

AN ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF BLACK ATHLETES

PUZZLE & RESEARCH QUESTION

This thesis focuses on the media representations of black athletes, as there is an overrepresentation of black people as athletes, especially in certain sports, while there is an underrepresentation of black people in other roles in sports media. This topic intrigues me because I feel as though black athletes tend to receive harsher criticism from media platforms than athletes of other racial backgrounds.

Research Question: What are the media representations of black athletes?

- Sub-Question #1: How do the media portrayals of black athletes connect to the media portrayals of black people?
- Sub-Question #2: What are the explanations of these media portrayals?
- Sub-Question #3: What are the effects of these media portrayals?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Having gone through literature, it is noticeable that most of the content examines the representation of black people in media and the media portrayals of athletes in a general sense. This thesis provides an insight into a grey area within the discourse of racialization by examining the media representations of black athletes. While the media portrayals of black people and athletes have been studied previously, this analysis considers a more specific demographic, that being black athletes, to identify the explanations and effects of these media representations.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The decision to use a literature-based systematic review approach for this thesis was made because this is the most appropriate style for the topic the project is concerned with. A systematic review is a review that uses systematic methods to identify and select literature for data extraction and analysis, which will be used to answer a well-formulated question or set of questions (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006, p. 39). Certain literature was selected because these references were ones that featured aspects of the set of research questions or the key terms used as search parameters in the title, abstracts or general descriptions. It was then decided that a thematic approach to literature organization and data analysis was the most appropriate for this thesis. After all selected literature had been reviewed and meaningful content was highlighted, these highlighted sections were organized into subthemes for analysis.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

Instead of applying a theoretical perspective to the analysis of the literature review, the theory portion of this thesis provides a brief explanation of the theories that were featured within the selected literature content. The four theories that were the most prevalent in the selected literature are:

- #1) The media-sport cultural complex: The relationship between sports and media inspires the media-sport cultural complex, as this view highlights “the interdependence of sport organizations, media conglomerates and advertising sponsors collective ability to generate revenue and fans,” (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016, p. 9).
- #2) Critical race theory (CRT): CRT acknowledges racism is embedded into society through a variety of contexts and means, such as negative stereotypes in media or access discrimination in education (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016, p. 10).
- #3) Intersectionality: “Racial categorization and racism” are embedded into society, as a person or group’s place in the societal hierarchy is determined by a combination of gender, social class, sexual orientation, religion and culture (Carter-Francique & Richardson, 2016, p. 10).
- #4) Framing theory: Media influences what the audience learns, as viewers use “journalistic frames” as references for their own personal beliefs (Coche, 2017, p. 91).

KEY FINDINGS & ARGUMENTS

Major Theme #1: The stereotypical depictions and descriptors used for black people and black athletes in media.

- Subtheme #1: Black athletes’ “brawn” vs. white athletes’ “brain” and the belief black athletes possess superior “natural” abilities.
- Subtheme #2: The hypersexualization of black women and the notion of black men as aggressive.
- Subtheme #3: The stereotypical depiction of black people and black athletes as criminals.
- Subtheme #4: Greater focus on missteps and lack of a redemption arc for black people and black athletes.

Major Theme #2: The race- and gender-based hierarchy found in sports and sports media.

- Subtheme #1: Exclusion of black people and black athletes from media.
- Subtheme #2: Effects of inaccurate portrayals of black people and black athletes in media.
- Subtheme #3: The furthering of the white-male-hegemonic power imbalance.
- Subtheme #4: Perpetuation of white saviour narratives.
- Subtheme #5: The “hypervisible” black athlete as a media commodity.
- Subtheme #6: “Good blacks” vs. “bad blacks.”

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

Throughout this analysis, it is important to consider that there is a lack of any personal experience relating to the topics discussed. I am not a black individual nor am I a professional athlete, so it is crucial I do my best to remain impartial, as the opinions I formed during this process are based on the observations made throughout the literature review. This analysis is a personal interpretation of the literature content, where I can acknowledge that I have also fallen victim to the conditioning from these media portrayals in the past. In regards to future research, human participant research could be conducted in order to provide an in-depth analysis of specific effects these media representations, or lack thereof, have on black adolescents’ self-identity formation.

Carter-Francique, A. R. & Richardson, F. M. (2016). Controlling Media, Controlling Access: The Role of Sport Media on Black Women’s Sport Participation. *Race, Gender & Class*, 23 (1/2), 7 - 33.

Coche, R. (2017). How Athletes Frame Themselves on Social Media: An Analysis of Twitter Profiles. *Journal of Sports Media*, 12 (1), 89 - 112. Published by University of Nebraska Press.

Petticrew, M. & Roberts, H. (2006). *Systematic Reviews in the Social Sciences: A Practical Guide*. New Jersey, Blackwell Publishing, 1 - 215.

