a notable decline in women's sports coverage, even though the opportunities for participation in women's sports and the levels of competition afforded to female athletes have never been higher (Fink, 2015). To date, there is limited research on the perceptions of women's sports coverage by the individuals who take part in their respective sports. Additionally, there is limited research in regards to how these elite professional female athletes view themselves as members of society. The theoretical framework of this study is based on constructivism, a theory that in part, "suggests that bodies of knowledge are created collaboratively and that the results of these constructions are influenced by time and place" (Denton, 2012, p. 35).

The purpose of this study is to examine how elite professional female athletes perceive the coverage of women's sports and to understand how these participants feel they are seen on a day-to-day basis by members of general society. Participants for this study were players who currently participate in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) and have played a minimum of one year in the league. Participants were obtained through a recruitment announcement to the public relations contact of their team and through inquiry amongst their teammates about possibly taking part in this study, a method known as snowball sampling (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

Those selected for the study were asked to fill out a consent form acknowledging their participation in the study. Semi-structured interviews with the primary investigator and interview notes taken during the interviews were the methods for data collection in this

study. Validity throughout the study will be kept through a step-by-step process detailing the analysis method that will be used to show how collaborating themes will be developed by the primary researcher, the usage of anti-themes (disconfirming evidence), an audit trail, extracts from the raw interview transcript data will be used to justify themes, and the completed write-up of the study's findings will be sent to the respective participants for approval before the final draft is approved.

This study will be analyzed through a qualitative descriptive thematic analysis, as it is used as, "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), which in this case, it will be used to attempt to understand what perceptions are held by elite professional female athletes on the coverage of women's sports and to examine in what ways these athletes view themselves in the day-to-day world. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide to thematic analysis will be used to facilitate this process.

Research Questions

What are the perceptions of elite professional female athletes on the coverage of women's sports?

In what ways do these elite professional female athletes view themselves in the day-to-day world?

Delimitations

The study was completed within the following delimitations:

1. Participants selected for this study currently play as members of a professional women's soccer team in the United States.
2. Participants will be women over the age of 18.

3. The study will be conducted through semi-structured phone or Skype interviews, based on the interviewees' preferences.
4. Participants will be recruited through a recruitment announcement sent to their team's respective PR personnel or via snowball sampling to teammates.
5. Only the participants will validate information obtained through interviews.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is taken from the philosophy of constructivism, with emphasis on social constructivism in particular. Constructivism, as mentioned by Denton (2012), "suggests that bodies of knowledge are created collaboratively and that the results of these constructions are influenced by time and place" (p. 35). Social constructivism was studied heavily by scholars such as West and Zimmerman (1987) and Lorber (1994/2007), particularly in regards to gender's place in American society.

West and Zimmerman (1987) note that gender is a social construction and something that is made relevant and reinforced through everyday interaction. In many cases, men and women are conditioned to follow the gendered expectations and experiences put forth by society, especially in their day-to-day interactions with those of another gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

In Lorber's (1994/2007) view, gender is not only apparent at the interactional level; it also shows up at the institutional level in its usage by humans to structure our lives. Additionally, Lorber (1994/2007) notes an interesting comparison between the social construction of gender and the social institution of gender, establishing that the only real difference between the two concepts is what is perceived as different by society.

In the world of sport, aspects of social constructivism as it relates to gender can be noted in the differences in media coverage of men's and women's sports. Another noteworthy example is female athlete's athletic achievements often being cast aside by members of society.

Gender in Sport

The passage of Title IX in 1972 caused a revolution within the sporting world (Schultz, 2014). This revolution also existed at the scholarly level and with it, advancement in research in regards to women's sports. With the development of research, studies like Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar & Kauer (2004), which explained that female athletes develop two identities—woman and athlete, came to existence. This dual identity constantly occurs as female athletes juggle the responsibilities of being a woman in today's society while simultaneously trying to compete as professional athletes.

Women in Sport. In many instances, the mere presence of women in sport challenges the male-dominated norms typically placed on women, viewing them as physically weak and passive (Ezzell, 2009). As Krane et al. (2004) notes, this idea of a dual identity has a profound effect on female athletes, with evidence of common instances surrounding eating disorders, negative self-image, and negative self-presentation.

Frequently, navigating the societal expectations of motherhood within the masculine and public context of an elite sport has proven to be quite difficult (Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Roth and Basow (2004) mention the apparent inequalities between men's and women's sports are amplified when considering male dominated sports like football and baseball. Hall (1988) introduces the idea that today's society is heavily influenced by male domination and ideals.

Women in Sports Business. Barriers in women's sport are not solely existent in the locker room or on the playing field but within the front office and executive positions as well. The inability of qualified female applicants to be hired for coaching and leadership positions is a long-standing problem in the realm of sport (Miller, 2015). Females in leadership positions within sport are often confronted with issues related to their gender that their male counterparts are less likely to encounter (Miller, 2015). Among these issues are instances of sexism, gender discrimination, and stereotyping in the workplace (Miller, 2015). These issues have been and are a deterrent to females contemplating a career in sport or advancement in their current positions, particularly in regards to individuals' feelings toward homophobia (Miller, 2015). Furthermore, Cook (2014) notes that most Division I female coaches' earnings are not equitable compared to their male counterparts, and most women's sports programs at Division I schools "get only 37% of athletics spending and 32% of recruitment dollars, although more than half of their students are women" (p. 7).

The Sports Divide. From a broader perspective, this disparity is most prominent in professional tennis. As Flake, Dufur, and Moore (2012, p. 368) mention, "the most popular women's sport worldwide in terms of marketability and popularity is women's tennis." One of the most telling reasons as to why women's tennis is so popular is its contrast from the men's game. Professional female players typically serve 30 km (18.6 mph) per hour slower than male players, which usually creates longer rallies, more service breaks, and more interesting points (Goff, 2015). In recent years, female tennis players have earned notably more money, sponsorship opportunities, and press coverage than any other female sports participants (Dockterman, 2014).

Another aspect of women's tennis that attracts spectatorship is the perceived attractiveness of the players themselves. Bakkenbüll and Kiefer (2015) found a positive correlation between a player's physical attractiveness and their likelihood of winning. Former professional tennis player Anna Kournikova is an interesting anomaly in the findings; she was constantly lauded more for attractiveness than her playing ability, to the point that she was covered by three separate English newspapers during the 2000 Wimbledon Grand Slam even though she lost in the first round (Kiefer & Scharfenkamp, 2012).

However, despite the gains in spectatorship and media coverage, a difference in pay between the men and women's tennis tournaments still exists. Bialik (2014) notes that while the sport of tennis may look better financially for women over men, compared to other sports they both compete in, it is likely that fewer than 200 female players are able to live off of earned prize money.

Pay in Sport. With the Grand Slam tournaments in men's and women's tennis being an exception, many sports pay differing amounts depending on gender. The fans and pundits of the most recent Women's World Cup in Canada made a strong uproar on social media and message boards over the pay inequality amongst the men's and women's national soccer teams in the United States and across the globe. Kassouf (2015) mentions that female players are often forced to find second jobs; both during and after the season and in many instances, are forced to retire young due to low salaries. A more recent example of the ongoing pay disparities between men's and women's sports is the "Equal Play. Equal Pay." stance being exhibited by the U.S. Women's Soccer team against their national federation, U.S. Soccer. In March 2016, members of the women's national team filed a complaint with the Equal

Employment Opportunity Commission, claiming U.S. Soccer engaged in wage discrimination by paying the women far less than the men (Davis, 2016).

Female Fans and Spectators. The gender disparities in sport also extend to the spectators. The dissolution of leagues like the Women's United Soccer Association in 2003 (King, 2009) has shown that it is difficult for women's leagues to survive in the American sports' landscape. Women are often characterized as unknowledgeable about sports and regularly are often not considered "real" fans. This thinking is typically coupled with the idea that female spectators are less likely to possess the disposable income necessary to enjoy leisure sporting events (Lough & Irwin, 2012). In actuality, this rationale has been proven untrue, as women currently account for almost half of sporting attendance in North America (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013).

Women's Sports Promotion/Marketing

Sports promotion is critical to the survival of any team or league. For example, companies around the world spent almost \$50 billion dollars on sponsorship investment in 2013 (O'Reilly & Horning, 2013). The recent 2015 Women's World Cup in Canada, which was shown on Fox Sports here in the United States, aired all 52 games live on their various media channels and raised almost \$30 million in ad revenue (Thomasson, 2015). That \$30 million is minuscule when compared to the 525 million U.S. dollars in ad revenue generated by the men's World Cup in 2014 (Thomasson, 2015). Creedon, Cramer, and Granitz (1994) note that the act of sports promotion is even more critical to the female athlete/sports team, remarking, "The relationship between the women athlete and promotion is a struggle between empowerment and pander" (p.182). Many female athletes have found (and continue to find) that more media exposure can be gained from "selling out" to mainstream media by posing

for magazines that highlight attributes other than their sporting skills (Smallwood, Brown, & Billings, 2014).

How Female Athletes Are Marketed. Marketing is an important aspect of both on and off-the-field exposure. The ability of athletes to successfully market themselves creates potential endorsement deals and opportunities to supplement athletic winnings. For many athletes, their primary source of funding is endorsements rather than yearly salary or prize money. We typically identify male athletes with their particular endorsement roles (e.g., LeBron James/Powerade, Peyton Manning/Papa John's, Usain Bolt/Puma). Of the 11% of endorsements that involve professional athletes on television, female athletes comprise only 3% of that total (Fink, Parker, Cunningham, & Cuneen, 2012).

A female athlete's perceived lack of femininity is frequently cited as the reasoning behind these limited endorsement opportunities (Fink, Kane, & LaVoi, 2014). Often, female athletes are portrayed as less attractive and less marketable; and in turn, receive less sponsorship and endorsement opportunities. Their talent alone typically is never enough of an attention grabber for potential business deals (Fink et al., 2014). For many women's sports, the attractiveness of its participants is the calling card for the league or organization's marketing efforts. From the LPGA's usage of Natalie Gulbis, a golfer known more for her looks than her ability in 2011, to Danica Patrick's portrayal in racing magazines, it's evident the idea that "sex sells" has breached the women's sports market (Fink, 2012). Many elite female athletes are attempting to change that idea by choosing portrayals of themselves that showcase their athletic prowess instead (Fink et al., 2014). Another notable marketing example is the recent Women's Tennis Association (WTA) marketing campaign, "Strong is

Beautiful" which featured stars like Victoria Azarenka and Maria Sharapova in attractive clothing and full make-up in provocative settings (Fink, 2012).

In many instances, the physical marks of femininity are often the subject of sports photography, whether it is the female athletes themselves, or female spectators at an event (Duncan, 1990). Hargreaves and Hardin (2009) note that photos of female athletes are often presented from a downward angle as if to present the female as submissive or passive to her male counterpart. These differences in women's sports coverage have been presented in other forms of traditional and new media as well, with Internet, magazine, newspaper, and social media outlets each displaying their own versions of coverage.

Media coverage of women's sport, much like the issues of lesbianism and pay inequality, has also found its way into the women's sports conversation. In many instances, female athletes are more defined by a number of photo shoots and modeling opportunities they are offered than their athletic performances (Hanson, 2012). The ongoing successes of female athletes like Serena Williams and Ronda Rousey has added to their marketability and their likelihood to appeal to mass audiences (Smallwood, Brown, & Billings, 2014). The American sports media has been forced to take notice of these women's athletic achievements. When media coverage of female athletes or women's sports does exist, it tends to omit the athletic ability of women and focuses on sexuality and lack of femininity (Christopherson, Janning, & McConnell, 2005). On the other hand, for male athletes, media coverage typically depicts them on the playing field in instances that showcase their strength and athletic prowess (Hanson, 2012).

As newspapers and television groups continue to move toward a more Internet-based approach, it is possible that their views toward women's sport may evolve.

Television Coverage. Television viewership is an important aspect for a sports league's financial success, and it is particularly crucial for those involved in women's sport. Studies have shown that women's sports struggle to receive coverage on shows like ESPN's SportsCenter (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015). In a different study, the aforementioned coverage on SportsCenter was measured to be 1.3% of the network's total sports coverage, as of 2009 (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013). Media coverage of female athletes is limited as is, with coverage of lesser-known women's sports being almost non-existent. This stance towards women's sports is apparent at the local media level as well. Studies of media coverage in Los Angeles between the years of 2004-2009 showed a clear decline to almost 1.6% of total sports coverage during a typical news broadcast (Cooky et al., 2015).

Internet Coverage. The process of obtaining news and scores about a favorite team or player has never been easier due to the invention of the Internet, particularly when considering how connected today's Millennial generation is to smartphones and tablets. Sites like ESPN and Fox Sports enable up to the minute coverage 24/7. However, this coverage is not equally available for women's sports. In 2010, ESPN created a website exclusively for women's sports, espnW. The site often posts articles regarding the sporting performances of female athletes, rather than reporting on aspects of their daily lives (Wolter, 2015). Wolter (2015) also notes that the articles on espnW also tend to use emotional language to describe female athletes, and point out physical/personal characteristics as well (i.e., "Victoria Azarenka's "blue eyes sparkle") (p. 358).

Social Media Coverage. With one quick post on Twitter or Facebook, an individual's followers can learn what they are doing almost instantaneously. Applications such as Twitter and Facebook are quickly becoming tools in the sports media arsenal, for

players, teams, and media members alike. For example, the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup was notable because of the number of participants who began using Twitter to communicate with fans during the tournament, and many of the athletes continued to use Twitter well after the tournament was completed. United States goalkeeper Hope Solo, one of the more well-known players in the women's game, is an active member on Twitter, constantly using it to allow fans an inside glimpse into her everyday life (Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012).

Engaging with a fan base is crucial for establishing and continuing the connection necessary to create lifelong fans. In many ways, the social media age has altered how women's sports are portrayed, as evidenced by the multitude of social media offerings associated with the 2012 London Olympic Games (Creedon, 2014).

Newspaper Coverage. Kaiser (2011) notes that there is less photographic and textual coverage of women in sport amongst American newspapers, even with the passage of Title IX. This phenomenon is not localized either, as O'Neill and Mulready (2014) mention this stance is prominent in the United Kingdom as well, saying, "If women's sports are not even on the radar of most people, then there is indeed little hope of creating readers' interest and popularising female sports, or encouraging women to change their role models and take up sport" (p. 665). Kian and Clavio (2011) found female tennis players during the 2000 Wimbledon tournament were disregarded in both Internet and newspaper coverage, in comparison with their male counterparts.

Magazine Coverage. The presence of a female athlete on the cover of a magazine is something that is limited in nature. Weber and Carini (2012) found that from 2000 to 2011, Sports Illustrated featured a female athlete on their cover only 4.9% of the time. Along with the low rate of magazine covers, female athletes are often minimized by being forced to share

the cover with a male counterpart or put in situations in which they are sexually objectified (Weber & Carini, 2012). This standard is not only found in sports specific magazines but in the magazine industry in general. Even with the passage of Title IX, the low rate of magazine coverage for women sports has barely moved upwards (Shor, Van de Rijt, Ward, Blank-Gomel, & Skiena, 2013).

Film Coverage. Female athlete's presence in electronic media has not only been limited to the television screen. As Pearson (2010) mentions, "sheroes", or female sports heroines have been present in films since the 1970s. This representation in films has not always been positive as many films characterized "sheroes" to be weak, emotionally sensitive, and laughable (Pearson, 2010). Films such as *Love & Basketball* and *Girl Fight* have shown that the societal image given to "sheroes" is slowly turning positive and that the depiction of women in sports films may be changing (Pearson, 2010).

Chapter 3: Method

This study consists of a qualitative descriptive thematic analysis, using semi-structured interviews with elite professional female soccer players who currently play in the top professional women's soccer league in the United States.

Procedures

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were selected due to their ability to illuminate the personal perspectives of elite professional female athletes in the area of media coverage of women's sports, and how they view themselves in comparison to those in general society as people. The inclusion criterion for this study was that the participants are elite professional female athletes who currently participate in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) and have played a

minimum of one year in the league. The requirement of participants having played at least one year in the NWSL prior to taking part in this study was to ensure that possible participants have had some exposure to sports media. The exclusion criteria for this study was any player who was not currently a member of a NWSL team, had not played at least one year in the league, and was not over the age of 18 at the time of this study.

An initial recruitment email to the public relation representatives of the 10 NWSL teams was sent to gauge potential participant interest in the study. This email described the study and reasoning as to why the primary researcher was searching for NWSL players. A sample of the announcement is provided in Appendix A. The respondents were also asked to inquire amongst their teammates about possibly taking part in this study, a method known as snowball sampling (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

Those who agreed to take part in the study received a set of pre-screening questions prior to taking part in the study. These were distributed to ensure the selected participants met the inclusion criteria for the study. Pre-screening questions included demographic information (i.e., age, gender, and ethnicity) and current employment status (i.e., team and league affiliation, years in league). By collecting this demographic information, it ensured a broad sampling of subjects from various backgrounds and differing educational, economic, and cultural standpoints. Some of the pre-screening questions were as follows: How long have you been a professional soccer player? What college/university did you attend/play for? Participants' phone numbers and email addresses were also collected in order to ensure the participants could be contacted to set up interview times. The pre-screening questions are provided in Appendix B.

Data Collection

As noted by Sandelowski (2000), data collection in qualitative research “is typically directed toward discovering the who, what, and where of events or experiences, or their basic nature and shape” (p. 338). For this study, semi-structured interviews between the participants and the primary researcher were the primary source of data collection. Interview notes taken during the interviews were used to supplement the data collected during the respective interviews. The data gathered during the interviews was transcribed verbatim. In order to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were given to the participants, as well as to any identifying information presented in the collected data.

Interviews. The interviews between the participants and primary researcher took place via Skype or telephone, depending on the preference of the participant. The participants were asked questions regarding their views on the current status of women's sports coverage, and how they feel as members of society compared to non-athletes. Some of the questions that were asked included: “How do you feel society views you as a female athlete?”, “Tell me about your experiences following sport through the media.”, and “What has it been like being covered by the media during your career?” The interview guide used for the semi-structured interviews and interview notes can be found in Appendix C.

Interview Notes. While the interviews with the respective participants were being conducted, the primary researcher created interview notes pertaining to each interview. The reasoning for completing interview notes was to document instances within the interview in which observable events such as reactions, emotional responses, context, and hand gestures of the interview participants occurred. Another notable usage of interview notes is the documentation of the primary researcher’s own interpretation of the answers given by participants.

Data Management and Ethical Conduct

Each participant's interview transcripts and the interview notes taken by the primary researcher for each interview were kept in its own file on a password-protected computer owned by the primary researcher. Each file was labeled with the pseudonym selected by the primary researcher following the completion of the respective interviews. IRB approval by the University of Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects was obtained prior to the start of this study. Ethical concerns initially raised by the committee regarding the consent form and maintaining participant confidentiality were adequately corrected to the committee's approval.

All participants were provided with the corrected consent form, which detailed the specifics of the study and requirements for participation. It also sought the prospective participant's consent to be audio/video recorded during the interview session(s). The prospective participants were required to read and fill out the consent form, and to send the completed form via e-mail to the primary researcher prior to the interview. Once received by the primary researcher, the completed consent forms were added to each participant's respective file. Consent was also obtained verbally before the interviews began and was noted by the researcher in the appropriate interview notes. A copy of the consent form can be found in Appendix D.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the collected data from the semi-structured interviews and interview notes was conducted through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide to completing thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) comment that thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). Sandelowski

(2000) mentions that qualitative descriptive analysis "is an effort to understand not only the manifest (e.g., frequencies and means) but also the latent content of data" (p. 338). Latent content is important, as it consists of hidden or undeveloped data that may be of interest to the researcher (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

In a sporting context, thematic analysis has been used in many studies. Erickson, McKenna, and Backhouse's (2015) article on protecting athletes from PED (performance enhancing drugs) use in sport, through semi-structured interviews with 10 competitive athletes, and Schinke, McGannon, Battocchio, and Wells's (2013) article about acculturation for immigrant athletes and coaches through elite sport via semi-structured interviews both borrow from Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide to thematic analysis to conduct the analysis of their respective studies. The phases below explain Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide as related to this study.

Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with the data

As data collection was being completed, the primary researcher transcribed the recordings of the respective interviews. Along with the notes taken during the interviews, the data were re-read for initial ideas noted from the data. This process, also known as immersing oneself in the data, is a crucial part of data analysis, as it started the process of searching for relevant meanings and patterns in the research data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Once the data were read and re-read by the primary researcher, the initial coding process began. As Braun and Clarke note, "codes identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst" (p. 88). Working across all of the collected data, a copy of each participant's transcripts was coded in a systematic fashion,

with the codes generated for each transcript being relayed and saved to an Excel spreadsheet for further usage. Following the creation of the initial set of codes, the codes were re-examined for relevance and connections within the interview questions and the creation of preliminary categories began to take place.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

After the initial coding and preliminary category presentation was completed, the search for possible themes generated by the data during the coding and categorizing process began. Codes were sorted into potential categories and then into possible themes at this time, with relevant data excerpts from participant's transcripts and interview notes being collected to supplement the initial themes.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Once themes were created, Braun and Clarke (2006) advised breaking phase four into two levels. Beginning with level one, the relevant extracts pulled during phase three were re-read to see if a noticeable pattern had developed between the extracts. If the extracts created a pattern, the second level of phase four began. If no pattern emerged, the theme in question was re-worked, discarded, or a new theme was created.

Level two mirrored the process of level one, with the only difference being that the entire collected data set was analyzed. This re-read served two purposes: 1) to figure out if the themes "work" with the data set, and 2) to code any data that may have been missed in previous coding efforts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The practice of disconfirming evidence, a process in which the researcher establishes a study's initial themes or categories, and searches through the data for findings that either confirms or disconfirms those particular themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000), was also adopted during this time to enhance the rigor of the

study.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Following the completion of phase four, the themes presented in level two were further analyzed in order to develop the essence and to determine which parts of the data worked with each particular theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The relevant data extracts that were found in phase four were put into a consistent narrative, relating to the theme they encompassed. For each theme, possible sub-themes were noted and discussed as part of the analysis.

Phase 6: Producing the report

Once the themes were finalized, the final write-up and analysis began. The selection of vivid extract examples, the final analysis of those selected extracts, and the relation back to the study's research questions and literature review encompassed this final phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once the final report was completed, it was sent to the participants for their review. Following participant approval, the defense of the thesis study was scheduled with the primary researcher's thesis committee.

Validity

To ensure validity, multiple methods were used. First, a step-by-step process detailing the analysis method that was used to show how collaborating themes were developed by the primary researcher from the readings of participant data has been provided (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The use of anti-themes, or disconfirming evidence, as noted in phase four of the analysis process was also used to ensure that relevant themes were properly determined and that no possible themes were left uncovered. An audit trail, described by Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013) as "outlining the decisions made throughout the

research process to provide a rationale for the methodological and interpretative judgments of the researcher” (p. 14), was used to describe the study process from start to finish. Extracts from the raw interview transcript data were also used to justify themes and further elaborate points of emphasis within those themes. Lastly, a member check, described by Creswell and Miller (2000) as “taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account” (p. 127), was used to verify the study’s results with the participants who took part in the study.

Reflexive Bracketing

In taking on and completing this study, there are some personal experiences relating to the subject matter that I feel are relevant to the results of the study. Over the course of this study, I worked as an intern for my university’s women’s basketball team and was involved in much of the team’s day-to-day operations and happenings. In many ways, this experience has strongly shaped my views of women’s sports and female athletes. Along with working with the women’s basketball team, I regularly watch women’s sports like women’s soccer and softball both in person and on television and would consider myself an avid supporter of women’s sports.

Another experience of note is the fact that along with completing this study, I am in the process of earning my Master’s degree, a degree that is considered high level in society and through the various courses I have completed, influenced my understanding of the sporting industry in aspects I had little to no knowledge in beforehand. Additionally, as an African-American, it is very possible that my worldview is much different from those interviewed for this study and could have an impact on the findings of this study. Lastly, as being both the primary researcher and a male who is researching women, there is the

possibility of the responses received by those who took part in the study being different due to me being a male, rather than the interviews being conducted by a female researcher.

Chapter Four: Results

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 individuals who currently play for a team in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL). The sample for this study consisted of 12 women (ages 23-29; with a mean age of 25). The participants had between one and three years of experience in the NWSL. Five participants identified as Caucasian, four participants identified as African-American, one participant identified as Australian, one participant identified as Italian/Jamaican, and one participant identified as Other. Each interview lasted between 15 and 42 minutes, with three of the 12 interviews lasting longer than 30 minutes. Participants were volunteers representing the 10 teams across the NWSL.

Table 1 – NWSL Participants

Name	Years In NWSL	Age	Ethnicity
Layla	3	25	African-American
Grace	3	23	Caucasian
Victoria	3	23	Caucasian
Hannah	2	23	Caucasian
Zoe	1	25	African-American
Erin	2	24	Australian
Elizabeth	1	24	Other
Brianna	3	25	African-American
Julia	1	26	Caucasian
Megan	3	25	African-American
Alexa	3	29	Caucasian
Rachael	2	28	Italian/Jamaican

The goal of this study was to examine the perceptions elite female athletes had towards the coverage of women's sports and to understand how the respondents viewed themselves in the day-to-day world. Interview comments revealed the thoughts of these elite

professional female athletes on the current status of women's sports coverage, and how they regarded themselves in general society. Direct quotes from respondents were used to illustrate the various themes and to frame findings in the actual words of respondents. The finalized results were broken down into six higher order categories and two themes, which the researcher felt best represented the data.

Categories and Themes

The initial result of categorizing yielded six preliminary categories ("Fighting for Eyes/Ears," "Role Models and Gender," "Financial Keys," "Status in Society," "Respect Factor," and "Sport as a Job"). The development of relevant categories began with each of the seven primary interview questions, and grouping similar codes found in the answers to those questions together, to create appropriate categories. Once preliminary categories were developed, the relevant categories were further refined and then grouped into the study's higher-order categories of "Stuck in the Shadows," "The '99ers," "Lack of Financial Support," "Inferiority Complex to Males," "Soccer as a Lifestyle," and "Social Reactions about Female Athletes." Definitions of the categories and development of the studies' themes also began at this time.

Research Question #1: What are the perceptions of elite professional female athletes on the coverage of women's sports?

Categories. Three categories were identified when examining research question number one: What are the perceptions of elite professional female athletes on the coverage of women's sports? These categories were *Stuck in the Shadows*, *The '99ers*, and *Lack of Financial Support*.

Stuck in the Shadows is described as the notion of female athletes and women's sports always being pushed to the background in comparison to male athletes and men's sports in their fight to gain fairer coverage, treatment, and respect. Alexa explained how female athletes are often portrayed based on their appearance, rather than abilities:

Um... I think there's mixed feelings still, to be honest. I do feel, in general, I feel respected and I feel that people look up to professional athletes in general, but there's definitely double standards in some ways, I know that a lot of times the commentary on female athletes has to do with appearance or things other than the quality of play, which is something that we continue to battle and I think that we as players have a responsibility to talk about the game and kind of draw attention to what's going on the field, as opposed to anything else.

Grace mentioned that women's sports are marginalized on television, particularly when matched against men's sports:

You know, sometimes you see some really obscure sport on ESPN and they can't even put our championship game on ESPN, its either on ESPN2 or ESPNU or ESPN3, so I think we definitely should get more coverage in that sense, hopefully I think they're working on a media deal for NWSL games to be on TV but so hopefully that's a step in the right direction.

Elizabeth talked about how her home country usually covers women's soccer:

"In (home country), it's terrible... like they didn't write anything in the media, no one talks about us, some people know you just from the national team but now everything is changing, now we have an episode on TV about women's soccer in (home country) that just started, the media is starting to talk more about women's soccer which is good but it's not as good as the men's soccer. It's hard being a female soccer player but whatever..."

The '99ers is defined as the influence of the 1999 Women's World Cup team on societal norms towards women's sports and the personal impact the team had on those interviewed. Many of the participants noted that one or more of the individuals on the '99 team was a personal hero of theirs and influenced their views towards women's sports and women's soccer. Victoria explained the long-lasting effect that the 1999 team has had on her soccer career:

“I loved like Mia Hamm, Kristine Lilly, like I was that kid. The ‘99ers were everything to me...Julie Foudy, Michelle Akers, Carla Overbeck, Carla actually coached me at (university), which was awesome and it’s so funny how things come full circle because Carla coached me at (university), I met Mia a couple of times because they’re good friends and I played in (NWSL city) and Kristine Lilly and Carla are best friends, and then I babysat Kristine’s kids, it’s like cool to see that because as a little kid I was in awe of these women, and now they’re some of my friends and mentors so it’s cool. Yeah, that whole team, the ‘99ers.”

Zoe talked about the effect the ‘99ers had on her as a child: “I liked Tiffany Millbrett a lot when I was younger actually. Of course, there was also the others, classic names, the ‘99ers, such an inspiration.” Alexa noted how she grew to appreciate the ‘99ers as she became more involved with soccer: “I grew up right around the time of the ‘99 World Cup and that’s when I really started to become more serious about soccer so Mia Hamm, Kristine Lilly, Michelle Akers is a big one for me, all those players were my idols.”

Lack of Financial Support is defined as the lack of the necessary financial backing by media and corporate organizations to women’s sports and leagues to ensure their continued survival. Players noted that while it was crucial for any league to have proper financial backing, it was especially vital for a women’s based league. Erin mentioned how added investment in women’s sport would be beneficial long term:

I think it would even be more attractive and enticing for parents to put their young girls into it if girls could actually make a living as a professional, that would definitely, I guess, bring more attention and anticipation into the sport, and then evidently more investment and revenue maybe.

Layla talked about how underinvestment hurts those involved in the NWSL:

Sure, the national team players make a little more than most players in the NWSL, but it is far lower than what someone in Major League Soccer makes and it’s really hard to see. We have been fighting for raises, fighting for so much and nothing ever gets better.

Grace noted the lack of money is even more notable when comparing it to her college team:

It has definitely some pros, and it has some cons. Like coming from my college, which is a very well off school, there's a lot of money from boosters, it's a prestigious university and you have so many resources, and then you go to pro soccer and this league just starting out and trying to maintain, sometimes it feels a bit more like a club team than a pro team.

Theme. The theme, *Female Athletes as an Afterthought*, was identified due to participants mentioning that women's sports and female athletes are often seen as afterthoughts to their male counterparts, to media coverage, and to many members of society. Many of the participants felt this influence significantly undermined them as professional athletes and wished that they were held in similar esteem as their male counterparts. Also, participants explained that while the 1999 United States Soccer team had pushed them to become professional women's soccer players, their impact on women's sports has been limited from a financial perspective for the athletes involved.

Hannah noted the uphill battle women's sports often face just to be on television:

I do see the challenges with that, in terms of financially and for different TV and media outlets that men's sports just kind of dominate. Honestly, I think that's how it's going to be forever and until there is some kind of significant change, I think that they attract, men's sports specifically, the biggest audience.

Rachael mentioned the differences in media coverage between MLS and the NWSL here in North America:

It doesn't compare, there's still massive room for improvement. Our pro games in the NWSL are not shown on TV, which I think is sad. We do have them streamed live on YouTube, which is a great option, but it is one of the best leagues in the world and is the sister league to the MLS. I just feel it should be held to similar standards as the men's games. Not even highlights are shown for the women in most cases. I think all women's sports across could use more coverage and recognition but I don't follow all so don't have a direct comparison.

Erin spoke about people should be more willing to give women's soccer a chance:

I definitely think that the women's game has just as much to offer to society as the men's game does. I would like to think that society looks at us as professional, positive role models for the younger generation and younger girls that are aspiring to be professional athletes.

Research Question #2: In what ways do these elite professional female athletes view themselves in the day-to-day world?

Categories. Three categories, *Inferiority Complex to Males*, *Soccer as a Job*, and *Social Reactions about Female Athletes* were identified when examining research question number two: In what ways do these elite professional female athletes view themselves in the day-to-day world? The matching of these three higher order categories created the central theme of this research question, *Female Athletes as Second Class Citizens*.

Inferiority Complex to Males is defined as the place in sport that elite professional female athletes feel they hold. Participants mentioned how they are generally looked down upon as professional athletes due to their gender. Brianna noted how professional female athletes often feel:

The first word that comes to my head is inferior, which is really bad but I think it's the fact of the matter when you think of every women's sport on every level, just kind of gets overshadowed by its male counterpart.

Rachael echoed that notion, saying:

I think we are still seen as inferior to the men from a "whole society" perspective, although slowly and surely, we are getting the recognition and support that is needed. We play and give our lives to this sport and we do it all very passionately.

Elizabeth gave her view of how she feels people treat female athletes:

I used to think it was really hard to pinpoint the majority or minority of views and sorts on female athletes. Now, I guess the way I see it at the moment, society looks at female athletes and says yeah, there might be some potential, there might be some talent but there's no way they're as good as men. A lot of society follows the crowd and I guess it stems from major corporations and networks, things like that.

Soccer as a Lifestyle is defined as elite professional female athletes wanting individuals in their social circles to realize that being a professional athlete is a lifestyle.

Those interviewed spoke about how they wished that their friends, non-sport colleagues, and even family understood that being an elite professional athlete is a full-time endeavor.

Victoria talked about how some people sometimes don't understand this aspect of being an athlete:

They just don't understand that this is a full-time job, just like you go to work every day, so do I, except mine is almost... even though mine isn't eight hours in the office, like... you don't have to worry about what you eat, how much you sleep, how much you drink, how much you walk around. I can't just go into the city tomorrow because I want to walk around the city tomorrow because I have a game on Sunday.

Alexa mentioned how much of a mental strain being a professional athlete can entail:

I do a lot on the side, like now I'm growing a business and stuff and that's all very healthy for me mentally because when you care so deeply about what you do and that's all you do for a couple of hours, it can be a huge strain on you mentally so I think for all of us who play professionally, I think I'm not the only one who feels this way but we do feel that it's somewhat of a sacrifice to do what we do, and we don't get compensated extremely well but we feel that were helping to grow the game and I thoroughly love what I do, I love the challenges of continually working to get better and being on a team and competing against some of the best players in the world so that's by far the most rewarding part.

Brianna explained how being a professional soccer player has affected her daily life:

It's just a lifestyle choice, we don't make millions of dollars and you pass up big job opportunities, not even big ones, just the thought of are you going to start the next chapter of your life? Or do you keep playing? You make huge sacrifices. A long-term relationship that I've been in, but I'm never home. That's a struggle in itself so you just make a lot of sacrifices just because you want to play professionally.

Social Reactions about Female Athletes is described as participants noting how those who are not members of their social circle, often have varying reactions to learning the respective participants were elite professional female athletes. Those interviewed noted a mix of positive and negative reactions by those they encounter and explained those reactions are part of being an elite professional female athlete. Megan talked about the reaction people often have when she explains she's a professional athlete:

It's just kind of like a funny introduction to people sometimes, to tell them what I do and they're usually very surprised but excited about it at the same time, especially if it's someone who has daughters or knows someone who plays soccer, they're like wow! There's an opportunity that they didn't know they had.

Victoria gave an example of a negative reaction she's had:

Sometimes you have the people that are clueless and like oh there's a professional league in the United States? Oh, women play soccer after college? Why aren't you a college team? I get that a lot... (NWSL team)? Is that a college team? Like no! So, I feel like there are different parts to it, but some people are just like... I hate that... when are you going to grow up and get a real job?

Hannah noted her reactions are usually positive:

Personally, when I tell someone, because not everyone knows which I completely understand and expect. When I do or when it comes up, I tell somebody that I'm a professional athlete, they're very surprised, and they're like "Wow, that's really awesome!" and they respect me for it. Some people say they didn't know professional women's soccer even existed.

Theme. The theme, *Female Athletes as Second Class Citizens*, was established due to participants voicing their opinions of how they feel they are treated as elite professional female athletes. Participants noted they are often treated as lesser beings as professional athletes in comparison to their male counterparts, that the effort they put into their sport and accomplishments they achieve are under appreciated, and that they wished that individuals understood they actually hold a valuable occupation. Grace explained her frustrations about how female athletes are treated:

I mean women's sports and female athletes have it rough when you really think about it. Sure, we've come a long way since Title IX and all of that, but you still see like boy's Little League baseball on ESPN instead of women's sports. We're talking age like ten year olds. I think every women's sports team has their struggles and hopefully were starting to grow in the right direction as a gender and sports as a whole.

Julia talked about her treatment as a female athlete in some of the other countries she's played in:

I've played in a couple of other countries before I came to the NWSL. I would say one of the main similarities I've noticed in many of the places I've played is that there sometimes is a lack of respect for female athletes. When they see you and see you play, unless you can prove yourself, they won't respect you as an athlete, so it's like if they see you're good, then they're usually ok with you but before that happens I don't think they expect all that much from you at all.

Victoria noted how there exists a lack of respect for female athletes even amongst her peers:

So, there are my peers that think, oh that's really cool but we go to work and we... I don't know how to explain it, let me think... The "I respect you and what you do, but it's not that cool" kind of feel, it's like well, we go to work too. I feel like I have that. My friends are all awesome about it and know how much I sacrificed for it and stuff, they appreciate it, but there's still some who are like oh whatever, that's no big deal, you're just the same as everybody else.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine elite professional female athletes' perceptions of women's sports coverage and to explore how these athletes see themselves as members of society.

This research attempted to bridge the gap in academic literature regarding the personal experiences of elite professional female athletes and their opinions about the coverage of their respective sports. While previous literature has identified a disparity in television coverage between men's and women's sports, as well as the existence of differences in the treatment and status of female athletes, little to no literature examines how this affects elite professional female athletes on a personal level.

An additional objective was to understand how these professional athletes view themselves in the day-to-day world. The most impactful findings of this study were the categories and themes that were identified in Chapter Four and the forthcoming discussion section will delve further into their connections with the existing literature and the theoretical framework that shaped this study.

Discussion

Research Question #1: What are the perceptions of elite professional female athletes on the coverage of women's sports?

The findings of this study indicate that elite professional female athletes are keenly aware of the challenge to garner media coverage, particularly in terms of television viewership, and women's sports teams are working to combat unequal treatment. The categories and themes that were mentioned in the previous chapter have some notable connections to the existing literature.

Much like the study conducted by Cooky et al. (2015), which examined the scarcity of women's sports coverage on local and national television networks, the first higher order category corresponding to this research question, *Stuck in the Shadows*, examined the effect television has had on women's sports. This study found that those who take part in women's sports fully realize just how hard it is for female athletes and women's sports to obtain recognition on mass media platforms such as ESPN's SportsCenter. Taking into account both the Cooky et al. (2015) study and the findings of this study, it is evident that television coverage of women's sports, particularly here in the United States, is not on similar footing as male sports.

The second higher order category of this research question is *The '99ers*. This category shares a connection to the work of Meân (2015) in regards to the members of the United States' 1999 Women's World Cup team. Participants mentioned what a profound effect the members of the 1999 team had on them as both young children and continue to have on them currently as professional players in their own right. As Meân (2015) mentions, the 1999 team was lauded in magazines and newspapers across the United States, something

that was unheard of at the time. Upon examining the player's childhood influences, it is apparent that the impacts of the 1999 team helped to mold and perpetuate the participant's drive to become a world-class soccer player. As Rogers (2014) mentions, that impact was also the driving force for many of the current members of the U.S. Women's National Team to pick up the sport of soccer themselves.

The final category in relation to this research question, *Lack of Financial Support*, examined similar facets as the work by Davis (2016) in respect to the fight for equal pay for players who play professional women's soccer. Much like the fight of the U.S. national team members mentioned by Davis (2016), the participants of this study are fighting their own fight for respect, equal treatment, and fairer pay in hopes of no longer having to obtain second jobs during the season or retiring early due to low wages, a sentiment Kassouf (2015) explains is hurting professional women's soccer in the United States. Furthermore, these findings note that the lack of financial backing is not only a women's soccer problem, but also a problem for women's sports as a whole. In many ways, this lack of financial backing relates to the lack of media coverage of women's sports. Being unable to raise the profile of a women's sports team, league, or its participants through the coverage of games and matches often leads to minimal financial support by sponsors, financial support that in many cases, is desperately needed (Reporter, 2016).

Lastly, the theme that corresponds with this research question, *Female Athletes as an Afterthought*, was developed through the influences of the higher order categories *Stuck in the Shadows*, *The '99ers*, and *Lack of Financial Support*. These categories found connections between the lack of coverage of women's sports by media outlets, and noted the results that the lack of coverage has on the longevity of the athletes and sports themselves. *Female*

Athletes as an Afterthought shares commonalities with the works of West and Zimmerman (1987) and Lorber (1994/2007). Much like their respective works, this study's findings note that a divide still exists in Western society on the idea of gender. While this study focuses predominately on the realm of sport, the ideas brought forth by the respective scholars still ring true in the treatment of female athletes in comparison to male athletes and the placement of female athletes within society as a whole. In addition, as Liang (2011) mentions, the continuation of the gendered outlook of sport is evident in instances such as the media's sexualization of female athletes, for example. This sexualization has very much become the norm of society, something that Liang (2011) notes likely dates back to sexist social norms. Another example of gender's role in the treatment of female athletes is the impact of Title IX. While Title IX has opened doors for many a female athlete, those doors have not been opened equally if one looks at the benefits from a racial perspective. Dusenberry and Lee (2012) explain that while Caucasian women have reaped the benefits of Title IX, those who identify with a minority group (e.g., African-Americans, Latinas) are vastly underrepresented.

Research Question #2: In what ways do these elite professional female athletes view themselves in the day-to-day world?

The notion of the day-to-day experience of being an elite professional female athlete was another noteworthy finding of this study. Similar to the previous research question, the categories and theme that were identified in Chapter Four will be examined further alongside the existing literature.

The first category under this research question, *Inferiority Complex to Males*, parallels the findings of Fink et al. (2012). Their work notes that sport is often seen through a

masculine lens, and is thought to be more suitable for men than women. That masculine lens is notable when compared to the findings of this study and the notion that female athletes feel they are looked down upon as athletes when compared to their male counterparts. Also of note, this study found that a repeated lack of media coverage often results in female athletes feeling they are inferior to those who participate in the male version of their respective sport. This feeling of inferiority felt by female athletes is also a sentiment that is sometimes pushed by male athletes themselves. Hoiness, Washington, and Cotrell (2008) found that male athletes may find a female athlete to be less respectable if she plays a sport such as softball, basketball, or soccer. The lack of respect seen by some male athletes is an interesting concept when paired with the masculine lens that Fink et al. (2012) says sport is usually seen through, as it pushes the thought that treating a female athlete like she is inferior is almost a norm.

The second category under this research question, *Soccer as a Lifestyle*, is consistent with some of the work done by Toering and Jordet (2015) in regards to professional soccer being a lifestyle for those who participate in it. Their work mentions that a level of self-control is necessary to succeed as a professional athlete. This mirrors one of the findings of this study in that the participants interviewed wished those who encompass their social circles realized they often are unable to partake in extracurricular activities due to their dedication to being a professional athlete. That dedication to sport requires that they not only dissuade from participating in activities that would diminish their playing ability, but also limits their social interactions with those in their social groups and can lead to misunderstandings with close friends and family. Additionally, being dedicated to one's sport often hinges on their individual motivations (Kimball, n.d.). Having an individual, whether

they be a trainer, a coach, or a teammate who helps push the athlete will often have a role in strengthening the athlete's dedication to the sport (Kimball, n.d.).

The third category, *Social Reactions about Female Athletes*, has relation to Kaskan and Ho's (2014) study on micro aggressions and female athletes. Their study noted that should a female athlete confront someone who they feel made a disrespectful remark, they might be labeled as weak and unable to withstand the rigors of being an athlete. This finding is similar to the idea brought forth by participants in this study in how the social reactions encountered by elite female athletes may have a positive or negative affect on the athlete, depending on the individual. By not responding to those disrespectful remarks, these female athletes are often designated as frail or soft, when given the same set of circumstances, male athletes are lauded and encouraged by teammates and spectators alike. Furthermore, Jeanes (2011) found that by conforming to those social reactions, female athletes are restricting their femininity, while also passing up using their participation in sport as an opportunity to challenge gender norms.

Female Athletes as Second Class Citizens, the theme of this research question, was developed through the relationships between the higher order categories of *Inferiority Complex to Males*, *Soccer as a Lifestyle*, and *Social Reactions about Female Athletes*. These three categories examined the treatment of female athletes and women's sport through a societal lens and looked at the possible effects these aspects of society may have on those who participated in the study. This theme finds association with the work of Fink et al. (2014) in how female athletes and women's sports are frequently compared and ridiculed when compared to male athletes and men's sports. Those interviewed for this study mentioned how they wish they were given the same treatment and respect that is usually

given to their male counterparts. Even when female athletes outperform male athletes in a particular sport, they never are given the same recognition and accolades, the United States women's soccer team following their championship during the 2015 Women's World Cup being a prime example of those differences.

This inequality between genders is problematic on a societal level as well. Rizvi (2016) explained that even at the Olympic level, female athletes and women's sports are compared to their male counterparts, like American shooter Corey Cogdell-Unrein, who won bronze in trap shooting, only to be reported in the press by reference to her famous husband. Cogdell-Unrein's situation is one that is commonplace in women's sports, in which female athletes are treated differently than male athletes. Going back to the masculine lens mentioned by Fink et al. (2012), it is possible that due to the predominate viewing of sport through the male perspective, the sayings and ideologies that make up those perspectives naturally make their way into common interaction between genders. These male actors may not realize their actions are having a negative effect on female athletes and women's sports as they view them as normal.

Recommendations

Practical Implications. A change in the mentality in the mass media coverage of women's sports and its presentation by commercial sponsors would help advance women's sports in a more positive manner. Along with a change in mentality by the media and sponsors, organizations need to be pressured by the people involved in women's sports (i.e., players, fans, team organizations, leagues) to actively promote and showcase their respective sports.

Because sports journalism is usually such a male dominated industry, the development and inclusion of more female journalists could help begin to bridge the existing gap between women's sports and the media, and there is "evidence to suggest that women sports reporters are less likely to cover women athletes in disrespectful ways and more likely to advocate expanding the coverage of women's sports" (Cooky et al., 2013, p. 24).

For those involved in women's sports as athletes, taking a proactive role in introducing not only themselves but also their sport to the public may help begin to swing the sentiment towards female athletes and women's sports in a favorable direction. Being a part of their local communities, interacting with fans via social networking, and allowing supporters to get to know the athletes' true self are a few ways in which the gap between women's sports and the public could continue to be shrank.

Future Research. The primary researcher would recommend conducting similar studies that examine other professional women's sports, such as basketball, softball, and track & field to ascertain whether the results and findings of those studies are congruent with this study. Further investigation would allow for an expansion of the scholarly knowledge base in regard to women's sports coverage and elite professional female athletes' views of society.

The researcher additionally recommends selecting participants from local professional teams if possible in future research. Having access to a local professional team may allow for even greater firsthand access to players, along with the possibility to observe practices and games, as it would provide the opportunity to obtain more observational data and the creation of deeper relationships with the study's participants.

A further search of the existing literature found that much of the information that currently exists regarding the connections between women's sports and media coverage to be dated back to the 1990s and early 2000s. More recent studies would be recommended to examine if the findings are still relevant in today's women's sports world.

Limitations

Three primary limitations impacted this study. The first limitation is that the results of the study may not be generalizable to all women's sports, because this study focused exclusively on professional women's soccer. The second limitation was participant access; some of the professional teams contacted for this study were unwilling to give permission for their players to take part. The third limitation was that the information collected as data for this study was self-reported by the participants and could contain biases.

Appendix A

Sample Recruitment Announcement

Hello. My name is Raymond Daly. I am a graduate student in the department of Health and Human Performance at the University of Houston working on my master's thesis. I am looking to conduct research to learn how elite professional female athletes perceive the coverage of women's sports, and to obtain an understanding as to how the selected respondents feel as members of general society.

To better understand their perspectives as elite female soccer players, I would like to interview members of your team. This is completely voluntary. This participation would consist of a one-on-one Skype or telephone interview at the player's convenience. The interview should take no longer than an hour in length. Participants will be given full anonymity and they will have an opportunity to review a completed draft of the report before its final submission.

If they are willing to participate in this research, could you please have them email me at Rdaly2313@gmail.com. In addition, you can contact my advisor, Dr. Michael Cottingham at mcotting@central.uh.edu or by phone at (713) 743-9065.

This project has been reviewed by the University of Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, should you have any questions, they can be reached at (713) 743-9204.

Appendix B

Pre-Screening Questions

Demographic Information

What is your age?

What is your gender?

What is your ethnicity?

Professional Information

What is the name of your team?

What league do you play in?

What position do you play?

How many years have you played in your league?

Additional Information

*If you didn't attend a college/university, please put "N/A" as your answer

What college did you attend?

What is your e-mail address?

What is your Skype contact information?

What is your phone number?

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Background

Tell me about some of your earliest playing experiences (childhood/high school)

- a. What's your first, most vivid memory of playing sports as a child?
- b. Middle/High School, what was that like?
- c. Who/What were some of your biggest influences as a child?
- d. Who was your favorite player growing up? Why?

Tell me about your collegiate playing experience

- a. Any particular events or happenings that stick out to you?
- b. Anything you wish you could go back and change?

Professional Sports

Tell me about your experience being a professional female athlete

How do you feel society views you as a female athlete?

Sports Media

Tell me about your experiences following sport through the media...

Tell me about your experience concerning sports coverage for women's sports and female athletes...

- a. How does this compare to coverage of male sports?
- b. Or to other professional female athletes?

What has it been like being covered by the media over the course of your career?

Appendix D

Consent Form

The University of Houston

Research Study: Fairer, Not Equal: Elite Professional Female Athletes And Women's Sports Coverage

You are being invited to take part in a research project conducted by Raymond Daly from the department of Health and Human Performance at the University of Houston. This project is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Michael Cottingham.

Taking part in the research project is voluntary, and you may refuse to take part or withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any research-related questions that make you uncomfortable. If you are a student, a decision to participate or not or to withdraw your participation will have no effect on your standing.

The purpose/objective of the project is to learn how elite professional female athletes perceive the coverage of women's sports, and to obtain an understanding as to how the selected respondents feel as members of general society.

You will be one of up to 20 subjects to be asked to participate in one-on-one interviews with Mr. Daly via telephone or Skype.

You can assist in this project by participating in an interview. This interview is completely voluntary, and will last approximately one hour. You may stop engaging in an interview anytime you like. These results may be published in journal articles or presented in conferences. The results will be kept in the faculty advisor's office for three years and then destroyed.

You will be provided the transcripts of your interview, and you may amend any statements you feel do not represent your perspectives at that time.

Every effort will be made to maintain the confidentiality of your participation in this project. Each subject's name will be paired with a code name by the principal investigator. This code name will appear on all written materials. The list pairing the subject's name to the assigned code name will be kept separate from all research materials and will be available only to the principal investigator. Confidentiality will be maintained within legal limits.

Risks: None of the questions should lead you to answers that would be damaging to you personally or professionally. No one should be able to match you to your answers.

Benefits: While you will not directly benefit from participation, your participation may help investigators better understand the effects of media coverage on women's sports and to understand the day-to-day lives of elite professional female athletes.

Participation in this project is voluntary, and the only alternative to this project is non-participation.

No incentives will be provided.

The results of this study may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations; however, no individual subject will be identified.

AGREEMENT FOR THE USE OF VIDEO/AUDIO TAPES

If you consent to take part in this study, please indicate whether you agree to be videotaped during the study by checking the appropriate box below. If you agree, please also indicate whether the videotapes may be used for publication/presentations.

- ☐ I agree to be videotaped during the interview.
 - ☐ I agree that the videotape(s) can be used in publication/presentations.
 - ☐ I do not agree that the videotape(s) can be used in publication/presentations.
- ☐ I do not agree to be videotaped during the interview.

If you do not agree to be videotaped, you may not participate in this research.

SUBJECT RIGHTS

1. I understand that informed consent is required of all persons participating in this project.
2. I have been told that I may refuse to participate or to stop my participation in this project at any time before or during the project. I may also refuse to answer any question.
3. Any risks and/or discomforts have been explained to me, as have any potential benefits.
4. I understand the protections in place to safeguard any personally identifiable information related to my participation.
5. By signing this form 'I agree,' I acknowledge the interview is voluntary, and I understand that if I have any questions, I can contact Raymond Daly at Rdaly2313@Gmail.com or Dr. Michael Cottingham at Mcotting@central.uh.edu or by phone at (713) 743-9065.
6. **Any questions regarding my rights as a research subject may be addressed to the University of Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (713-743-**

9204). All research projects that are carried out by Investigators at the University of Houston are governed by requirements of the University and the federal government.

I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions to my satisfaction. I give my consent to participate in this study, and I have been provided with a copy of this form for my records and in case I have questions as the research progresses.

Appendix E

Table 1 – Study Participants

Name	Years In NWSL	Age	Ethnicity
Layla	3	25	African-American
Grace	3	23	Caucasian
Victoria	3	23	Caucasian
Hannah	2	23	Caucasian
Zoe	1	25	African-American
Erin	2	24	Australian
Elizabeth	1	24	Other
Brianna	3	25	African-American
Julia	1	26	Caucasian
Megan	3	25	African-American
Alexa	3	29	Caucasian
Rachael	2	28	Italian/Jamaican

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