

Racial Bias in Professional Sports: From a Media and Fan Perspective

by

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Racial Bias in Professional Sports: From a Media and Fan Perspective

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ABSTRACT

There has been an issue with racial bias in the sports broadcasting and reporting industry, as well as with sports fans. This study looks further into the issue of racial bias through both lenses listed above. To help look at racial bias in sports media, there will be closer examinations of Agenda Setting Theory, and Framing Theory. To look closer at racial bias in sports fandom, the Social Identity Theory will be used to help ground the issue. There will be some specific cases that will be discussed to provide more insight to both sides of the issue. After a thorough literature review, there will be a study that looks specifically at a case of racial bias from the perspective of the media and the perspective of the fans. The case of National Football League player Richard Sherman will be the case examined. The issue at hand is a post-game interview Sherman gave after a big win in the playoffs of the 2013-2014 season. This mixed method study looks at media reports and fan perceptions on the Richard Sherman case.

Key Words: Agenda-setting, Framing, Racial Bias, Richard Sherman

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Introduction

The study explores racism in sports coverage and perceptions of sports fandom. By looking at racial bias in sports through two separate lenses (media and fans), it provides insight from two sides of the issue. The two groups of people who make up the media and fans, both are at the forefront of the issue of racial bias in sports. A quantitative and qualitative analysis is done on one specific event to provide more insight on racism in sports coverage and sports fandom. Both of these analyses will come after a thorough literature review covering racial bias in sports coverage and racially biased sports fans.

First, racial bias in sports that takes place amongst media members is examined more closely. To look in this area closer, an examination of agenda setting theory and framing theory in sports coverage was done. In looking at these theories, it can be seen how the media is setting the agenda for the audience and perhaps setting the tone for racism in their work. In the literature review, there are articles highlighting the history of racially biased language seen from the media. There are specific cases discussed. In fact, there is one specific case that will be further examined: The Richard Sherman case. There was a content analysis of news articles chosen and coders then coded the paragraphs in each article for positive and negative tones. It should be noted that a lot of the negative tones found in the articles will relate to racial issues. It was beneficial to see how second-level framing theory can lead into racially biased language in print and during live broadcasts.

The second area that was further researched will be sports fans reactions to

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racially biased cases. A closer look at Twitter was examined for fan reaction. With the rise of social media amongst everyone including professional athletes, it has opened the door for fans to have direct contact with professional players. There is no question Twitter presents a unique communication platform that never existed before amongst athletes and fans. With this new and unique way of communicating between fans and players, it opens another platform for the highly invested fan to be a part of. The social identity theory and how it relates to this issue was examined in this section. Looking at multiple theories created a dual theoretical approach. Fans that are more than casual fans often have reasons for being so invested in their favorite teams and players. These reasons can be seen more clearly when looking at social identity theory. On this side of the issue, there was a content analysis done of tweets that took place shortly after Richard Sherman, a NFL player, gave a postgame interview. After selecting search phrases to use in the search, there was a sample of tweets collected for coding. There were then trends and themes found within the sample of tweets. All of the trends, themes, and additional findings within the sample of tweets will then be discussed.

Agenda Setting Theory and Framing Theory in Sports Coverage

Maxwell, McCombs, and Shaw (1977) offer a definition that is functional and easy to digest for the agenda setting theory. This definition can be labeled as the seminal research in this area. This was the first used and identified definition of the theory.

This impact of the mass media- the ability to affect cognitive change among individuals, to structure their thinking- has been labeled the agenda-setting function of mass communication. Here may lay the most important effect of mass communication, its ability to mentally order and organize our world for us. In

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short, the mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about. (1)

agenda setting theory is more specific to this particular paper. It has been known as the second-level of framing theory, which sometimes causes criticism. This criticism comes into play because many theorists and researchers can make the argument that both framing theory and agenda setting theory are too similar. However, in this case, and in many others, both theories can strengthen each other. Framing theory is the beginning of altering a viewer or listener's perception. When looking at racial bias in sports, agenda setting theory helps strengthen Framing Theory. As a researcher it becomes clearer as to how the media can frame an event, and in this case, set the agenda based on race.

Looking at agenda setting theory from this perspective, helps understand why it is labeled the second-level of framing theory.

Framing theory is complex and also very vast. As it refers to sports coverage, it can be looked at as a bias that in return alters the behavior of a fan. “The media, including newspapers, magazines, books, movies, radio, television, video games, and the Internet, pervade culture. Although each of us incorporates the media into our lives in different ways, the things we read, hear, and see in the media are important parts of our experience. They frame and influence how we think about the world” (Coakley, 2004, pg. 406).

The main issue in sports coverage, as it deals with framing, is the bias in how it's reported. For instance, there are numerous different ways a local sportscaster can “frame” his five-minute segment on the 11 o'clock news. Coakley's (2004) study offers more insight to this idea:

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We also think that, when we hear the commentary or read the report on the event, the commentators and journalists are “telling it like it is.” We don’t usually think that what we are seeing, hearing, and reading is a series of commentaries and images selected for particular reasons and grounded in the social worlds and interests of those producing the event, controlling the images, and delivering the commentary (408).

This was an interesting concept to explore. It is important to realize that by selecting specific images and words, there is an immediate frame being put on a story or an event by a member of the media. People who are watching, listening, or reading through whatever medium are given a specific angle of the story, and in return their perception can change. There are also similar examples displayed during a live televised game. The viewer may not acknowledge the fact that their perception of the action is being framed, however with certain language being used by broadcasters; their perception of the game is being framed for them in a specific way. Sometimes the word choice and naming patterns broadcasters may seem “normal” on the surface. However, these are subtle alterations that change the viewers’ perception of the game. These examples will be discussed specifically later on in the literature review.

There is a large amount of research that shows how sporting events have been framed over time. A great example of a framed sporting event took place on a grand stage at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. “NBC strategically created entertaining drama by representing what media analysts have described as “plausible reality” in their broadcasts; to do this, they deliberately withheld information, so that they could frame events in their terms, even know they knew those terms to be contrary to what was

expressed by the athletes and others involved” (Coakley, 2004).

Framing by Sports Commentators: Impact on Sports Fans

There is a significant amount of research involving sports commentary. Most of the research that has been done involves the effect sports commentary has on the audience. Additionally, most of the research has been done on live sporting events (McGuire, 2002.) It has been found that sports commentators have an ability to frame the game in a way that alters sports fans perceptions and attitude towards the game. Additionally, it has been found that announcers can impact the emotional effect on viewers by overdramatizing specific events (Comisky, Bryant & Zillman, 1997).

McGuire (2002) found, “that sports announcers engaged in selective perception in their commentary when explaining positive or negative events impacting the team for which they were announcing” (p. 51). It was found in the study that one teams announcer had framed the event by saying the team was pulling off an upset win. The other announcer for the opposing team framed the event by explaining how their team lost to a team it was expected to beat. Therefore, because of the different way each announcer framed the game, there were different levels of excitement between both fan bases. This of course depended on if they were listening to the losing teams’ broadcaster or the winning teams’ broadcaster.

While these examples of sports commentators framing the message don’t directly speak to sports broadcasters framing the contest using racial bias, it does show that commentators can alter and change the perceptions of fans by framing an event. It shows that sports commentators have the ability to frame any event based on the language they use. Therefore, the language that has been found in sports commentary involving racist

language is sure to be altering the perception of fans listening.

Beginning of Racial Bias in Sports Coverage

Most of the research found in racial bias in sports coverage deals with racial bias among African-Americans and European-Americans. There hasn't been as much research done in the area of racial bias in sports involving Asian-American athletes or Latino-American athletes (Wenner, 1995). Throughout the years of sports coverage on television and in print, racial bias has slowly diminished due to reporters being more delicate in their word choice. However, there is still some biased language that has remained consistent throughout time. Some of the language isn't directly done with the intent of being racially biased. In other words, there is a lot of hidden bias that still remains in today's sports reporting.

One magazine that has been examined for racially biased trends is *Sports Illustrated*. *SI* was and still is one of the nation's leading sports magazines. It wasn't until 1974 when increased coverage of African-American (male) athletes took place (Condor & Anderson, 1984). This coincides with a study done by Francis (1990) on stories about men's Division 1 college basketball between 1954 and 1986. Although there was a significant increase found in the number of stories written about African-Americans, there was also a significant increase in African-American athletes throughout that time period. Furthermore, Francis (1990) said, "in proportion to their population and their performances on the court, black basketball athletes received far fewer articles than their contribution to the sports seems to warrant" (p. 60). It was found that *SI* had a thirty-year gap before its first and second cover featuring African-American female athletes. Over a 35-year period African-American women were featured on only five of 1,835

covers. It wasn't until the early 1970's when African-American athletes were even found in *SI* advertisements (Francis, 1990).

On the television side of racial bias in sports coverage, there is a classic study that was done by Rainville and McCormick (1977). They found that European-American players received more praise and far less criticism than African-American players in National Football League commentary. There was evidence found that the sports announcer was building a positive reputation for the white player while praising him during a positive play. The announcer was also found making the white player out to be the aggressor and was focusing more on his success. The announcer was conversely building a negative reputation for the black player by comparing him to other players who had at some point garnered negative attention. Furthermore, the announcer was making negative remarks about the black players' past accomplishments (p. 24-25). This study was done in an age where racism was a lot more widespread. This study can be seen as one of the influential studies that found and documented the issue of racial bias in sports coverage.

African-American Athletes Stereotyped as Deviant

There are many examples of stereotypes toward African-American athletes that are hidden in sports commentary. Commentators are often times not directly using stereotypical language towards African-American athletes. These examples can be seen in the next section, which discusses commentators' word choice. However, there are some other forms of racial stereotyping in sports that is far less disguised. These forms include broadcasters' more or less making assumptions and stereotypical remarks knowingly. This type of racial stereotyping has progressively diminished in time.

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African-American athletes have been stereotyped as a threatening “urban black masculinity” (Cole & Denny, 1995, p. 129). McDonald (1996) said, “Much of Michael Jordan’s popularity was achieved by contrasting his image to the deviant image of other African-Americans in the media” (344). These common stereotypes of African-American athletes have been very prevalent in the NBA. A few of the more sought out cases include: Michael Jordan’s gambling addiction, Len Bias’ drug addiction, and lastly Magic Johnson’s sex addiction. Cole and Andrews (1996) argue that the stereotypical issues were at their peak in the 1970’s and 1980’s.

“According to the racist rhetoric of an increasingly influential American New Right, the NBA was *too drug infested* simply because it was *too black*. The mainstream media used the specter of drug abuse within the league as evidence of the pathological depravity of the African American males who dominated and thus threatened the existence of the NBA and, by extension, the nation as a whole” (p. 145). To go along with this point, players in the NBA especially have been stereotyped to be violent in nature. Cole and Andrews (1996) found that African-American NBA players can be depicted as being criminally violent “thugs.” One of the players who was knowingly put under this type of scrutiny was Charles Barkley. The mediated image of Barkley was that he was extremely aggressive and violent. It was so known to the public as a common stereotype that Nike had Barkley jokingly saying, “Pardon me, I’m sorry, excuse me’ as opposing players fly by the wayside” (McDonald, 1996). It will be important to note the word “thug” as it relates to racial bias in sports coverage. Later in this paper, an examination of the usage of the word “thug” will be looked at more specifically.

The stereotype of African-American men as oversexed and unable to control their

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sexual demands influenced the media portrayal of African-American male athletes. This was the case with NBA legend Magic Johnson's contradiction of HIV and Mike Tyson's rape conviction. While the NBA has been a sport with more examples than any other sport, there have been cases outside of the NBA as well. For instance, one big example that was just touched on outside the

NBA dealt with professional African-American boxer Mike Tyson. Lule (1995) had some interesting observations from the Tyson case. "Just two portraits of Tyson emerged," Lule said. "He was either a crude, sex-obsessed violent savage who could barely control his animal instincts or he was a victim of terrible social circumstances, almost saved from the streets by a kindly overseer, but who finally faltered and fell to the connivance of others. Both these portraits demean and debase Tyson, depicting him as a creature helpless either to basic instincts or the machinations of others. Both portraits depict a man without self-control or determination."

Racial Bias in Word Choice of Sports Commentators

Oftentimes media members take part in racial bias without direct knowledge they're doing so. For example, a study done in 2008 provides some great insight into common generalizations made by sports broadcasters. Some of these generalizations show racial bias toward a specific ethnic group. In Buffington and Fraley (2008), the metaphor "Black brawn vs. White brains" is a key variable that describes the imbalanced literature in sporting context based on a basketball player's mental and physical approach to the game. Ten comments made from the 2000 NCAA men's basketball championship were pulled aside for further analysis. Each comment focused on either physical or mental skills. Each of the 72 participants were asked to match the player with the

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comment that was listed. For each comment, there were four different pictures of players shown to participants. All but one group of pictures contained two white players and two African American players. There were two hypotheses presented. The first is that African American players are identified as being more athletic, fast, and physically gifted than white players. The second is that white players are depicted as being more intelligent, hard-working, and good teammates more so than African American players. Both of these hypotheses were supported (Buffington & Fraley, 2008, p. 302-304). While these slight differences in communication don't sound too biased on the surface, the different words used to describe players of a certain ethnicity does in fact display racially biased language. In addition to opposing physical and mental capacities, sports broadcasters can be seen inadvertently attaching ideologies and representations to players of a specific ethnicity.

African-American athletes can be seen as being portrayed as naturally athletic and oversexed. These stereotypes suggest that they are "closer to nature" than European-Americans and thus "animal like" (Jackson, 1989). These observations make it not surprising some media members imply that African-American male athletes resemble animals. Furthermore, it was found that the same was true for African-American female athletes as well. Television commentators often compared African-American female athletes to animals, something that was not done when discussing or describing European-American female athletes (Jackson, 1989).

Racial Bias in Naming Patterns of Sports Commentators

The next form of biased behavior amongst broadcasters that will be examined has to deal with naming patterns. There have been some stark findings in this area. In a

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specific study, college and professional basketball was looked at closer to find out if there were specific naming patterns being used by commentators. Additionally, the study looked at if a players' race had anything to do with commentators using first names only, last names only, or both first and last names to talk about a player. Before looking specifically at some findings, it is important to note that looking at a sport like basketball complicated some of the research and findings. The reasoning behind this is because of the speed of the game. The game is often played at a frantic pace, and it is feasible to say that sometimes commentators just don't have the time to call a player's entire name. However, with this complication aside, there were some intriguing findings in the study.

“Commentators deal in words and they are alert to the possibilities of ‘having fun’ with them, as well as finding ways to vary how they refer to individual players. For example: ‘You’re looking for things to fool around with a little bit, to play with’ (Bruce, 2004). This quote was taken by an undisclosed sports broadcaster for the study. Another undisclosed broadcaster was quoted saying, “If he has a real definite first name, you can use that first name. Rashard- you could use that. Michael- you couldn’t use that. That is how I do it and I think that is how most people would do it. You wouldn’t call him John. That’s why you would use his last name” (p. 870). While these choices seem innocent, they are not if you look deeper into the decisions. Bruce says, “They are powerfully influenced by the commentators’ location in a society grounded in racial difference” (p. 870). He goes on by saying, “Words which seem ‘fun’ or have a ‘good sound’ are often those which are unusual or unique. In this analysis it was usually the first names of black athletes that stood out to the mostly white commentators as unique enough for the audience to be able to recognize the player on this basis alone” (p. 870).

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Furthermore, Bruce found that white commentators called an Idaho State point guard by his first name, which happened to be Shabaka. The commentators were heard drawing out the syllables of the players' first name and emphasizing it throughout the broadcast. This example suggests that for some white commentators particularly, some African American names seem fun and exotic to say. Another broadcaster was quoted by saying, "Pervis Ellison with the Celtics. I mean Pervis is not particularly good- and certainly hasn't made very many great plays over the last couple years- but when he does make a play, it's fun to play with Pervis, with that name" (p. 870).

The issue was not only limited to the names of African American players. Bender (1994) suggests that commentators have more difficulty with 'foreign'-sounding names. The multi-syllabic names tend to make it difficult on commentators. In these instances, commentators tended to use nicknames or first names more frequently for these athletes. "Examples included Duke's white American bench player, Scott Wojciechowski (called Wojo 57% of the time) and Wisconsin's Nigerian-born center, Osita Nwachukwu" (871).

These examples above "point to the normalizing discourse of the dominant white society" (871). "For example, when asked if he would use first name only to identify player Richard Keene, one commentator responded, 'No. Keene. See because Richard is too normal.'" Others stated they generally avoided the use of 'common' first names, such as Michael, Kevin, Bob or John. However, whichever way you look at the issue, there is a case for racial biased language toward a specific ethnic group.

Former Athletes Using Racially Biased Language

In sports reporting and broadcasting, there is a heavy emphasis on making sure the audience can trust the reporter or broadcaster. Professionals in sports media need to

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be able to be credible sources for fans. This is why former professional athletes, people who have played at the highest level, get hired into sports broadcasting and reporting positions. It is important to look at how current and former athletes, sometimes turned sports personalities, are being racially biased towards athletes of opposing races. When a sports fan says a racial slur or posts a slur on social media, it doesn't garner the attention that a former professional athlete, or a well-known sports personality saying something similar would. Unlike the casual sports fan, what a former professional athlete or sports personality says rings around the world in the media and sometimes never fully leave the minds of the media and general public. The words of these former athletes have the power to "frame" or set the agenda for an issue or an event at any point in time.

To share some examples of the major athletes that have publically flamed opposing races and ethnicities, Howard Cosmell of totalprosports.com wrote an article in October of 2010 titled: *10 Ridiculously Racist Remarks from Sports Personalities*. There were some really disheartening and extreme examples of racial slurs that were presented in this article. One example from the article included professional boxer Floyd Mayweather Jr. speaking about opposing boxer Manny Pacquiao. Mayweather went on a video rant and referred to Pacquiao as a "yellow chump." Mayweather went on by ordering Pacquiao to make him a sushi roll and to cook him some rice. Both of these comments were referring to Pacquiao's ethnicity. Pacquiao is from the Philippines. Mayweather not only had this incident. He also had a borderline incident prior to this rant about Pacquiao. On May 5th, 2007, Mayweather fought Oscar De La Hoya, a Mexican fighter. On Mayweather's walk into the ring, he wore an enormous sombrero on his head. Some Mexican viewers took this as a non-verbal racial threat towards the Mexican

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community.

Another example that can be found involves Fuzzy Zoeller, a former professional golfer. In 1997, Tiger Woods busted on the scene and was running away with a victory at his first ever Masters appearance. Tiger Woods, who is of African-American descent, was racially ridiculed by Zoeller. During the fourth and final round, Zoeller was quoted by saying, “You pat him on the back and say congratulations and enjoy it and tell him not to serve fried chicken next year. Got it? Or collard greens or whatever the hell they serve” (p. 1). This quote spread like wildfire in the national media. It is still a much talked about and remembered racial slur today.

Also in the article, there were some examples that dealt with NBA superstars. The first example involves former star-player, current studio analyst for TNT, Charles Barkley. He publically ridiculed Auburn University when they didn’t hire the African-American candidate. Barkley also defamed Notre Dame for firing former head football coach Tyrone Willingham. Willingham was an African-American. At one point in his playing career he was asked by a reporter if he thought not getting some calls was a racial issue. Barkley responded, “This is why I hate white people. You guys try to turn everything into a racial issue.” The other NBA superstar that was talked about in the totalprosports.com article was Shaquille O’Neal. Shaq was being interviewed by Fox Sports in 2002 when a reporter asked him if he had any words of encouragement for new NBA center from China, Yao Ming. Shaq answered, “Tell Yao Ming, ‘Ching-chong-yang-wah-ah-so.’” Without any further explanation needed, the Asian community did not take kindly to Shaq's comments.

Lastly, another example came from former NFL wide-receiver Michael Irvin.

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Irvin, who was a great player for the Dallas Cowboys, went on a national radio in 2006 and had some remarks about Cowboys quarterback Tony Romo. “He doesn’t look like he’s that type of an athlete. But he is. He is, man. I don’t know ... some brother down in that line somewhere ... I don’t know who saw what or where, his great-great-great-great-grandma ran over in the ‘hood or something went down.” While Irvin tried to mask what he was referring to, it was pretty easy to see that there were a few unethically racial comments in this quote.

Racial Bias Found in Fouls Called by NBA Officials

While this case doesn’t directly coincide with bias from the media or sports fans, it is still a very significant case regarding racial bias in sports. In 2007, a study done by Joseph Prince and Justin Wolfers drew significant attention towards racial bias in NBA referee calls. Their findings were that white referees called fouls against black players more often than white players (and vice versa) (Ingraham, 2014). Prince and Wolfers, the authors of the study done in 2007, went back and looked back on the issue they earlier studied and found that the bias that previously existed was suddenly gone. The chart that was formed in 2007 shows that the more white referees are working a game, the less fouls are called against white players with a very subtle decrease for black players.

The first period that was covered in the initial study was from 2003-2006. The second part that was further examined was from 2007-2010. There were two major differences in the more recent chart. First, there is no longer a meaningful difference in foul calls based on the ethnicity of the referee, and also that the overall number of fouls called decreased moderately. The NBA was asked later about the differences in each chart and was asked

if they had made any adjustments to the officiating. They denied changing anything after the initial chart was posted, which became a large talking point throughout various media outlets. Joseph Price, co-author of the findings in both time periods, said, “Racial bias is a malleable trait.” He went on by saying, “Large-scale public focus on a specific type of racial bias in a specific group can make it go away. Price went on to say that the same holds true for any situation in which implicit bias is a factor. For instance, the same could be true when a police officer decides to pull someone over, or how a teacher decides to grade an essay (Ingraham, 2014).

Social Identity Theory: Sports Fandom

There are so many sports fanatics that loom in the United States. There are fans that buy jerseys, pay big money to watch their teams play, and even stash away team collectible items year after year. “The social identity theory states that people are motivated to behave in ways that maintain and boost their self-esteem,” (Schlabach, 1998). This quote about social identity theory gives some great insight into why sports fans become “fanatics”. It provides a valid answer to the question; why do sports fans become so obsessed with their favorite team? It tells us that people latch onto sports teams and become one with that team to garner that sense of togetherness and to improve their self-esteem. Sports fans tend to develop a type of in-group favoritism toward one specific team that eventually helps a person develop a social identity (Schlabach, 1998). These relationships that fans build with sports teams are exemplified in many cases. In many cases, a fanatic sports fan will still love their team just as much after a defeat. This is due to the biases and discriminating behaviors a person has against the *other* teams, and he or she will attribute a team loss everywhere besides the team itself (Schlabach,

1998). These discriminations and biases can become hostile and sometimes can lead towards comments becoming racially deviant.

Emotionally Invested Sports Fans

One question to ask before we look at how sports fans react on Twitter is the question of why sports fans become so emotionally invested in their favorite teams and players. There is research out there that suggests there are specific motives as to why people watch sports and gradually become more invested in their favorite team.

According to some researchers, a lot of the same motives for watching sports are similar to the motives for general television viewing (Gantz & Wenner, 1995). However, other studies have found specific sports-viewing motives. It was found that sports fans found “arousal” in watching sports and becoming a fan (Rubin, 1981). Gantz (1981) found that avid sports fans watched sports for the “thrill of victory.” Another motive found in this study was that sports fans watched sports to “let loose.”

It was also found in a similar study done by Gantz and Wenner (1995) that avid sports fans would watch “sports from a deeper qualitatively different set of experiences than non-fans.” This would suggest that avid fans become more emotionally invested while watching sports. Additionally, avid fans are more emotionally invested than casual fans, suggesting these types of fans would be more likely to talk about sports on social networks. It was also found that casual sports fans watched sports more with their families and friends simply because others around them were watching sports (Rubin, 1981).

Sports Fans Become Unfiltered on Twitter

Twitter is at the forefront as the social media platform for sports fans to showcase

their feelings, emotions, etc. towards a player, team, or situation. Twitter has given the fans a louder voice than they've ever had. Fans have the ability to interact directly with their favorite teams and players. While there is a lot of positive attributes for Twitter and its relationship with sports fans, there can be some drawbacks as well. There are a lot of completely invested sports fans who are extremely passionate about their teams and favorite players. However, sometimes fans can become numb to what their saying behind their cell phone or computer. If there are pivotal stories in the sports world, or controversial actions by players on and off the field, you can bet that fans are taking to Twitter to react.

Joel Ward Case

Joel Ward is a professional hockey player for the Washington Capitals in the National Hockey League In 2012; Ward came through in overtime of Game 7 in a playoff series against the Boston Bruins with a dramatic game-winning overtime goal. While many Capitals fans praised Ward for his heroics, he was simultaneously racially ridiculed on Twitter for his game-winning goal. The fact that Ward is an African-American hockey player playing in the NHL, which is a predominantly white player's league, opened up the floodgates for racist tweets from fans. Ian Carey, a sports writer for the *Huffington Post* wrote an article on the racist reactions from hockey fans on Twitter after the Ward goal. "These hockey fans seemingly had no inhibitions of posting their racist language for the whole world to see, with some referring to hockey as a "white man's game" and telling Ward to "go play basketball", Carey said. (Carey, 2012).

While Carey didn't get into much detail about specific tweets, he alluded to the fact that many fans said they didn't believe African-American hockey players had a place

in the NHL. Carey continued by saying, “While this small group of people should in no way be seen as a representative of hockey fans in general it is disturbing that so many people felt that posting such comments was somehow OK.” Carey went on to say, “I only wish this was an isolated incident, but the marriage of sports, sports fans, and Twitter seems to have ousted a racism problem that many might have believed wasn't prominent and possibly didn't exist at all” (Carey, 2012).

Throughout Carey’s article, he outlined what FIFA has done to combat the racially derived tweets from sports fans directed at players. He explained how a player had collapsed on the playing surface in London and went into cardiac arrest during a match. He said that his heart stopped beating for 78 minutes and fans were waiting patiently for the outcome. An English student decided to write a series of racist tweets directed at this player while his life was in danger on the field surrounded by medical attention. The student was later arrested and his racial statements landed him 56 days in jail (Carey 2012). Carey concluded the article by explaining how the NHL should take a similar approach that FIFA currently uses in dealing with racist fan reactions on Twitter.

The Richard Sherman Case

Richard Sherman has proved over the last couple seasons to be one of the NFL's best cornerbacks in the entire league. If you ask him, he is the best. In the 2013 NFL playoffs, Sherman’s Seattle Seahawks defeated the San Francisco 49ers to earn a trip to the Super Bowl. After a long, hard-fought game, Erin Andrews of Fox Sports interviewed Richard Sherman after a dazzling performance. Sherman was intense and unorthodox in his responses to questions. He consistently yelled intensely and proclaimed that he was the best cornerback in the league. Shortly after the interview was over, social networks

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were flooding with racial slurs towards Sherman. Twitter was exploding with fan reaction and a lot of it was negative words for Sherman. Sherman was called an ape, a thug and the n-word among many other words (Dyson, 2014). Sherman went to Twitter that night and said that this example of hatred and backlash he was receiving is an example that racism is alive and well in the United States.

This particular case will be looked at further in both a qualitative and quantitative analysis. The quantitative section will deal with racial bias in the Richard Sherman case from the media's perception. There will be sports stories written on the Sherman case selected for coding in this section. The qualitative section will look at racial bias in the Richard Sherman case through the eyes of the fans. Analyzing tweets from sports fans will be done to further understand the fan's perception.

Part 1: Quantitative Analysis of News

This section will be examined by determining which tone some of the national media outlets used when describing the Richard Sherman case of racial bias. The focus of this analysis will be to further understand how various media outlets set the agenda or framed this event. Furthermore, there were two variables that were looked at when conducting this study.

The first variable that was looked at identified if a paragraph showed positive, negative, or neutral tones towards Richard Sherman. It is important to understand when coding that aside from Richard Sherman's post-game antics, he played a very good game. He helped lead his team to a Super Bowl. It was clear to all three coders that the articles coded were dealing with racially biased language. All coders understood that negatively coding a paragraph meant there was some form of racial bias found, and therefore it was

negatively coded.

The second variable that was looked at was the target of the coded paragraph in a specific news article. The targets included: the player involved, the team the player represented at the time, the community/city the team is located in, the fans, and other.

Hypothesis 1: The majority of news articles examined will portray Richard Sherman in a negative tone opposed to portraying him in a positive tone.

Part 1: Method

Sample and Unit of Analysis

There were a range of articles selected for this quantitative analysis. There was one news story collected from thebiglead.com. Another article was selective from *Time Magazine*. A third article was selected from the *Huffington Post*. The next article selected from *The Guardian*. The last two articles that were coded came from *USA Today* and *Sports Illustrated*. All of these articles covered the Richard Sherman event from a national media standpoint. There were no local articles selected because it could create biased results. All of the articles were published within a two day period. They were either published on January 19th or January 20th of 2013. The unit of analysis for this study was paragraphs. The sample was the amount of total paragraphs in the six news articles (N=49).

Coding Scheme

Three coders were explained the parameters of the study and were provided thorough instructions. There were two variables that were coded for percentage of agreement by all three coders. The frequency distribution charts were completed by taking the average between all coders for every specific variable. The first variable

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focused on positive, negative, or neutral tones toward Richard Sherman after his infamous interview with Erin Andrews. Positive tones were identified as paragraphs that benefited Richard Sherman after his post-game interview. Negative tones were identified as paragraphs that put Richard Sherman at risk or at a disadvantage based on his race. The second variable focused on the target of the paragraph. The average percentage of agreement for variable one was 66.67%. The average percentage of agreement for variable two was 85.03%. These were all tentative conclusions.

Results

By analyzing the tones of the paragraphs that were within the coded articles, H1 was supported. There were more instances that Richard Sherman was portrayed in a negative tone, rather than instances portraying Sherman in a positive or neutral tone (See Table 1). Sports writers framed the event by targeting Richard Sherman more than any other variable listed (See Table 2). Coders understood going into the study that by negatively coding a paragraph about Sherman, they found that there was some form of racial bias towards Sherman found in that paragraph.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentages of Positive, Negative, and Neutral Paragraph

Tones

<u>Targets</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Positive Tone Towards Richard Sherman	9	18.37%
Negative Tone Towards Richard Sherman	21	42.86%
Neutral Tones Towards Richard Sherman	19	38.78%

Table 1: Discussion

When interpreting the results of the frequency and percentages of tones found within the paragraphs, it was found that there were more negative tones towards Richard

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Sherman than positive or neutral tones. In fact, only nine of the 49 paragraphs were coded as a positive tone towards Sherman. The second most frequent variable coded was that of neutral tones towards Richard Sherman. We can make the inference that neutral tones account for sports writers simply stating the facts and being unbiased by not taking a positive or negative side on the Sherman incident.

An interesting finding within the articles and the coding of these articles was the sports writer really set the tone for the article in their headline. For instance, in the article written about Sherman on thebiglead.com, the title read: “Richard Sherman Screamed at Erin Andrews About Michael Crabtree.” This title immediately sets the agenda for the article. Furthermore, the title gives the entire article a specific tone. The article that was written by *Time Magazine* was titled: “Richard Sherman’s Postgame Interview Was the Best.” In comparison to the title of the story on thebiglead.com, this title sets a different agenda, and a different tone.

One big limitation with this study was that there were too many neutrally coded paragraphs. This limited the results of the study. So, if this study were done again, that variable could be changed, omitted, or perhaps broken down into other variables to improve upon the results of this study.

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Target

<u>Targets</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Richard Sherman	34	69.38%
Seattle Seahawks	1	02.04%
The city of Seattle	0	0%
Seattle Seahawks fans	1	02.04%
Other	13	26.53%

Table 2: Discussion

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The results of this study shown in Table 2 showcase that Richard Sherman was at the center of attention in the paragraphs that were coded. Interesting enough, the Seattle Seahawks, who won the game prior to Richard Sherman's post-game antics, were not the target of the discussion in 48 of the 49 coded paragraphs. Richard Sherman stole the thunder, and sports writers most likely changed their headlines as he was ranting on the field after the game. This relates back to framing theory. Specifically, taking a brief look at story framing can help better understand this concept. Kirk Hallahan, from the Department of Journalism and Technical Communication at Colorado State University, says "Story framing involves (a) selecting key themes or ideas that are the focus of the message and (b) incorporating a variety of storytelling or narrative techniques that support that theme.

One limitation with this study was that the city of Seattle was never coded as a target for a paragraph. All three coders failed to code the city of Seattle as a target of a paragraph. Therefore, if this study was done again, this variable would be eliminated from the list of variables.

Part 2: Qualitative Analysis of Tweets

Looking at Twitter posts by fans during two cases involving racial backlash, a qualitative analysis was done. A qualitative analysis completed by looking at social media posts provides a sufficient way to obtain direct and specific feedback on an issue or event. When doing a qualitative analysis, there are emergent themes that become visible to the researcher (the researcher is also at the heart of the study and is much attached to the issue).

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Twitter is becoming a growing tool for research purposes because of the accessibility through the search bar. There are beginning to be great studies done on television ratings based on statistics drawn from Twitter. For example, a study done in 2011 showcased Twitter being used to look at the popularity of television events. Bruns', Harrington's and Highfield's (2013) study found the following:

Among the most prominent uses of Twitter at present is its role in the discussion of widely televised events: Twitter's own statistics for 2011, for example, list major entertainment spectacles (the MTV Music Awards, the BET Awards) and sports matches (the UEFA Champions League final, the FIFA Women's World Cup final) amongst the events generating the most tweets per second during the year (Twitter, 2011). (315)

The article also explains that there are numerous amounts of qualitative and quantitative information being studied from Twitter posts as it pertains to an event or specific game.

A quote from the article reads: "Using innovative methods which combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to the analysis of Twitter datasets containing several hundreds of thousands, we examine overall patterns of participation to discover how audiences express their fandom throughout the event" (Bruns et al., 2013).

In this specific instance, a qualitative analysis was done on one case involving a racially controversial event in professional sports. The case involves Richard Sherman, a defensive player for the Seattle Seahawks of the NFL. Sherman's post-game interview sparked a Twitter up rise amongst fans of the NFL. The purpose of this analysis was to find trends among fan tweets about this specific case.

RQ1: Was Richard Sherman racially ridiculed on Twitter after his post-game speech?

Qualitative Method

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Using Twitter to qualitatively analyze data on the issue, the goal was to find some trends and themes throughout content. There were three separate search phrases typed into Twitter. The first phrase was: “Sherman Interview.” Only looking at comments that took place from January 20th or January 21st, there were 28 Twitter posts that showed up. The second phrase was: “Richard Sherman Erin Andrews.” Only looking at posts that were made on January 19th (the day of the interview), all 34 comments were coded. The last phrase used was: “thug Sherman.” There were 19 posts that showed up for January 19th. These were coded. Then, using the same phrase, the first 19 posts that showed up for January 20th were also coded. So, a combined 100 Twitter posts were coded from the three search phrases.

A table for coding was then set up to differentiate the posts. The categories were set up to see if there were positive or negative effects to the image of Richard Sherman. Furthermore, the negative image category also included racist remarks towards Sherman. Results were then drawn from the results of this coding scheme.

Results and Discussion

There were three general themes that emerged from the analysis of the fan tweets on the Richard Sherman case: there were quite a few tweets expressing Erin Andrews being scared of Richard Sherman (Hostile Sherman), Richard Sherman is a classless thug (Thug Sherman), and lastly Sherman acted emotionally after a game and he’s an intelligent football player (Stanford Sherman).

There were some varying results based on the search phrase typed into Twitter. The search phrase “thug Sherman” was looked at exclusively on two separate dates. There was a reason why that the search phrase “thug Sherman” was looked at on January

19th and January 20th. The interview with Richard Sherman took place on January 19th. Then on January 20th, there was more information known by fans and the idea was to find out if the media had set the agenda for fans a day after the event.

Hostile Sherman

It was clear that there were a lot of responses from fans on Twitter who looked at Sherman as being hostile in the post-game interview. There were numerous tweets that made Sherman out to be a monster like figure talking to the reporter Erin Andrews. There were a lot of tweets talking about Sherman yelling at Erin Andrews and also similar tweets which portrayed Erin Andrews as someone who was scared during the interview. One tweet read: “Erin Andrews is scared of Richard Sherman.” Another tweet read: “Richard Sherman is scaring the sh*t out of Erin Andrews.” Another similar tweet said, “Thought he (Sherman) might eat Erin Andrews right there #NFCChampionship.”

There were a lot of these type of tweets found within the sample size of tweets about the interview. It was an interesting finding that more people looked at Sherman as being hostile rather than fired up or enthusiastic after a big win. There were some individuals who took the side of Sherman just being amped up directly after the big win. However, as the tweets have already shown, more people defamed Sherman and thought his antics were “classless” and “scary.” There was also one tweet that read: “Here is the video that led to Erin Andrews filing a restraining order against Richard Sherman.”

Thug Sherman

The day the interview took place there were some very racist driven tweets towards Richard Sherman. It was interesting to find out how the tweets from the same search phrase changed tone a day after Sherman’s comments in his post-game interview.

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First, let's take a look at some of the responses that immediately followed the Sherman interview. One tweet from January 19th read, "Sherman is a thug. I can't wait to see him get blown up by Peyton and the Broncos receivers." Another tweet read, "Richard Sherman is just another classless thug." While these responses were less subtle than others, there were some sports fans who said they liked Sherman the player, but don't like Sherman the person. One tweet read, "I don't dislike Sherman, just know he's a thug, that's pretty easy to figure out, love to have him on my Defense."

A lot of these tweets that were coded were knee jerk reactions from fans directly after Sherman's comments to Erin Andrews. It was interesting to see that fans immediate reactions in this case were far more racist than the comments that came the next day. Before we look at how the tweets were different on January 20th, let's look at a few more tweets in this section. One tweet read, "Erin Andrews was so scared. Richard Sherman is a true thug." Another tweet read, "Sherman. Way to thug out and prove that you're a classless douche." These comments shown above were all extremely racially biased on the day of the event.

The same search phrase, "thug Sherman," was used to code responses on January 20th. The day after the postgame interview Sherman responded to some of the racial criticism in a letter he himself wrote. Along with Sherman's comments, sports fans began responding differently the day after the event. One comment read, "I would suggest people throwing around the term thug with Richard Sherman, don't, in fact, actually know what a thug is." Another comment read, "Being a bad sport doesn't make Seahawks' Richard Sherman a thug." It was interesting seeing the tone of the tweets changing the day after the interview. Another tweet read, "Got to defend my man Richard

Sherman. When he trash talks, he's a classless thug. But, when I do, I'm a presidential contender."

Stanford Sherman

The theme "Stanford Sherman" was an interesting find. This theme really emerged after the postgame interview. There were some fans that referred to Sherman being a Stanford grad directly after his comments. However, most of the sports fans began talking about Sherman being an educated Stanford grad the day after the postgame interview. After Sherman made his comments about the racial backlash he was receiving, many sports fans began sending tweets regarding Sherman and him being an educated Stanford grad. They began taking his side over the conflicting fans who were calling Sherman a "classless thug" the day before.

There were a lot of examples from sports fans on Twitter working to improve the image of Sherman. One comment read, "Richard Sherman is a thug?? How many thugs do you know that had a 4.0 GPA in HS, scored a 1400/1600 on the SAT and had a 3.9 at Stanford?" Another comment read, "Sherman is a Stanford graduate. Smarter than every person saying he's a thug." One tweeter responded, "Here's your reminder that Richard Sherman is a STANFORD graduate. So, save your racist comments about him being a thug or stupid."

Additional Findings and Suggestions within trends and themes

There were a lot of varying opinions throughout these tweets from sports fans. It was interesting to see how much publicity Erin Andrews got along with Richard Sherman. Andrews, who has been a longtime reporter for the NFL on several networks, got a lot of backlash for the interview as well. While Andrews didn't deal with any

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racially driven criticism in the tweets that were coded, it was seen by some tweeters that she was afraid of Sherman and that dictated how the interview went. There were also a lot of meme pictures of Andrews and Sherman that were coded. These pictures depicted Andrews and Sherman in somewhat disrespectful fashion.

Also, another finding that was interesting within the trends and themes was that of Sherman being either classless or simply amped up after a big win. It was interesting to see fans' opinions on the postgame interview. There was so much inconsistency in responses to the interview. While reading many tweets prior to selecting the search phrases to use for this study, it felt there was no middle ground accounted for in peoples' opinion of the incident. Fans were either highly critical of Sherman or highly in favor of his remarks and his actions. It seemed that this large gap in opinions really fueled the issue.

The interview with Sherman called for national attention on TV networks, radio, and social media. There were many people in the sports journalism field who specifically spoke out after the interview. There were very mixed responses. Tony Dungy, a former NFL head coach, and current NBC sports analyst said, "Richard Sherman made the play to win it. But show a little class Richard. Sets up a great Super Bowl. Offense vs. Defense." While Dungy was highly critical of Sherman's remarks, Pete Thamel of *Sports Illustrated* said, "Anyone bothered by Richard Sherman tonight has never sat through a one-game-at-a-time cliché fest. Speak your mind, Richard." Each of those quotes were tweeted by the two members of the national media the day the interview occurred (Greenburg, 2014).

Erin Andrews went to Twitter after her interview with Sherman too, "Richard

Sherman gave a candid response seconds after an emotional game..looking forward to a great SuperBowl matchup." Mark Schlereth, a former NFL player, and current analyst for ESPN said, "Sherman you're embarrassing yourself...Shameful." Looking at these mixed reactions and varying opinions people had after the interview was interesting (Greenburg, 2014).

Conclusion

Limitations: Adjustments with the Same Amount of Time and Money

If there were the same amount of time and money provided, there still could have been some adjustments to the study. One large limitation with this study had to do specifically with the qualitative portion of this study. The qualitative portion looked at fan reaction on the Richard Sherman case through tweets. Identifying an age demographic of the coded tweets would have improved this study and its findings. This would have taken minimal time with the sample size remaining the same.

Also, there was some lag time in gathering the coders complete coding sheets for the quantitative portion of the study. This hindered some further advancement in the study. There could have been stricter guidelines in when coders had to return their completed coding sheets. However, all of the results did come in and all of the coders were able to provide a complete coding sheet. The initial coding scheme that was given to coders could have been adjusted to be more visible. One coder had to make sure that she was supposed to move on to a second variable if she coded the first variable a specific way. There could have been more clarity in the coding scheme that explained how all variables needed to be coded for. While there wasn't too big of an issue in this case because of this mistake, it could have been a bigger issue if there were more coders, or

coders who weren't able to meet in person.

Limitations: Adjustments with Unlimited Resources

There are potential changes and additions that could have made this a better quality study. A big issue with this study was the sample size was too small. If there were more time, more money, or more people helping collect data, the sample size could have been larger and in return could have produced better results. However, with the sample that was used for the study, there was still enough data to analyze the issue and provide results. There is no question with unlimited resources, results and findings could have been more precise, and could have improved the study overall. Also, with a larger sample size, this could have improved the inter-coder reliability scores.

If there were time, there could have been a specific study that dealt with the differences in how the local media in Seattle set the agenda, opposed to how the national media set the agenda. This could have made an interesting case in the literature review. If this were done first, then a look at the local and national media could have provided some interesting results. It would have been interesting to see how each media outlet framed the event and then how fans reacted from a local perspective opposed to a national perspective. Perhaps this type of study could have been done completely separate.

Recommendations for Future Research

This current study does not attempt to offer advice to media outlets as they attempt to minimize such “racially negative tones” in their reporting about other situations. This study does however begin to pave the path for future research within similar areas of research. In looking at this study after the fact, there are many other areas that could be looked at further that were somewhere mentioned or discussed in this

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current study. For instance, one of those areas is the role that gender plays when a sports reporter is interviewing a professional athlete. Looking at how athletes respond and communicate to female reporters opposed to male reporters could make for a very interesting study.

Another area that could be looked into further is that of differences in how the local media frames sporting events and instances, opposed to how national media frames the same events and instances. This was mentioned briefly in the limitations section. There could be some interesting findings within this area. In this current study, looking at how the media in Seattle framed this incident opposed to how media outlets from ESPN framed this incident could derive some intriguing findings.

Lastly, an area that could be looked at further within this case deals with specifically how Sherman was looked at on social media. There was a common word that was found that was continually being used to describe Sherman. That word is thug. There should be a study looking specifically at the word “thug,” and what it really means. Where did this word come from? How is it being used differently today than it was before? All of these recommendations offered in this section could be implemented into a new study.

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