Racial Representations of Women's and Men's Intercollegiate Basketball Coverage on ESPN.com

Terrence A. Jordan, Georgia Southern University
Heather Maxwell, University of Minnesota
Nicole LaVo, University of Minnesota

Prior research has shown that racial ideologies exist within traditional media (i.e., newspaper, media guides, television). Through these different channels, Black athletes are often praised for their physical attributes while, Whites athletes are credited for their cognitive abilities (McCarthy, Jones, & Potrac, 2003). This phenomenon of athletic superiority and intellectual inferiority of Black athletes has been coined “race logic” (Coakley, 2007; Hodge, Burden, Robinson, & Harrison, 2006). Race logic is well documented in different forms of media but no research has explored the phenomenon via the Internet. The purpose of this study was to benchmark media coverage of women’s and men’s intercollegiate basketball on the internet.

The objective of this study was to examine whether race logic was challenged or reproduced in online photograph representations of women’s and men’s basketball players on their respective websites within ESPN.com. Feature photographs (n=336) for the 2006-2007 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball season were collected on ESPN.com. The sport of basketball and the content source, ESPN.com, were purposively chosen for analysis in this study. Quantitative content analysis was employed. First, each photograph was coded for the publication date. Second, each feature photograph was coded as “female” or “male”. Third, each photograph was coded by race: (1) White, (2) Black, (3) combination of White and Black, or (4) other. Only feature photographs of athletes were included in this study. Coaches, spectators, mascots, etc. were not included. The NCAA reported the 2005-06 student-athlete race/ethnicity percentages for Division I men’s and women’s basketball were Black males (58.9%), White males (29.9%), and other males (11.2%); Black females (44.6%), White females (44.3%), and other females (11.1%). Descriptive statistics were run for the following variables: 1) Quantity and percentage of men’s basketball photographs that featured male basketball players, 2) Quantity and percentage of women’s basketball photographs that featured female basketball players, 3) Quantity and percentage of men’s basketball photographs that portrayed only White athletes only, Black athletes only, or a combination of White and Black athletes, 4) Quantity and percentage of women’s basketball photographs that portrayed White athletes only, Black athletes only, or a combination of White and Black athletes.

Comparing the racial/ethnicity composition of the 2005-06 NCAA Division-I women’s and men’s basketball players to the racial/ethnicity composition of women’s and men’s basketball feature photographs on ESPN.com during the 2005-06 season revealed four important findings. First, a sizable quantity of photographs portrayed combinations of Black and White athletes. Second, when photographs portrayed solely Black females or Black males, Black athletes were proportionally representative of the NCAA racial/ethnicity composition for women’s and men’s basketball. Third, when photographs portrayed only White females or White males, White athletes were under-represented in comparison to the NCAA racial/ethnicity composition for women’s and men’s basketball. Lastly, when pictured homogenously (only Black or only White), Black athletes, regardless of the sex of the athlete, were five times more likely to be portrayed in photographs compared to White athletes.

The findings of this study indicate race logic was both challenged and reproduced by online feature photographs of women’s and men’s NCAA Division-I basketball on ESPN.com. Race logic was challenged because a large percentage of the photographs a combination of Black and White athletes. Race logic was reproduced when athletes were featured homogenously as White athletes were drastically under-represented. Future research should continue to study race/ethnic representations of athletes in online and traditional media because images produce cultural norms and inform society of what is valued.