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Keeping Score: How Heteronormative Language in Professional Sports Shape the Identities of
Student Athletes
University of Portland
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the toxic trends within the sports community that create a heterosexual environment for student athletes. The theory of cultivation was applied when reviewing different articles of literature relating to identity, sports language, sports media, and the intersection of sexuality and sports. Upon categorizing the data, critical analysis was used. Analysis of findings are further discussed through the themes that emerged: representin', genderin', and dominatin'. Interviews with popular athletes, mic'd up games, and articles were used to demonstrate the prevalence of this issue in society and how society has normalized this type of language. Student athlete's look up to professional athletes and often mimic trends within their own lives. Their identity is further repressed when identifying as LGBTQ because of heterosexual norms. The sports world has normalized using language that harms a portion of their population to the point where student athletes fear publicly identifying outside heterosexual norms.

Introduction

In the time I spent being an undergraduate student, I have befriended many athletes from different sport backgrounds. A significant amount of these athletes identify with a sexuality other than heterosexual but choose to let others assume that they are heterosexual because of possible ramifications. These ramifications can include bullying, fixation, ostracization, or a sexualization (for women athletes). These young athletes see pro athletes who “come out” as LGBTQ+ and are then labelled as “gay” or “lesbian” instead of an athlete first. Because of this, I have paid close attention to pro athlete interviews, articles, and athlete’s personal identity as well as the identity given to them by the media.

Sports have historically been a masculine-dominated field in which players are expected to perform in a certain manner. There is little room for deviating from the expectations without a new identity being assigned. Media has a large influence on which identities are accepted and used as the “core” or main feature of one’s identity. The careers surrounding sports media are also dominated by males which translates to the types of articles and stories being published. According to research done by Rory Magrath, “The Guardian estimates that only 2% of sports articles in the national press are written by women” (2019). NCAA athletes look up to these athletes and model their lives off of what information is available to them. Sport celebrities are extremely influential to young athletes and constructing their identities.

More and more research has been published on the topics of gay athletes and their struggle to identify as a different sexuality as well as an athlete. Society has become more accepting of athletes who identify as gay, however the image presented by media shows a less inclusive environment. The language within interviews use gendered terms and questioning, which help construct heterosexual norms. There is an obsession in society to either ignore

different sexualities or to expose/"out" athletes. In research, there is a gap when looking at interviews and their impact on the identity process of young athletes.

Conceptualization of Communication

Language will be examined through the theory of cultivation when conducting research on professional athlete interviews/articles. Cultivation theory argues that the media shapes a person's sense of reality. This theory suggests that many receive information through mediated sources which then influences and morphs an individual's world view. An example of this is mean world syndrome, which is when individuals ingest a lot of violent-related content and then perceive the world to be a dangerous place. This theory is relevant to this research because of how young athletes are being highly exposed to a specific lifestyle presented by the media. The only access young athletes have to professional athletes is through mediated sources.

This theory also suggests that the attitudes the media represents are already present in society. By being already present, the media needs to only show these attitudes in different ways to make people think these are the attitudes that everybody has. If interviews are generally being conducted by males, then the content generated are going to reflect masculine attitudes. These attitudes are then going to be seen as the attitudes of the public in general.

Literature Review

Identity

Identity can be a continuous work in progress for individuals throughout their entire life. It can shift at different ages and some parts can become more prominent than others at different times. For student athletes, there is the constant struggle of their main identity shifting between the different facets of their life: "identity is an extensive negotiation that is always changing, always being interpreted and reinterpreted, and always contested by various entities" (Billings &

Hundley, 2010, pg. 5). An added struggle is when their sexual identity is thrown into the mix as well. This identity usually takes the foreground and becomes the label used to identify these individuals rather than any other part that makes up who they are. There is also the fact that identity is seen differently from an individual standpoint and from society's standpoint: "that identity is located at both individual and social levels; that some aspects of identity are more malleable than others; that our interactions with others influence our identities; that identities must be situated in specific histories and cultures" (Butterworth, 2014 pg. 5). People are the results of their surroundings and interactions with one another, which shapes a huge part of their identity. Individuals can identify in a way that others disagree with because of the parts that they have come in contact with do not align with the individual's self-identity.

In terms of a student athletes' athletic identity and their sexual identity, there is a problem with stereotypes and fear. The two identities are ones widely talked about in media and in interpersonal communication and are often misconstrued or interpreted without a clear understanding. Stereotypes are used in trying to understand the identities presented: "gender identity is reduced to biological differences and reinforced with social constructions as evidenced in visual cues...sexual orientation is left to a viewer's increasingly flawed conceptions of 'gaydar,' based on stereotypes of effeminate men or masculine women" (Billings & Hundley, 2010, pg. 5). Sexuality cannot be guessed or found through other aspects of a person's identity. It is separate and stereotypes fail to recognize this. Society and the media have difficult times in using appropriate language when discussing LGBTQ individuals. This is increased and shown at a greater level when the same stereotypes are applied to athletes and sports: "women's athletic identity work has to manage the implications of contesting masculinity. This includes either being framed as masculine and hence lesbian" (Meân & Kassing, 2008, p. 130). Certain

stereotypes are used in between identities to label an individual in another way. Society loves pushing labels on people and become frustrated when there is a struggle in the process of labeling. Female athletes are often the “enigma” in society because of the masculine manner in which they compete: “...in a culture that conflated sexuality with gender expression, and where it was feared that feminine boys would become gay, sport also served as a mechanism of masculinization” (Adams et al., 2010, p. 279). Sports are referred to as “masculine” because of the aggressive and competitive nature that they are performed in, these are typical traits of males and thus masculine. For this reason, females are typically more likely to be labeled as LGBTQ because they are competing in a masculine field. Males in the same field are more likely to be harshly judged for identity because they are in a place where norms and language are set up so that society expects them to be heterosexual.

Sports Language

Within every subculture of society, there are norms and language that exist for the members of the group. Within the sports community, there are different ways that language is used to communicate specific expectations. Even the naming of women’s sports communicates that female athletes are different and lesser than their male counterparts. The term “sports” is associated with male athletes and thus the need to include “women” before talking about female athletes. The need to make this distinction comes from sports being a male-dominated industry and women being viewed as a sub-culture.

In other areas of life, sexuality is not prescribed to people based on their careers or cultures as much as sports use this practice. There is no correlation with sexuality and performing in masculine or feminine ways, yet cultures cannot stop trying to fit people within small boxes that align with their own opinions and beliefs:

“There is no reason why sexual orientation should be held to have any bearing on athletic ability or fitness to participate, but sport is nonetheless a key cultural sphere in which heteronormativity is reproduced and the rumored or known homosexual orientation of particular athletes viewed as a source of scandal, concern, ridicule, or ambivalent acceptance” (Hughson & Free, 2011, pg. 117).

Society has chosen to equate being LGBTQ as a derogatory term or insult. That being the case has caused trash talk and news topics to center around sexual orientation because of it being deemed a negative aspect of somebody’s identity. Being anything but heterosexual is also seen as a news story because “sport media and professional sport have reinforced notions of hegemonic masculinity and organized competitive sports and the media that cover them in Western cultures have been highly homophobic” (Sherwood, et al., 2020, p. 5). Heterosexual language has been heavily pushed in normal conversations as the norm. Interview questions include asking about somebody’s plans to find a “wife” or “husband” and the bachelor/ette lifestyle athletes stereotypically live. Before tackling the issue of homophobia in the sports world, society needs to focus on changing the connotations of heterosexual/LGBTQ language.

Another issue of language in the sports community centers around heterosexual sex. This is an issue that has left the sports community and infiltrated everyday life in the way that most members of society understand the meaning of these terms: “sport is frequently used as a metaphor for heterosexual sex – ‘scoring’, ‘getting to first base’, and so on” (Hughson & Free, 2011, pg. 118). These terms describe “traditional” male and female intercourse and leave little room for interpretation otherwise. The use of these metaphors has increased the space for homophobia within sports. Using heterosexual language can “potentially push LGBT athletes back into the closet— despite research documenting how sports culture is becoming an

increasingly liberal environment for sexual minorities” (Magrath, 2019, pg. 266). Social media has created a huge platform for these terms to be used on a wider scale. In recent times, there has been an unspoken push to prescribe these terms to any type of intercourse but the original intent behind these terms still persist. Language does not lose its original meaning no matter how much society tries to add more inclusive definitions.

In concern to male and female sports individually, expectations run rampant on the manner in which athletes are expected to perform. Certain language is expected to be used by athletes and “in sport, players who do not live up to the expected orthodox scripts of masculinity are often subordinated through physical dominance and ridicule” (Adams et al., 2010, p. 281). Male athletes who deviate or try to be an ally risk being bullied and ostracized by members of their sport. When language fails, some will try to dominate using traditionally masculine characteristics such as their physical presence. There is more leeway with female athletes and more freedom to own their sexuality: “rather than reducing female stereotyping, the increase in women’s sporting presence has worked to raise awareness and concern about female athletes’ sexuality and thus the need to negotiate discourses of traditional beauty, size, and femininity” (Meân & Kassing, 2008, p. 127). With the increase of respect being given to females as athletes comes the power to change norms in society. The shift in language has begun slowly in society but cannot be fully adapted without male sports also adopting this practice.

Sports Media

The media is everywhere and consumed by majority of sports fans if they want to stay up to date on the details behind the games and athletes. The media paints pictures to society of a specific reality and is able to shift opinions and ideas because of this power: “The media has long been recognized for its role in shaping and maintaining cultural norms and values, and for its

influence on the culture of sport in particular” (Harris & Parker, 2009, pg. 133). Athletes are given specific narratives for their identities even if the athletes do not personally relate to these narratives. When a non-typical identity emerges, such as being LGBTQ, the media picks up on this and will shift the coverage to focus on this personal aspect of their life rather than the reason they are in the media at all. With media, there is “a relationship to issues of power, ‘the power to shape public opinion, the power to reach millions of people, the power to help an individual cognitively shape a ‘reality,’ however flawed that conception may be,’” (Butterworth, 2014, pg. 3). The media has the power to feed society one side of a bigger story, which creates a skewed version of the truth. Sports is part of a nation’s culture and can often change the way coverage is conducted to fit the cultural norms. There is an increase in the coverage for all parts of an athlete’s life: “receive significant media coverage not just because of their performances as athletes but because of their appearance, lifestyle, and ‘celebrity’ image” (Harris & Parker, 2009, pg. 133). There is an expectation now from society for the media to report on all parts of an athlete’s life. They feel entitled to know everybody’s sexuality, especially somebody they look up to and idolize. With this entitlement comes the pressure for sports and athletes to conform and share personal parts of their lives that they may not want to.

The media opens up a bigger discussion in a public space: “media remains a forum for contested debate about homosexuality and homophobia” (Sherwood, et al, 2020, pg. 2). There are constant conversations on whether certain words and languages are appropriate or homophobic. Athletes, media journalists, and members of society have very different views on policing language used and will often come to blows in the media. Even though these discussions are in the public space, they do little to change what actually happens behind closed doors. There is also the fact that “mainstream sport media is increasingly policed for homophobia and sexism,

. . . the anonymity of the internet permits hegemonic masculinity to flourish in specific locations, without contestation” (Kian, et al. 2011, p. 680). Trolls have always been an issue ever since the internet came to existence. Trolls are anonymous individuals who harass, and comment mean or untrue comments for the purpose of causing conflict. These internet trolls are influencing a bigger conversation and debate to take place in the media.

Sports media is a male-dominated field that can often fall victim to using more masculine language that is not inclusive. The media has the power to choose how interviews are conducted and the conversations that start in response to them: “heterosexual male sports journalists routinely engage in heterosexist language, but do not espouse negative attitudes toward homosexuality” (Magrath, 2019, pg. 265). These articles choose to ignore the toxic problem that they are contributing to. They are not directly being negative towards the LGBTQ community but doing so indirectly by using heterosexual language. Some sports are being more proactive than others, but these small improvements mean very little when others are not adopting similar practices: “while NBA media coverage demonstrated elements of inclusive masculinity, National Football League (NFL) media sources were more likely to illustrate traditional hegemonic masculinity structures.” (Sherwood, et al. 2020, pg. 4). Football is a more traditionally masculine sport, so the language used reflects that. It is a sport in which the majority of players are male and display typically masculine traits such as aggression and physical dominance. All sports need to be held accountable for the media they produce for the public regardless of the reputation they are trying to uphold.

Rationale

This topic should be addressed because of how prevalent it is in the sports industry. According to a study done by Gallup in 2017, the number of adults in America who identify as

LGBTQ was 4.5% (Newport, 2020). This number is drastically lessened when looking at the number of athletes who identify. Reasons for this discrepancy in numbers can be linked to fear of publicly identifying as LGBTQ and also uncertainty within themselves. With the progression of society in becoming more accepting and supportive of LGBTQ individuals, it is the natural progression that sports also follows this model. There needs to be better interview protocol as well as new language used by athletes during interviews. The sports media controls the majority of society's ingestion of news related to interviews and has the power to edit and control the information being published.

Using cultivation theory, this study can add a dimension of interview impact on the youth as well as specific gendered terms used that contribute to the problem. Analyzing the language used, popular terms appear throughout the research that point to problematic patterns in the sport society. Practically speaking, this research can add to coaching language surrounding athletes and locker rooms. This study also adds to creating a more accepting and supportive environment for youth athletes who struggle to identify as an athlete and a member of the LGBTQ community. A student athlete's identity can already be so conflicting to navigate and grasp without another main facet of their identity being shunned or silenced for fear of how others might react.

Research Question

Language used by professional athletes has created an unsafe environment for student athletes that affects their identity process. LGBTQ student athletes have been silenced in order to fit into a heterosexual world created by those they look up to.

RQ1: What are the characteristics of language in professional sport's media that create/construct heterosexual norms for student athletes' identity?

Characterize the Problem

This is a huge problem for student athletes because their identity is already being changed and assigned so much in these formative years. Some have the added stress of navigating their sexuality on top of other aspects of their lives. This intersectionality of identities would be easier to address if there were guidelines on what language to use and avoid when discussing sports. LGBTQ student athletes spend hundreds of hours with teammates and coaches and should not have to hide a large part of their identity because of fear. Team cultures are cultivated early on and are difficult to change or recreate when rules are already made. This is why it is so important to create safe and welcoming cultures early on, so interventions are ultimately not needed.

Locker rooms are a second home for many student-athletes yet are not seen as a safe place because of “locker room talk”. There is an entire type of dialect that is problematic yet accepted in society because it is expected and just another part of college sports. These talks are sacred and not to leave the locker room, which breeds an unhealthy environment where almost anything can be said. Norms are established here with unspoken expectations for the types of stories and comments teammates can make. One very prominent and popular topic of discussion is sex, heterosexual sex specifically: “In these very public discussions, these male athletes are expected to express not only their sexual desire for females but, more importantly, their dominance over them” (Sternod, 2007, p. 94). Overt masculine themes are displayed through locker room language which silences those who identify as anything other than heterosexual. These locker room conversations and topics are merely reflections of the larger conversations happening in the media. Young and impressionable athletes see how their role models are speaking and being spoken to in interviews and take that to mean that they should model their own language in order to be more similar.

Method

The method of critical discourse analysis was used in the analysis of media's heterosexual and homophobic language within the sport's world. A discourse was first chosen to demonstrate the blatant inequality shown towards LGBTQ athletes in a heterosexually dominated sphere of culture. A data source was chosen to demonstrate this discourse further. After data was chosen, the societal and historical context surrounding the text was explored. The effects of the data were expanded upon using previous research.

Selection of Analysis

A better understanding of heterosexual language used within the sporting community will be shown through various interviews, "mic'd-up athletes", and sports articles. Quotes were used from popular and mainstream athletes/journalists who have the biggest impact on student athlete's identity. Data was used from both heterosexual athletes and athletes identifying within the LGBTQ community to provide a bigger picture of the issue. In one study done, "mass mediated celebrities provided the cognitive and emotional involvement that people sought, usurping the role of the traditional hero" ("The Social Impact", 2008, p. 7). For this reason, data found by lesser-known athletes/media were not used within this study.

Interviews and "mic'd up" athletes were deemed usable if the views/likes on videos had more than at least 10,000 views. Articles produced by journalists were chosen based on the platform they were published on and whether or not it is a well-known media. In concern to the time of publication, data was only chosen if having been produced since 2010. This time period was chosen because of society labeling itself as more accepting in recent years. The past ten years of media also has the biggest impact on current student-athletes and language trends still utilized today.

Criteria for Data

Data was chosen based on whether heterosexual or homophobic language was used in talking about athletes or sports. Comment sections were not used in this study because of the low-level of exposure they have. The sports of football, soccer, and basketball were the focus of this study because of the wide popularity they have in American culture. America was used because for the sake of athletes and the different popular sport medias being known and influential on student athletes.

Coding Procedure

Fifteen interviews were used from athletes in football, soccer, and basketball. Both female and male athletes were used and chosen based on popularity in the sporting world. Data used from these interviews must have directly or indirectly referenced sexuality, heterosexuality, or gendered norms. Data was further placed coded based off of similar trends that emerged. As different trends emerged, categories were given that encapsulated the overall trend.

Context for Intervention

Through research done, the population that would benefit most from an intervention would be NCAA student athletes. All athletes stand to benefit from specific guidelines, not just LGBTQ or heterosexual athletes. Language used in and out of locker rooms/team spaces will be shifted to be more including and less targeted toward a majority population. There is always a risk present with trying to introduce and change current language and being seen as “soft” or “sensitive”. Soft meaning that one cannot take a joke and does not see the conversations or comments as harmless. Some might also take the guidelines as policing their private spaces or encrypting on spaces seen as “sacred” or private for their teams. Toxicity starts brewing from

within, which is why these private spaces need to be addressed foremost so that the media does not have material that further perpetuates the problem.

Proposed Outcomes and Ideas for Intervention

For this project, the aim would be to change the language surrounding “safe” team spaces. There needs to be a shift in heterosexual terms and phrases used to assume other’s sexualities as it is silencing a part of the community. These guidelines serve as a starting point for future conversations on why they are even needed in the first place. Accountability is needed in order for anyone to change their current behaviors and language. Coaches and teammates have to hold one another accountable in order for an intervention to be successful. Self-reflection will be encouraged after seeing these suggestions and further encouraged when somebody threatens to use old and toxic language with one another.

With these guidelines, locker room talk will hopefully decrease, gendered terms will stop, and assumptions will cease to exist about one another’s sexuality. Teammates are more likely to hold one another accountable or to call each other out if there is a written set of “do’s” and “do not’s”. They can blame their behavior on what the guidelines told them to do. This guideline can act as a scapegoat for teammates to blame when telling each other to not speak a certain way. It eliminates the possibility of being made fun of or ridiculed for sticking up for silent teammate.

Findings

When focusing on the data collected, trends emerged within the interviews and the answers athletes gave. The study found that many athletes are quick to criticize one another through the use of gendered terms. Athletes were also found to use certain language/gestures to demonstrate their heterosexuality and masculinity in the case of male athletes. Through the gathering of data,

three themes emerged: representin', genderin', and dominatin'. The following demonstrates the findings and their relation to past research done on similar topics.

Representin'

When going through different articles published on popular media sites, a significant portion did address being LGBTQ and an athlete. These articles were often written while interviewing an athlete who identifies as a sexuality other than heterosexual. Two athletes that were chosen are Megan Rapinoe, who identifies as lesbian, and Caitlyn Jenner, who previously competed in the Olympics as a male but is a transgender female.

The focus of these articles was centered on the athletes and their sexuality rather than of them being an athlete. Most articles written about LGBTQ representation in the sports world were written because of interviews conducted with LGBTQ athletes. Both of these athletes have been very open with their identities and have also accomplished quite a bit for the sporting world. Rapinoe was quoted saying, "I think so often with gay females in sports, there's this particular stereotype about it and there's such a narrow view of what it means to be gay and be athletic" (Kacala, 2019). She was calling out the stereotypes that are prevalent for LGBTQ athletes. These stereotypes are part of the struggle that athletes go through when figuring out their identities. By calling them out on a major media platform such as NBC News, Rapinoe is continuing the conversation that so many are choosing to ignore. Caitlyn Jenner's interview was conducted in order to shed light on the gendering that comes with being an athlete: "I needed sports to prove to everyone, but most of all to myself, my masculinity, or at least the masculinity society says I should have had" (Michael, 2019). Jenner points out the toxic masculinity involved within the sports world and the pressure athletes feel to conform. She further repressed her true identity by trying so hard to fit in societal norms. Both athletes are discussing the harmful effects

that the sporting community had on their own identity. They are representing a struggle that so many other athletes go through but do not have a platform to have the discussion.

Genderin'

Looking at quotes from athletes either right after a game or during, a more problematic theme emerged. Athletes were often freer with their speech as they were caught up in the moment and not thinking about the implications of their words. Going through mic'd up moments in the NFL showed a healthy amount of trash talk that had more to do with their opponent's lack of strength. This type of trash talking gendered their counterparts. Male athletes often equated more feminine qualities when trash talking male athletes.

A recent example of this type of trash talk happened during a post-game interview with Marcus Morris. Morris plays for the NBA on the New York Knicks team and was documented saying: "Just a lot of female tendencies on the court – flopping and just throwing his head back the entire game." (Bonesteel, 2020). Morris went on to say that basketball is a "man's sport" and did not have room for the other player's playing style. This interview was covered all over social media and Morris did end up apologizing for his gendered comments. This type of language not only demonstrates to younger athletes that it is okay to think this way, but also discourages younger female athletes. Morris used women in an intentionally demeaning manner that lessened their athletic abilities. Another example of using feminine qualities in a negative fashion came from an NFL cornerback for the Jacksonville Jaguars, Jalen Ramsey. In a post-game interview, Ramsey was asked what he said to an opposing player in order to illicit a physical reaction from him: "'I told him he was soft,' Ramsey said. 'I just kept telling him he was soft, he's soft'" (Lyles Jr., 2019). Ramsey was not outright calling his opponent feminine, but by using a feminine term such as "soft", his true intent was revealed. Just like with Morris, Ramsey was

equating being feminine as being less of an athlete.

Another example of lessening women in the sports world comes from former NFL player, LaVar Ball. Ball was coaching a basketball game when he disagreed with the female referee and demanded that she be substituted out for a different referee. After the game, he was interviewed and said, “She's good. She's probably a great ref for the women. She's probably a great ref. But this men's stuff, it's a difference between women's basketball and men's basketball” (Norlander, 2017). Ball viewed the referee as lesser and not capable of refereeing male athletes because of her gender. This was another theme that appeared in the data where men did not think women should be in a male-dominated environment.

Dominatin'

A third trend that appeared throughout the data was more indirect and silent. This data within this category was not as blatantly obvious upon first reading or hearing but still just as harmful. Some of the data alluded to homophobia or used power to assert dominance over women.

A recent example of this came from NFL quarterback Tom Brady. A topic that came up in the interview was male genitalia: “The two also spoke about a fair amount about male genitalia. Brady revealed that he was un-phased by seeing his teammates' junk in the locker room after a while.” (Crowley, 2020). This topic was irrelevant to Brady as an athlete but still was included in the interview. Brady has shown masculine qualities on the football field and with his marriage to a supermodel. He was able to openly discuss this without fear of ridicule because of this. Few athletes could answer the same interview question and be able to have no worry about repercussion. This type of language alludes to homophobia indirectly by Brady feeling the need to say he was unphased with seeing his teammates in the nude. Another example of an athlete

feeling the need to assert dominance was during a 2015 NBA game. LA Clippers player, Blake Griffin, was filmed on the bench grabbing a trainer's head and pushing it towards his lap.

The last example that further supports male athletes need to show dominance is from former NFL player, Marshawn Lynch. Lynch was interrupting reporter's broadcast during a summer training camp and dismissed interview questions in favor of focusing on the married female reporter: "So that's our first date? To the soul food?" (ESPN, 2017). The reporter was asking about his new restaurant when Lynch redirected the conversation in a way to ask her on a date. The reporter had to continue the interview in a seated manner while Lynch stood over her. Lynch not only displayed dominance by asking her out in an interview she could not cut short, but also by his physical presence. His language and physical demeanor were a harmful example to show youth athletes. Lynch was a successful football player and highly covered in the media. Student athletes see this example and might have pressure to display their own dominance in their lives. This further represses the identity process student athletes face as they are being shown a hypermasculine role model getting away with poor behavior.

Discussion

The professional sports world has cultivated a toxic and dangerous environment for LGBTQ student athletes. Language used when discussing different sports and athletes is predominantly heterosexual, which in turn creates a heterosexual environment that silences sexual minorities. Sports media is particularly harmful for student athlete's identity process because it is edited and created to showcase a particular lifestyle. Student athletes ingest content of the "ideal" type of athlete, which leads them to try and mimic this ideal in order to succeed. By mimicking this ideal with one another, a space is created within teams that is neither nor welcoming for those that do not identify as heterosexual. In order for this to be rectified,

intervention must begin at an earlier stage so when student athletes become professional athletes, the toxic patterns are lessened. Once the initiative is taken by student athlete organizations, other members of the sporting community will begin to practice them as well.

Implications

Research revealed that this heterosexual language is the norm and practiced by the majority of the sporting world. Social media is quick to call out obvious problematic language, but an apology for comments made does not dismiss the harm caused. Through sorting interviews, articles, and demeaning gestures, trends appeared that made it seem as though being heterosexual is the norm. Sports society claims to be progressive and more accepting but fails to practice these claims in their work. This specific research can supplement future research on toxic masculinity and student athlete's identity. Terms were created that could be used when describing phenomena's in other areas of society.

Limitations

This study was limited to American sports and three sports in particular: football, soccer, and basketball. These were chosen because of their popularity but other sports could be researched more to see if the same trends are seen or if some are more progressive. A different way to approach the same study would be to exam the comment sections for athlete's social media posts to see how society is practicing these trends.

Another limitation is not having interviewed current student athletes who identify as LGBTQ and seeing how their identity process has been affected by the media. It would be interesting to see which professional athletes made the biggest impact on them and how they learned to perform their identities.

Choosing to focus on a decade of interviews was another limitation as different norms appeared throughout the decade. Future research might do better on focusing on the last few years only instead.

Looking Ahead

In the future, it will be interesting to see how these trends change in concern to interview practices. Cross-platform research could be done to see how different social medias report the same story. Sport media organizations could also make public declarations to change their reporting style. This might create backlash within the sports community, but the backlash will lead to future conversations on why there was even a pushback to begin with. This is a broad intervention but even if one school takes the initiative to implement penalties for certain language being used, more schools might feel pressure to do the same.

Intervention

Brochure Outline for Language DOS and DON'TS

- I. Front page-*Title and University Name/Logo*
 - a. *Student Athlete's Guide to Eliminating Heterosexual Norms within the Sports Community*
- II. Second Page- *Explain the issue and why it needs to be addressed*
 - a. "Heterosexual language within sports has repressed student athletes' identity process. Language used creates little to no room for athletes to identify as another sexuality without also being afraid. 'Locker room' talk further perpetuates this problem. Within this pamphlet, athletes will find language dos and don'ts within that will start the process of eliminating this problem."
 - b. Facts

- i. “The Guardian estimates that only 2% of sports articles in the national press are written by women” (Magrath, 2019).
 - ii. 10.5% of high schoolers identify as LGB (Green, 2019).
 - iii. 4.5% of adults in the US identify as LGBTQ (Newport, 2020).
- III. Third Page-*Dos*
 - a. Do be an ally for teammates
 - b. Do hold one another accountable
 - c. Do inform the University of homophobic comments made
 - d. Do be supportive and openminded
- IV. Fourth Page-*Don'ts*
 - a. Do not try and assume anybody's sexuality
 - b. Do not stereotype based on gender
 - c. Do not describe one another using gendered traits
- V. Fifth Page-*Resources on Campus*
 - a. List clubs and mental health resources relevant to the college
- VI. Sixth Page-*List of national organizations that support LGBTQ athletes*
 - a. Athlete Ally
 - b. GLSEN
 - c. Federation of Gay Games
 - d. Women's Sports Foundation
 - e. Go! Generation Out Athletes

Conclusion

Though society has made great strides to be more inclusive to everybody, the sports

world has failed to do so within its own community. By being male-dominated, masculine qualities encroach on the different aspects within the community. Language is the biggest contributor to the issue of perpetuating a heterosexual space. The data collected shows how normalized unhealthy practices have become in the media and interactions between athletes. Intervention is needed at the lowest level in order to transform the language so that when current student athletes become professional athletes, the norm has changed.

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