

Assessing the “Goodness of Fit” Between Scholarly Assertions and Audience
Interpretations of Media Images of Black Male Athletes

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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June, 2013

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Acknowledgements

In order to complete this project I needed the assistance of many people. Thank you to my advisor Dr. Mary Jo Kane for your honesty and guidance as I progressed through the PhD program at the U. Thank you also to my committee members: Dr. Jennifer Bhalla, Dr. Jo Ann Buysse and Dr. Douglas Hartmann for your insight and feedback on my dissertation as well as my other research ideas. Thank you to Dr. Nicole M. LaVoi who served as my unofficial advisor for the last five years and listened to all of my new research ideas. I would also like to thank School of Kinesiology staff members: Jonathan Sweet, Marta Fahrenz, Angie Roberts and Carol Nielsen for their willingness to answer any and all of my questions related to being a graduate assistant in this program.

Thank you to my friends who encouraged me to take the leap to quit my job, and move halfway across the country to enroll at the U of MN. The support of other graduate students is a necessity while trying to complete this degree. Thank you to Julia Dutove, and Ayanna Franklin for facilitating focus groups as well as Ness Madeiros and Kari Ornes. Thank you to Chelsey Thul for helping with the data analysis portion of my project as well as making me laugh which, kept me sane during the process. A well-written dissertation needs outside help from those who pay close attention to detail, so thank you to Hayley Russell and Dr. Katherine M. Polasek for offering your time and feedback.

Finally, thank you to those who participated in my dissertation focus groups. I really appreciate your help in recruiting friends and family as well as the time you took out of your schedule to discuss the images.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. Without the support from my parents, John and Susan Houghton, I certainly never would have made it this far. Although you may not have agreed with all of my decisions, you supported them nonetheless, which has meant a tremendous amount to me. As for my siblings, Sally Ann, Sally Margaret and Patrick, your differing perspectives played a crucial role in enabling me to achieve this goal. I always look forward to the next Houghtonpalooza wherever that may be.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the “goodness of fit” in sport media research, specifically how audiences interpret media images of Black male athletes and the ways in which their interpretations “fit” with scholarly assertions pertaining to racially marked media depictions. Participants in the study (n=36) were part of eight focus groups segmented by age, gender and race. They viewed and discussed mainstream media images of Black male athletes found on major American sport media websites (ESPN.com and SI.com). The images corresponded with five categories of representation found in the literature: *highly competent/natural athlete*, *exotic savage*, *deviant*, *emotionally immature*, and *race transcendent*. Although results were systematically compared across groups, race seemed to be the most significant factor in focus group responses. White participant responses provided support for some of the scholarly assertions (*stereotype interpreted as reality*, *conditional acceptance of Black male athletes*, *perception of sport as upward mobility* and *the myth of meritocracy*) while African American focus group responses were more likely to challenge some assertions (*stereotypes interpreted as reality*, *perception of sport as upward mobility* and *myth of meritocracy*), and confirm the existence of others (*conditional acceptance of Black male athletes*). Similar to the sport media study by Kane and Maxwell (2011), which utilized audience reception research, this project aims to generate knowledge and awareness that sport leaders could use to implement programs or practices which have the ability to transform sport and society into a truly equitable realm.

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CHAPTER 1:

Introduction

Background of the Problem

Since Jackie Robinson integrated Major League Baseball (MLB) in 1947, people often cite the realm of sport as a harbinger of racial equality and progress (Hartmann, 2002; 2012). Scholars have made compelling arguments about sport as a meaningful cultural institution particularly Hartmann (2012) who noted the following reasons for its importance: 1) the popularity of sport, 2) the prominence of people of color within sport, 3) the ways in which sport is perceived to emphasize fundamental capitalistic principles such as meritocracy. Due to the constant news cycle, it is difficult to ignore the prevalence of African American male athletes in professional sport. While African Americans constitute roughly 13% of the population, Black males comprise 67% of the National Football League (NFL) and 78% of the National Basketball Association (NBA) (Lapchick, Costa, Sherrod, & Anjorin, 2012; Lapchick, Lecky, Russell & Trigg, 2012). Black male athletes dominating power and performance sports reinforce “common sense” notions of biological superiority (Coakley, 2008) and the myth of meritocracy, which implies that hard work and talent lead to success (Birrell, 1989; Davis & Harris, 1998). The on-field success of Black male athletes allows the myth of meritocracy to persist while obscuring institutional barriers that prevent Black males from obtaining leadership positions throughout the sports world (Davis & Harris, 1998; Hardin, Dodd, Chance, & Walsdorf, 2004; Griffin, 2012; Griffin & Calafell, 2011; Harrison, 1998). Despite their overwhelming presence as professional football

and basketball players, Black men have rarely moved into management positions at the end of their playing careers (Griffin, 2012; Sage, 2005).

Although there has been an increasing amount of research dedicated to media depictions of Latino and Asian male athletes (Eagleman 2011; Gonzalez, Jackson, & Regoli, 2007; Nakamura, 2005; Sabo, Jansen, Duncan, & Leggett, 1996) the majority of sport and race media research has focused on Black male athletes (Billings, 2004; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005). Acknowledging that a dearth of literature exists regarding media depictions of Latino or Asian athletes, for the purpose of this exploratory study, the racial analysis will be confined to African American athletes. This is important because little research exists that examines how audiences interpret images of Black male athletes. Subsequently, the purpose of my dissertation is to examine the “goodness of fit,” the ways in which audiences interpret and discuss media images of Black male athletes within five categories of representation and how audience interpretations align with or contradict scholarly assertions.

According to Seate, Harwood and Blecha (2010), media has the ability to “shape public opinion” (p. 344). Sport media is a multi-billion dollar industry in which White newspaper staff (87.4%) overwhelmingly outnumber people of color (12.6%) (Lapchick, Moss, Rusell & Scarce, 2011). Over the course of the last 35 years, scholars have primarily explored the relationship between sport media and Black athletes in two ways: the amount of coverage, meaning the number of cover images or articles (Goss, Tyler & Billings, 2010; Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Lumpkin, 2007; 2009); and media depictions, meaning how athletes are portrayed verbally, visually or through text (Angelini & Billings; 2010; Billings & Eastman, 2002; Bishop, 2005;

2009; Buffington, 2005; Bruce, 2004; Cole & Andrews, 1996; Davis & Harris, 1998; Eagleman, 2011; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Hardin et al., 2004; Harrison, Tayman, Janson & Connolly, 2010; Leonard & King, 2011; Lewis & Profitt, 2012; Mastro, Blecha & Seate, 2011; Rainville & McCormick, 1977; Rada, 1996; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2004; 2005; Sabo, et al., 1996; Sanderson & Clavio, 2010; Ventresca, 2011).

Research indicates that sport media has depicted Black male athletes in ways that reinforce stereotypes of Black men. These categories are as follows: highly competent/natural athletes (Billings & Eastman, 2002; Bishop, 2009; Buffington, 2005; Bruce, 2004; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Mercurio & Filak, 2010; Murrell & Curtis, 1994; Rainville & McCormick, 1977; Rada, 1996; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005); exotic savages (Carrington, 2002; Leonard, 2004; Leonard & King, 2011; Lule, 1995; Markovitz, 2006; Sanderson & Clavio, 2010; Sloop, 1997); deviant (Brown, 2005; de B'beri & Hogarth, 2009; Eagleman, 2011; King & Springwood, 2001; Leonard, 2006; Mastro et al., 2011; Tucker, 2003; Walton, 2001); emotionally immature (Billings & Eastman, 2002; Bishop, 2005; 2009; Davis & Harris, 1998; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2004); and race transcendent (Andrews, 1996, Billings, 2003; Cole & Andrews, 1996; Giacobbi & DeSensei, 1999; Kellner, 2004). Carrington (2003) notes,

Even a cursory glance through contemporary media forms shows how often, and to what extent, the Black male torso (always heavily defined, never 'soft') is used to connote notions of athleticism, that is strength, aggression and power. Often underlying such representations are also coded plays on notions of animalism (p. 19).

These five themes, highly competent/natural athlete, exotic savage, deviant, emotionally immature and race transcendent, reflect the range of representations of Black male athletes in sport media scholarship and will be referred to as categories of representation.

Scholars have described consequences that result from negative media depictions of Black male athletes. These include: stereotypes interpreted as reality (Childs, 1999; Eagleman, 2012; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Lewis & Proffitt, 2012; Mastro et al., 2011; Mercurio & Filak, 2010; Seate et al., 2010; Wonsek, 1992), conditional acceptance of Black male athletes (Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Griffin, 2012; Hardin et al., 2004; Harrison, 1998; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005), perception of sport as upward mobility (Berry & Smith, 2000; Davis & Harris, 1998; Griffin, 2012; Hoberman, 2000; Johnson, Hallinan, & Westerfield, 1999; McDonald, 1996), and the perpetuation of the myth of meritocracy (Andrews, 1996; Cole & Andrews, 1996; Buffington, 2005; Davis & Harris, 1998; Kellner, 2004).

While identifying consequences of negative depictions, scholars have rarely gauged the ways in which audiences interpret media narratives (Goss et al., 2010; Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Mercurio & Filak, 2010). A majority of the research focuses on the extent to which gender and racial ideologies are reproduced under the assumption that audiences passively interpret the messages (Jhally, 1989; Millington & Wilson, 2010; Sorice, 2009; Wenner, 1989). In other words, a gap exists between what scholars are asserting and how audiences may actually be interpreting media narratives. Consequently, there is a need to incorporate audiences into sport media research as it

pertains to notions regarding race. The following section provides a brief overview of existing sport media scholarship.

Studies That Address Race and Sport Media Research

Sport media race research has focused on media depictions of Black male athletes and the consequences of negative portrayals found in print and television journalism. Initially, scholars who examined print media focused on the sheer presence of Black athletes based on the number of pictures or feature articles in major sport magazines (Lumpkin & Williams, 1991; Lumpkin, 2009). Over time, sport media research has evolved to include more sophisticated textual analyses of language employed by journalists (Angelini & Billings, 2010; Bishop, 2009; Buffington, 2005; Murrell & Curtis, 1994). Research dedicated to televised coverage of sport has demonstrated that commentary has gone from overtly stereotypical portrayals (Rainville & McCormick, 1977; Rada, 1996) to more subtle (Billings & Eastman, 2002; Bishop, 2009; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005) “heat-of-the-moment slippages” meaning that announcers utilize stereotypes during unscripted moments (Bruce, 2004, p. 875).

A majority of existing research has often concentrated on sport media portrayals of Black professional or collegiate male athletes (Andrews, 1996; Billings, 2004; Bishop, 2005; 2009; Brown, 2005; Bruce, 2004; Buffington, 2005; Byrd & Utsler, 2007; de B’beri & Hogarth, 2009; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Hawkins, 2010a; Markovitz, 2006; Mercurio & Filak, 2010; McCarthy & Jones, 1997; Rada, 1996; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005; Rainville & McCormick, 1977; Wonsek, 1992). While results indicate that journalists and commentators have transitioned from using overt to more

subtle discriminatory language, they still routinely describe Black male athletes based on historical stereotypes of natural athleticism (Billings & Eastman, 2002; Buffington, 2005; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Mercurio & Filak, 2010; Rada, 1996; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005). For example, Mercurio and Filak (2010) found that media portrayed African Americans NFL as less intelligent than White quarterbacks through subtle language describing Black athletes as more athletic.

Despite the transition from overt to subtle language that reinforces stereotypes of Black men, scholars have cited consequences of negative depictions on audiences. Through consistent negative portrayals, sport media perpetuates stereotypes (Childs, 1999; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Goss et al., 2010; Mercurio & Filak, 2010; Wonsek, 1992), which contribute to the idea that sport is the sole vehicle for upward mobility for Black males (Berry & Smith, 2000; Hoberman, 2000). The myth of meritocracy, the idea that there is a level playing field for people of all races, is reinforced through media coverage/narratives of sports, football/basketball, that are dominated by Black male athletes (Andrews, 1996; Cole & Andrews, 1996; Buffington, 2005; Davis & Harris, 1998; Kellner, 2004). Consequently, Black men are often only “conditionally accepted” by society, meaning that they are idolized for their athletic prowess on the field but excluded in most other realms of society (Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Hardin et al., 2004; Harrison, 1998; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005).

Gaps in the Literature

In recent years, an emerging critique of sport media scholarship has questioned the assumed relationship between media narratives and the ways in which audiences interpret those narratives (Millington & Wilson, 2010). Few studies (McCarthy, Jones,

& Potrac, 2003; Wilson & Sparks, 1996; 2001) have specifically focused on audience interpretations of media depictions of Black male athletes. All three studies found that Black focus group participants discussed that people of color faced institutional barriers (McCarthy et al., 2003; Wilson & Sparks, 1996; 2001). In fact, Black participants in the study by McCarthy and colleagues (2003) refused to accept stereotypical media depictions of Black male athletes, meaning that they openly questioned announcers who described of Black players as fast but not intelligent. Results also indicated that Black participants did not view sport as a vehicle for upward mobility (Wilson & Sparks, 2001). Conversely, White audiences were more apt to agree with the stereotype that the success of Black male athletes were due to genetics (McCarthy et al., 2003; Wilson & Sparks, 1996; 2001). According to Wilson and Sparks (2001), White participants also viewed racism as a “distant reality” something that they were aware of but did not view as a major problem for people of color. The divergent ways in which White participants and Black participants discussed the depictions indicate the ways in which stereotypes are internalized and/or challenged.

Despite the importance of the research by Wilson and Sparks (1996; 2001) and McCarthy and colleagues (2003), some critical issues remain. Although the studies demonstrated that individuals have the capacity to both challenge and accept media portrayals of Black athletes, the relative paucity of research warrants further exploration. The studies utilized the medium of television through commercials or televised soccer matches but did not focus on the range of representations of Black male athletes (i.e. highly competent/natural athlete, exotic savage, deviant, emotionally immature, race transcendent). Despite the fact that female sport fans exist, women were

excluded as focus group participants in the previous three studies. My dissertation seeks to address these weaknesses by utilizing Black and White, male and female focus group participants to discuss images that reflect five categories of representation of Black male athletes and to assess if their interpretations confirm or challenge how race and sport scholars have talked about the impact of these racially inscribed images within categories of representation.

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to contribute to the knowledge base in sport media research by exploring how Black and White audiences interpret images of Black male athletes and the ways in which these interpretations align or contradict scholarly assertions. I used focus groups to examine audience interpretations of images that reflect a range of representations of Black male athletes. Exploring how individuals interpret images will provide needed information on the impact of media portrayals of Black male athletes as sport media scholars have made it clear that it is no longer sufficient to analyze an image or text and presume to know how audiences interpret the message (Millington & Wilson, 2010; Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Kinkema & Harris, 1992). Since little information exists regarding audience interpretations of such images, this research can help provide insight into how audiences interpret and discuss media portrayals of Black male athletes. Subsequently, it will provide empirical data that will help illustrate how audiences situate images of the Black male athlete within stereotypical portrayals. In order to understand the impact of media images in society, it is important to work with and utilize consumers of sport media through focus groups.

CHAPTER 2:

Review of Literature

Introduction

The literature review will begin with an overview of color-blind ideology and critical theory. The next subsection focuses on race-based critical theory and how that will inform the analysis. Next sport media race research, including studies that analyzed both print and television, is examined in two parts: scholarship that revealed five dominant categories of representation of Black male athletes and the four consequences of the portrayals. The literature review concludes with a summary of sport media scholarship that has utilized audience reception research.¹

Color-Blind Ideology

Over the last 50 years, the United States has moved towards what scholars deem “a color-blind society” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). The dismantling of discriminatory legislation has led the to the perception among Whites that people of color face no economic or social barriers (Gallagher, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Buffington & Fraley, 2011; Wise 2009; 2010). Omi and Winant (1994) define a color-blind society as a place where “no special significance, rights or privileges attach to one’s race” (p. 1). One of the central critiques of color-blind ideology is that it does not explain the consistent pattern of racial inequality in the United States (Gallagher, 2003; Hartmann, 2007). According to Bonilla-Silva (2010), Gallagher (2003) and Wise (2009; 2010), color-blind ideology allows Whites to maintain positions of power by disregarding existing

¹ The literature review reflects the most recent research pertaining to media representations of Black male athletes and scholarly assertions as of June 2013.

institutional barriers while simultaneously placing blame on perceived cultural or individual deficiencies of primarily minority groups. As Bell and Hartmann (2007) stated, “Race is both everywhere and nowhere...” (p. 910).

Sport in particular has been rife with examples of the ways in which color-blind ideology plays out. While media has lauded sport as the pinnacle of meritocracy, a place where equal opportunity takes precedence regardless of race, scholars have rebuked that claim. For example, Griffin (2012) argues that the numerical representation of Black male athletes and Black coaches in the NBA allows the league to promote itself as “a color-blind and progressive organization” as they “exploit a highly profitable Black male image” (p. 175). Furthermore Griffin and Calafell (2011) point to how NBA commissioner David Stern downplayed the significance of race following the player versus fan brawl in 2004 while implementing a dress code as evidence of both White racism and color-blind ideology. Sport media has helped to fuel the idea that sport is free from racism and discrimination. Leonard (2004) notes that color-blind ideology has permeated media discussions of race and sport and has allowed Whites to “minimize the continued importance of racism” (p. 288). The hypervisibility of Black male athletes in football and basketball supposedly renders racism and discrimination obsolete as the on-court success of Black male athletes is pointed to as evidence of equality, thus reinforcing color-blind ideology.

Critical Theory

Scholars have sought to interrogate color-blind ideology and race through several key theories: critical race theory, Black feminist theory, racial formations theory, and race-based critical theory. This section introduces the commonalities among

the theories but goes into greater detail regarding race-based critical theory because it provides the theoretical framework for this project. Generally speaking, a critical theorist perspective emphasizes two key components: reflexivity in research and the importance of research directed towards social change (Hartmann & Bell, 2010). The underlying viewpoint informing critical theories such as race-based critical theory, critical race theory, and racial formation theory is that race, although socially constructed, has become embedded as a “social truth” in the modern world (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Hartmann & Bell, 2010; Omi & Winant, 1994). This means that although race is a socially constructed category people believe it as truth.

Social justice is an integral component among critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and race-based critical theory. For example, “It [critical race theory] tries not only to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out to not only ascertain how society organizes itself along social lines but to transform it for the better” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 3). Similar to Kane and Maxwell’s (2011) audience reception research, this project aims to generate knowledge and awareness that sport leaders could use to implement programs or practices which have the ability to transform sport and society into a truly equitable realm.

Race-Based Critical Theory

Race-based critical theory focuses on how “underlying cultural beliefs” inform the ways people talk about race and racism and how that combination often perpetuates inequity (Hartmann & Bell, 2010, p. 262). Race-based critical theory sets itself apart from critical race theory and color-blind ideology by seeking to explore the ways in which individual actions of the dominant group reproduce inequality (Hartman & Bell,

2010). The following describes the four key components of race-based critical theory (Hartmann & Bell, 2010).

1. *Race is a defining and foundational feature of society.* Over the course of history, the emphasis that racial differences are genetic has become ingrained in society. In spite of the fact that race is socially constructed, individuals often perceive race as a legitimate, genetic category. The emphasis on inferiority of people of color has resulted in numerous issues. For example, incarceration rates for people of color are dramatically higher in comparison to Whites. People of color are more likely to face poverty and have less access to quality education (Hartmann & Bell, 2010). The consistent disparities based on race signifies the fact that race remains a fundamental organizing tool in modern society with Whites maintaining positions of power.

2. *Current racial arrangements and relationships are inequitable and unjust.* Since overt racism has been dismantled through legislation, many believe that Blacks face few barriers preventing them from obtaining economic success (Gallagher, 2003; Wise, 2009; 2010). Scholars have examined the present inequities from a variety of perspectives but have been unable to explain the source of the patterns (Hartmann & Bell, 2010.) The failure to explain the root causes of inequity fuels the desire of scholars to identify the subtle processes that perpetuate inequality (Hartmann & Bell). Although discriminatory legislation has been repealed, racial inequalities persist prompting the need to find the source(s) of the problem.

3. *Racial differences and inequalities are constructed in social relationships and not reducible to other forms of stratification.* A multi-dimensional analysis that explores racism in relation to class, nation, and gender is needed. It is insufficient to explore

racism through a narrow lens. The relationships among race, class, and gender are dynamic with each factor contributing distinctly to inequality. Consequently, causes of inequity are often interrelated and complex in nature; therefore, analyses should not be reductionist in nature (Hartmann & Bell, 2010).

4. Contemporary racial formations are structured through cultural mechanisms and social processes that are subtle and systemic and often difficult for ordinary, even well meaning people, to appreciate and comprehend. Since overt discrimination is illegal, it is important to explore the actions by individuals that reproduce inequality on a daily basis. For example, individuals often do not realize they are reproducing racialized social processes because they could or would not talk about racial inequality directly. Examining the behavior or language that people utilize to discuss (or ignore) race is fundamental to explaining how and why distinct inequities persist in the face of perceived meritocracy (Hartmann & Bell, 2010).

To date no research has examined portrayals of Black male athletes using a race-based critical theory framework. Race-based critical theory provides an appropriate foundation for understanding how a focus group discourse might perpetuate and/or challenge racial inequities within existing institutional structures such as sport media. The next section explores the existing body of knowledge in sport media research.

Sport Media Research

Scholars assert that when sport media continually depicts athletes in ways that reinforce racial stereotypes it can contribute to a “falsely constructed reality” among consumers of sport media (Eagleman 2011, p. 166). Gallagher (2003) noted that color-blind ideology is reinforced through positive depictions of race relations that permeate

the media through the use of cultural symbols such as hip hop in commercials.

Furthermore, media often portrays sport as a site of equality and racial harmony (Hartmann, 2002; 2007). Media plays a prominent role in the reproduction of dominant ideologies. “It is critical to focus on the mechanism of production and reproduction, especially those that escape the attention and understanding of the agents themselves” (Hartmann & Bell, 2010, p. 265). As an institution of reproduction, sport media has often reinforced racial ideologies in American society, which has contributed to the marginalization Black male athletes.

In particular, race and sport media research has focused primarily on depictions of Black male athletes. According to scholars, sport media across the mediums of print and television have consistently portrayed Black male athletes in ways that reinforce stereotypes through five predominant categories of representation: highly competent/natural athlete (Billings & Eastman, 2002; Bishop, 2009; Buffington, 2005; Bruce, 2004; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Mercurio & Filak, 2010; Murrell & Curtis, 1994; Rainville & McCormick, 1977; Rada, 1996; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005), exotic savage (Carrington, 2002; Laucella, 2010; Leonard, 2004; Lule, 1995; Markovitz, 2006; Sanderson & Clavio, 2010; Sloop, 1997), deviant (Brown, 2005; de B’beri & Hogarth, 2009; Eagleman, 2011; King & Springwood, 2001; Leonard, 2006; Lewis & Proffitt, 2012; Mastro et al., 2011; Tucker, 2003; Walton, 2001), emotionally immature (Billings & Eastman, 2002; Bishop, 2005; 2009; Davis & Harris, 1998; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2004), and race transcendent (Andrews, 1996; Billings, 2003; Cole & Andrews, 1996; Giacobbi & DeSensei, 1999; Kellner, 2004). The following section discusses the most recent research related to each of these five categorizations Black male athletes.

Highly competent/natural athlete. One of the most dominant patterns of representation present in sport media is the Black male as “natural athlete” or biologically/genetically superior athlete (Sailes, 2010; Hawkins, 2010a; 2010b). Black male athletic superiority is perpetuated through sport media, as announcers, and journalists have routinely described Black male athletes in terms of physical abilities as opposed to intelligence or effort (Bigler & Jeffries, 2008; Bruce, 2004; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Murrell & Curtis, 1994; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005; Rainville & McCormick, 1977). Though television announcers have moved away from the overt stereotypical depictions found in earlier research, subtleties in language still reflect stereotypical patterns of representation (Bruce, 2004). For example, describing Black quarterbacks as “running quarterbacks” implies that they cannot grasp the offensive strategy and are only successful because of their physical ability.

According to Mercurio and Filak (2010), praising Black athletic superiority implies that Blacks lack the intellectual capacity to succeed in leadership positions within sport as well as other industries. This dichotomy undermines the effort and intelligence of African American athletes and serves to reinforce White male hegemony in sport as well as society at large (Lumpkin, 2007). “According to race logic, intelligence is more developed than physicality on the evolutionary scale. Physicality is more primitive and African American physicality is evidence of their intellectual inferiority” (Simons, 2003, p. 17). Numerous studies have illustrated that racial stereotypes founded on physical superiority and intellectual inferiority are perpetuated by game announcers in both collegiate and professional sport, namely football and

basketball (Bruce, 2004; Eastman & Billings, 2001; McCarthy & Jones, 1997; Rada, 1996; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005).

The seminal study of professional football announcers by Rainville and McCormick (1977) initially exposed sport media bias in favor of White athletes. Announcers in this study routinely attributed negative characteristics to Black players while White players were consistently praised for their cognitive abilities. White athletes also received more special focus and sympathy from the announcers. Rada (1996) also examined television commentary of NFL games. Results indicated that announcers described Black athletes more negatively than Whites. More specifically, Black athletes were primarily depicted as less intelligent and having more “character” issues than Whites (Rada, 1996). Rada also found that the announcers in his study described Black athletes as more athletic than Whites, which is not consistent with Rainville and McCormick’s (1977) findings. Although 20 years apart, these studies indicated that announcers routinely portrayed Black football players more negatively than their White peers.

Research by Murrell and Curtis (1994), Byrd and Utsler (2007), Buffington (2005), as well as Mercurio and Filak (2010) has focused on print media portrayals of Black NFL quarterbacks. According to Murrell and Curtis (1994) and Mercurio and Filak (2010), the stereotypical depiction of Black brawn versus White brains has persisted. More specifically, the journalists in Murrell and Curtis’ (1994) study often attributed the success of Black athletes to internal factors such as natural athleticism while the success of White athletes was described in terms of hard work and leadership.

The studies illustrate that media has portrayed Black athletes in ways that reinforce the stereotype of natural athlete.

In his study of journalist commentary on professional African American quarterbacks from 1999-2003, Buffington (2005) found a shift from discussions of historical struggles of Black male athletes to an absence of present day issues based on race. Buffington related this to the media discourse that portrayed race as insignificant. He also noted the lack of discussion of race of quarterbacks in a theme he called “silence equals progress” (p. 23). Still, he found that Black quarterbacks were often portrayed as stereotypically athletic, or more specifically as “running quarterbacks.” The term “running quarterback” is a subtle reference to the notion that Black males are natural athletes who lack the necessary intelligence to lead an offense and team.

Eastman and Billings (2001) also found similar covert stereotypes in their research on college basketball commentary. The researchers analyzed the ways in which sports commentators framed race and gender in college basketball. Their findings revealed that commentators relied heavily upon the stereotype of the biologically superior Black athlete. For example, when discussing the players, Blacks were described as naturally athletic while Whites were depicted as relying on work ethic and intelligence (Eastman & Billings, 2001).

Rada and Wulfemeyer (2005) examined television coverage of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) football and basketball games during the 1998 regular season. Consistent with the findings of Rainville and McCormick (1977) and Eastman and Billings (2001), their research revealed that announcers routinely described African American male athletes more negatively than White athletes.

Specifically, announcers relied heavily on the stereotypes of the natural talent of Black athletes versus the intelligence of White athletes. In addition, when portraying African American players as people, announcers criticized their character and intelligence. Rada and Wulfemeyer (2005) also noted that every negative statement made by announcers was directed towards Black players. Consequently, the announcers consistently portrayed Black male athletes as naturally athletic and in turn reinforced that long-standing stereotype.

Research by Sabo et al., (1996), Angelini and Billings (2010), Denham et al., (2002) Byrd and Utsler (2007) has demonstrated a positive shift in coverage of Black male athletes. Sabo and colleagues (1996) analyzed seven international televised sporting events that were broadcast on American media outlets. In a departure from previous literature, they found that announcers were less likely to describe Black athletes by physical characteristics. In fact, announcers did not explicitly discuss race of the athletes in any of the broadcasts (Sabo et al., 1996). The authors claimed that the decrease in stereotypical descriptors of Black male athletes might reflect a heightened sensitivity among media members towards perpetuating racial stereotypes (Sabo et al., 1996).

Similarly, Angelini and Billings (2010) analyzed sportscaster dialogue from the 2008 Olympics. The results illustrated that “there has been a step away from discussion of hard-wired racial stereotypes” (Angelini & Billings, 2010, p. 9). For example, sportscasters praised White athletes’ physical strength more than Black athletes. Furthermore, Denham and colleagues (2002) conducted a content analysis of announcer commentary during the 2000 Men’s and Women’s NCAA Final Four Basketball

Tournament. They found that stereotypical portrayals by television commentators were declining compared to previous studies (Eastman & Billings, 2001; McCarthy & Jones, 1997; Rainville & McCormick, 1977) but have not disappeared altogether. Although the “natural athlete” stereotype persisted, commentators also directly described Black male players as intelligent. Additionally, the commentators attributed leadership skills to Blacks as well as Whites (Denham et al., 2002). These studies show that sportscasters have begun to portray Black male athletes more positively than found in previous literature.

Analyzing text from articles in *Sports Illustrated*, Byrd and Utsler (2007) also claimed that media might be becoming more sensitive to racial stereotypes. Their content analysis of coverage of six White and six African American NFL quarterbacks revealed that announcers described the intelligence of Black and White professional quarterbacks similarly. The authors argued that Blacks were depicted as more athletic because it fits with the nature of the position of quarterback that requires a higher caliber of athlete (Byrd & Utsler). While the research on Black quarterbacks illustrates that media depictions have moved away from an overt negative focus associated with the race of the Black male athletes, subtle stereotypes of Black men as naturally athletic but less intelligent than White athletes remain.

Exotic savage. The construction of the Black male as an exotic savage has a long history in the United States; it can be traced back to slavery when “African Americans were defined as animals, property to be owned by White men” (Ferber, 2007, p. 14). Similar to the Black male as natural athlete category, the association of athleticism with primitivism plays on notions of Black people being subordinate to

Whites due to a supposed lack of intelligence and more barbaric nature (Feagin, 2000; Carrington, 2002). In the 20th century, as Black males began to dominate certain sports (e.g., boxing, track, and basketball) society rejuvenated the Black male as primitive/exotic savage stereotype to explain their success in sport (Childs, 1999; Hoberman, 1997).

An underlying component of the exotic savage stereotype is that Black men have historically been portrayed as hypersexual and/or unable to control sexual urges (Brown, 2005; Leonard, 2004; Markovitz, 2006). Both Leonard (2004) and Markovitz (2006) analyzed the media “spectacle” surrounding Kobe Bryant’s rape trial (p. 396). Leonard (2004) noted that importance of understanding that the threat of Black male sexuality is predicated on the fear of Black men raping White women. The “the myth of the Black rapist” was a mechanism that allowed White men to police Black males through a fear of lynching (Leonard, 2004, p. 294). In the Bryant rape trial, media often compared Kobe to other Black male athletes arrested for violent crimes including OJ Simpson, Mike Tyson and Rae Carruth. These comparisons reinforced the link between Black male athletes and sexually violent/savage behavior while ignoring White male athletes who have committed similar sexual crimes (Leonard).

Markovitz (2006) argued that NBA players are highly “eroticized and racialized” through media attention that has focused on sexual exploits of prominent Black male NBA players including Dennis Rodman, Wilt Chamberlain, and Magic Johnson (p. 401). In the Kobe Bryant rape trial, Markovitz (2006) found that media coverage invoked stereotypes of the “sexually monstrous” Black male by connecting the case to narratives that focused on the historical link between the myth of the Black

male rapist and lynchings that occurred during the Civil Rights Era (p. 405). The continual media emphasis on the insatiable Black male sexual appetite reinforces the exotic savage stereotype.

A more recent analysis of media coverage and commentary pertaining to Kobe Bryant by Leonard and King (2011), demonstrated that Bryant's past indiscretions continue to impact the way he is perceived presently. The authors explored various instances where race and criminality emerged in discussions of Bryant. Through their examination of blog posts, videos and comments on said posts where discussants repeatedly mention Bryant's sexual indiscretions, the authors assert that these discussions indict Bryant in ways only associated with historical stereotypes of Black males as hypersexual and unable to control their urges (Leonard & King, 2011). While White athletes such as Josh Hamilton and Ben Roethlisberger can redeem themselves for their past mistakes, Black athletes like Bryant and Michael Vick face a much more difficult path due to the association between Blackness and the culture of poverty (Leonard & King, 2011). The "culture of poverty" narrative blames the victim by insinuating that problems in the African American community are self created due to their perceived lack of morals/values derived from non-traditional family structure, meaning single mothers/absentee fathers (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). As a result, regardless of what he has accomplished since the 2004 incident, in terms of his on court success, philanthropy or family life, Bryant is still perceived as the stereotypical hypersexual Black male.

Similarly to Kobe Bryant, Tiger Woods' extramarital affair provided plenty of media fodder. Sanderson and Clavio (2010) examined media coverage of Woods to fan

comments on Woods' Facebook page to explore the framing of the story. According to Sanderson and Clavio, media coverage of the situation portrayed Woods as a "fallen hero," as well as an athlete whose intensity on the golf course carried over into his sex life. This type of portrayal reinforced the stereotype that Black males have insatiable sexual appetites. While mass media portrayed Woods in ways that reinforced stereotypes, Sanderson and Clavio (2010) found that fans posting comments on his Facebook page were much more empathetic and viewed his infidelity as a "mistake" and being "human" (p. 446). Certainly not all fans responded by supporting him, as some responses indicated their disappointment in his behavior. Regardless, this study reflects the ways that mass media can reproduce dominant ideology but at the same time audiences have the ability to resist or challenge said narratives.

Rada's (1996) study of professional football coverage during the 1992 season illustrated how professional announcers routinely attributed animal nicknames to Black male athletes. At no point in the analysis did Rada (1996) find that announcers ascribed animal nicknames to White athletes. As Rada (1996) succinctly states, "The animal nicknames present the player as just that, an animal" (p. 237). By describing Black men as animals media reinforces stereotypes (exotic savage) that marginalize Black men.

In studying media portrayals of Mike Tyson, Sloop (1997) and Lule (1995) both found that journalists described Tyson as a savage. While covering his rape trial, Lule (1995) noted journalists repeatedly called Tyson an "animal" and a "danger to society" (p. 182). The press even took the characterizations a step further to discuss Tyson's predicted demise in prison through a beating or knifing, as this apparently seemed an appropriate punishment fit for a "beast" (Lule, 1997, p. 185). Sloop (1997) cited media

reports that described Tyson as a “wild creature” or an “uneducated brute” (p. 110).

Linking Tyson to animalistic behavior perpetuates the idea that he was “impulsive” and uncontrollable, similar to a rabid dog, thus rendering him (and his behavior) to something subhuman (Sloop). These depictions create a direct association with Tyson and a type of exotic savage.

Carrington (2002) also noted how Black men have long been described as the exotic other through depictions as savages, beasts, and animals. He points to media portrayals of Joe Louis and Mike Tyson as evidence. In a story published prior to a fight, the *New York Times* described Louis as a “magnificent animal” while more than 50 years later the *Mirror* (a London newspaper) used the word “savage” in its headline to describe Tyson (Carrington, 2002). These descriptions were not the lone adjectives used, both articles invoked the exotic savage metaphor numerous times. The similarities in the characterizations of Louis and Tyson 50 years apart illustrate the extent to which the categorization of Black men as “exotic savages” is embedded in Western culture.

Recently, Laucella (2010) examined print articles related to Michael Vick’s dog fighting indictment and trial in four newspapers for two months during 2007. She found that journalists routinely sensationalized Vick’s role in the dog fighting ring and often portrayed him as a savage. Journalists attributed Vick’s savagery to his inability to control innate barbaric urges (Laucella, 2010). For example, Laucella noted that through his involvement in torturing dogs, journalists also claimed Vick “let his animal instincts overtake him” (p. 57). According to Laucella (2010) coverage of Vick’s case, rarely linked the individual act to systemic problems associated with dog fighting. The focus on Vick’s individual acts allows journalists to pathologize him and the Black

community without examining larger societal issues. Ultimately, by dehumanizing Vick, media reinforced the stereotype of “savage” Black male athlete.

Deviant. The deviant Black male athlete could be considered a criminalized extension of the exotic savage. The deviant Black male athlete can be described as violent, aggressive, and/or one who might participate in criminal behavior (Davis & Harris, 1998; de B’beri & Hogarth, 2009; Eagleman, 2011; King & Springwood, 2001; Leonard, 2006; Lewis & Proffitt, 2012; Mastro et al., 2011). The deviant Black male, in part, stems from the popular perception of Black men as criminals due to their overrepresentation in prison (Berry & Smith, 2000). Hawkins (2010a) alluded to how the “bad Black” or as he termed it the “bad nigga” has become a symbol for crime (p. 71). Sport media has played a pivotal role in perpetuating the notion of the deviant Black athlete by reproducing negative racial imagery (Hawkins).

Lewis and Proffitt (2012) examined media framing of marijuana incidences of two White athletes (Michael Phelps, Brad Miller) and two African American Athletes (Michael Vick, Josh Howard). Articles from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Atlanta-Journal-Constitution*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *USA Today* as well as ESPN.com and Foxsports.com provided the units of analysis. The analysis revealed that coverage of White athlete, Michael Phelps’ marijuana use was written off as “not a big deal,” and framed as a youthful indiscretion, this despite Phelps’ previous arrest for a DUI (Lewis & Proffitt, 2012, p. 7). Similarly, Miller’s arrest and suspension from the NBA barely warranted any press coverage at all, despite the fact a suspension from the league happens only after a third failed drug test, meaning Miller failed two previous drug tests (Lewis & Proffitt, 2012). In comparison, the coverage of both Vick and

Howard's run-ins with the law was framed as part of a trend, and in Vick's case they cited his past legal problems as evidence (Lewis & Proffitt, 2012). In addition, writers seemed to identify with Phelps as the "well meaning teenager" but not with Vick or Howard, the two Black athletes (Lewis & Proffitt, 2012, p. 15). The dismissal of Phelps' and Miller's marijuana use while framing Howard and Vick's actions as part of a larger trend is consistent with previous research that depicts Black male athletes in ways that reinforce stereotypes.

In a quantitative analysis of news articles found in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today* over a three-year period, Mastro et al., (2011) examined sports news depictions of race and crime. Findings were consistent with previous research in two ways: 1) sport media coverage overrepresented Black male athletes as criminals in comparison to White athletes, and 2) coverage also overrepresented Black males in proportion to the number of Black athletes in professional sports. The analysis also illustrated that not only was the amount of coverage greater, the text of the articles pertaining to criminal behavior of Black male athletes provided more explicit details, was also more negative and accusatory than articles about criminal behavior of White male athletes (Mastro et al., 2011). Such coverage explained criminal behavior by White male athletes as unique and situational while criminal behavior of Black male athletes was more "episodic" and a symptom of individual failures (Mastro et al., 2011, p. 540). By over-representing Black male athletes as criminals through a larger number of articles and then reinforcing that through the accompanying text results in a media frame that depicts Black male athletes in ways that reinforces the deviant stereotype.

Eagleman (2011) utilized articles found in *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine* to explore the ways in which MLB players of differing nationalities and races were depicted. In comparison to White and Latino Americans, African American players received the most negative portrayals. While White male athletes from the United States were portrayed as hard workers who learned the game from their fathers, Black male athletes from the U.S. were described in ways that reinforced stereotypes of “deviant” Black males (tattoos, baggy clothes, owning cars with tinted windows, listening to rap music, raised by single mothers) (Eagleman, 2011). Thus, the results of this analysis are consistent with previous research regarding portrayals of Black male athletes.

A content analysis of *Sports Illustrated* cover images from 1970-2003 by Goss and colleagues (2010) explored the racial representations of NBA athletes. The authors analyzed the image as well as the text accompanying the image of 216 magazine covers. In a departure from previous historical stereotypes, Black athletes in cover images were depicted as intellectual more often than White athletes (Goss et al., 2010). On the other hand, stereotypes and negative portrayals of Black male athletes did emerge. They found that from 1970-2003 positive depictions of Black athletes decreased over time while positive portrayals of White athletes remained consistent (Goss et al., 2010). In addition, the cover images often portrayed Black athletes as violent through the text accompanying the visual portrayal.

Media coverage has frequently equated Black athlete with criminal (Hoberman, 1997; de B’beri & Hogarth, 2009). De B’beri and Hogarth (2009) examined the media coverage of Ron Artest and the 2004 NBA brawl in the Detroit. Coverage often

privileged Whiteness by rendering it invisible through discussions that denied race was an issue in the brawl. This occurred despite stating “hip-hop” and “egos” were to blame, as those adjectives indirectly reference Black athletes (de B’Berri & Hogarth, 2009, p. 95). Media specifically described Ron Artest as uncontrollable and inferred that he was a criminal who instigated the fight (de B’berri & Hogarth, 2009). As de B’berri and Hogarth (2009) stated, “public discourse reverted to popular representations of Blacks as thugs, criminals and malcontents” (p. 94). The coverage of Artest and the brawl consistently used language that reinforced the stereotype of the criminally deviant Black male.

Leonard (2010) analyzed media coverage following NBA players Gilbert Arenas and Javaris Crittendon suspensions for bringing guns into the locker room. Results revealed that media reinforced stereotypes by associating Black males with criminal behavior. Coverage often linked Black male athletes to criminal behavior involving guns. For example, articles that followed the incident focused on Black male athletes who owned guns while painting unflattering portraits. Furthermore, gestures and facial expressions that were deemed “menacing” by Black players came under additional media and league scrutiny due to the stereotypical association between Black athletes and violent behavior (Leonard, 2010, p. 259). According to Leonard (2010), Arenas became not only a symbol of violence but also symbolic of the perceived lack of morals and values in the Black community. By connecting Arenas’ behavior to the perceived deficiencies in the African American community, the media reinforces the stereotype of the pathologically deviant Black male athlete.

Brown (2005) investigated media coverage of NBA player Allen Iverson's domestic dispute during the summer of 2002. He analyzed stories from three major Philadelphia newspapers the *Inquirer*, *Daily News* and *Tribune* as well as local news broadcasts during a two-week span of time. One major issue he found was that news outlets treated most information from Iverson's case as fact whether or not it was true (Brown, 2005). By focusing on Iverson's past criminal record, and questionable information including his supposed use of a gun to force his way into an apartment building, a repeatedly "heated" with argument his wife, as well as Iverson's haggard mug shot, journalists constructed Iverson as the stereotypical angry Black male prone to violent behavior (Brown, 2005, p. 73).

Research by King and Springwood (2001) noted the disparity in media depictions of Lawrence Philips (a Black male) and Christian Peter (a White male). Both men were collegiate football players at the University of Nebraska in the early 1990's. During that time, they were arrested for assaulting women. The authors asserted that the excessive media attention focused on Philips resulted from the "animalistic and deviant inscriptions" that have been historically associated with Black men (p. 116-117). According to King and Springwood (2001), while media outlets focused solely on Phillips, they virtually ignored Peter's role in the crimes and thus perpetuated the stereotype that links Black males to deviant behavior.

Tucker (2003) and Walton (2001) offered a similar juxtaposition of media coverage regarding violent incidents involving professional athletes. Tucker examined how the media focused on Latrell Sprewell's (Black male NBA player) violent outburst towards his coach while ignoring a similar violent incident by Kevin Greene (White

male NFL player). According to Tucker (2003), the Latrell Sprewell/PJ Carlesimo choking incident received far more media attention than Kevin Greene attacking his coach on the sidelines during a televised game. This type of biased media coverage reinforces stereotypes of the deviant (violent, aggressive, criminal) Black athlete while erasing the similar negative behaviors of White men. Walton (2001) also noted that media as well as the Golden State Warriors organization consistently stigmatized Sprewell following the incident while disregarding the verbal abuse he took from Carlesimo during practices and games. For example, journalists described Sprewell as “disturbed” and as a “recent strangler” (p. 353). By utilizing those adjectives regularly, media reinforced the link between Black male athletes and deviance.

In an additional piece on the NBA, Leonard (2006) identified the ways in which media coverage of the 2004 brawl at The Palace in Auburn Hills, Michigan reinforced the stereotype of the deviant Black athlete. According to Leonard, media has consistently described Black NBA players as aggressive and out of control. Furthermore, the refusal of journalists to acknowledge the stereotypical association between Blackness and crime has resulted in descriptions of these athletes as “thugs” or “criminals” (p. 158). As a result, “Just as crime signifies Blackness and vice versa, Blackness has come to embody a pollutant within the NBA that necessitates surveillance and regulation” (Leonard, 2006, p. 160.) In sum, not only were Black athletes described as deviant, the media supported the NBA’s attempt to control/limit perceived deviant behavior (Leonard).

Emotionally immature. The emotionally immature Black male athlete has been defined by the media in terms of selfish, arrogant, and insubordinate behavior that leads

to negative repercussions such as contract hold-outs, and/or excessive celebrations following individual accomplishments (Cunningham, 2009; Davis & Harris, 1998; Billings & Eastman, 2002; Bishop, 2005; 2009; Simons, 2003). The main difference between the depiction of the deviant Black male and emotionally immature Black male is that the emotionally immature Black male engages in insubordinate behavior (e.g., ignoring team/league rules, emotional outbursts on the court/field) but not necessarily criminal behavior. Conversely, as Black male athletes are characterized as immature and selfish, White male athletes are often depicted as team players (Davis & Harris, 1998).

Bishop (2005; 2009) conducted two separate studies that explored the media coverage pertaining to NFL player holdouts. The first study, analyzed newspaper coverage of Seattle Seahawks wide receiver Joey Galloway's contract holdout. The coverage of Galloway portrayed him as greedy, unmotivated and materialistic (Bishop). Also within the coverage of the contract holdout, journalists positioned the head coach as the ultimate authority figure and by holding out Galloway undermined his authority and threatened the success of the team (Bishop, 2005). The second textual analysis of newspaper articles compared the coverage of Kellen Winslow (Black NFL player) to Philip Rivers (White NFL player). Both players had been first round draft picks in the process of holding out of training camp due to contract negotiations. Journalists depicted Winslow as selfish and greedy; they also suggested that Winslow's father was controlling him (Bishop, 2009). These portrayals imply a high level of immaturity derived from Winslow's inability to make his own decisions, and his sole focus on money. On the other hand, Rivers was portrayed far more favorably. According to

Bishop (2009), Rivers was depicted as someone in control of his destiny and as a “sympathetic figure” (p. 72). Furthermore, in numerous articles, journalists suggested that the Chargers organizational ineptitude was at fault for Rivers’ contract holdout not Rivers himself. One could argue that the Cleveland Browns were also inept; however, this was not the case and Winslow was cast as an immature Black man whose holdout was negatively impacting his team (Bishop, 2009). Both articles reflect the ways in which media portrayals reinforce stereotypes of Black male athletes as emotionally immature.

In a qualitative analysis of televised coverage of intercollegiate football and basketball, Rada and Wulfemeyer (2004) found that Black male athletes were depicted in ways that reinforced the emotionally immature stereotype as well as the supposed cultural depravity of the African American community. Similar to Bishop (2005), the coach was described as an authority figure but in results from Rada and Wulfemeyer (2004), announcers described the coach as playing a more paternalistic role due to the perceived chaos in the lives of fatherless Black male athletes. By playing into the perceived culture of poverty narrative the announcers frame Black male athletes as self centered and directionless while positing White coaches as saviors, thus reinforcing the emotionally immature stereotype of Black male athletes.

Billings and Eastman (2002) added to previous sport media research through their study of American television coverage of the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Their analysis revealed that White male athletes were overrepresented based on participation rates and Black men were depicted as physically superior in comparison to White athletes. Similar to Bishop’s (2009) findings, the image of the “immature” Black male

athlete emerged in the television coverage. In this case, the media depicted Black male athletes as arrogant while White male athletes were contrasted as more modest. Billings and Eastman suggested that this was due, in part, to the criticism that journalists directed towards the celebration by the United States men's 4 x 100 relay team. The media critique reinforces the stereotypical narrative that Black male athletes are emotionally immature.

The portrayal of NBA players has consistently been linked to immature, selfish behavior (Berry & Smith, 2000; Davis & Harris, 1998; Leonard, 2006). Davis and Harris (1998) pinpointed the depiction of Black men as immature through an analysis of an article in *Sports Illustrated* entitled "Petulant Prima Donnas." As the title implies, the author of the article had few positive adjectives for Black male players. In fact, he described all Black male athletes as whiny and selfish because they focused on individual instead of team performance (Davis & Harris). In contrast, sport media often describes White male athletes as hard working team players. Consequently, the article in *Sports Illustrated* is another example of how sport media reinforces the stereotype of the emotionally immature Black male athlete.

Race transcendent. Recently, color-blind ideology has permeated media discourses (Hartmann, 2007) as media narratives have excluded any significant discussion of race. A corollary to a color-blind discourse in sport media that has emerged is the idea that athletes, specifically Black males, can "transcend" race. This means that White consumers now accept Black athletes as commercial icons. Athletes such as Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson, and until recently, Tiger Woods have epitomized this idea as journalists have posited them as "race transcendent" (Andrews,

1996; Billings, 2003; Cole & Andrews, 1996; Davie, King & Leonard, 2010; Davis & Harris, 1998; Giacobbi & DeSensei, 1999; Kellner, 2004). Due to both their athletic and commercial success, White audiences as well as people of color have idolized Jordan and Johnson. Discussions of “race transcendent” athletes have often been couched within color-blind ideology. While the construction of Black athletes as race transcendent appears, on the surface to be positive, the concept that Black athletes can be seen as “color-less” is false and reinforces White male hegemony.

According to Andrews (1996), Nike played a prominent role in the construction of Jordan as “All-American” and wholesome. The seemingly innocuous “All-American” image of Michael Jordan appealed to meritocratic principles of hard work, dedication, and commitment (Andrews, 1996); it also served to render Black men as “less threatening” to Whites (Davis & Harris, 1998). This initially started with a series of Nike advertisements with Spike Lee as Jordan’s sidekick Mars Blackmon. The advertisements contrasted the “good Black” versus “bad Black” construct with Jordan as the nice, well spoken athlete and Lee as the prototypical aggressive, urban Black male. Contrasting Jordan with an “other” through these Nike commercials, allows him to be portrayed as wholesome while Lee’s character is posited as the semi-threatening “urban” Black male (Andrews, 1996). In addition, Jordan’s refusal to publicly discuss any political issues pertaining to the African American community further cemented his race transcendent status in the media (Andrews, 1996). In sum, Nike downplayed Jordan’s Blackness by using other Black males (e.g., Spike Lee or Charles Barkley) to project the aggressive, urban stereotypes and as such, Jordan could be seen as a “paragon” of White virtue (Andrews, 1996).

Cole and Andrews' (1996) explored the way the media constructed the race of superstar players Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson. Through media stories and management testimonials "Jordan came to represent a Black version of a White cultural model..." (Cole & Andrews, 1996, p. 130). Sport media depicted Magic Johnson as unselfish and competitive, which contrasted with how they portrayed other Black NBA players in the 1980's as lazy and selfish (Cole & Andrews, 1996). The narratives of racial harmony that media perpetuated through Johnson's relationship with Larry Bird also reinforced an emerging color-blind ideology. Magic's mass appeal based on his "docile" and "childlike" nature fueled his acceptance by Whites and thus the perceived transcendence of race (Cole & Andrews, 1996).

Andrews (1996) and Cole and Andrews (1996) observed that the concept of a race transcendent superstar is, to an extent, fleeting. While Jordan and Johnson exhibited "good" behaviors (e.g., winning championships, openness with the media, not getting arrested), the media described them as race-less; however, that changed when both were found to have engaged in what the press deemed as "unsavory practices." Journalists connected Jordan's gambling habit and Johnson's HIV to the stereotype of the deviant Black male (Andrews; Cole & Andrews). As a result, Jordan and Johnson (race-transcendent superstars) were just one mistake away from being described by the media as just another Black guy (Leonard, 2004).

Tiger Woods is also an example of an athlete who the media claims to transcend race; however, Billings' (2003) and Giacobbi and DeSensei's (1999) research illustrates a complex relationship between media portrayals of Woods as a race transcendent figure and his Blackness. A point to consider is that although Woods identifies himself

as Cablinasian, media outlets often refer to him as a “Black” golfer. An initial study of media coverage pertaining to Woods discussed the complexity of his mixed racial heritage. Giacobbi and DeSensei (1999) noted that journalists were reticent to discuss race overtly but often positioned Woods as a “messiah” who would transcend golf in the post “O.J. Simpson era” (p. 415). In other words, Woods’ dark skin, multi-racial background and refusal to claim one race allowed journalists to present him as a respite from the supposed criminality of Black male athletes like O.J. Simpson. In addition, articles also discussed his friendship with Michael Jordan, thus fueling a race neutral portrayal. Billings (2003) found that the media did not depict Tiger solely on stereotypes of Black athletes. For example, announcers attributed Woods’ success to his experience while they blamed his failure on his lack of concentration or composure. Billings also noted that announcers discussed the athleticism of other golfers more frequently than Woods. This marks a change from previous research where announcers often described minority athletes as “natural athletes” more frequently than White athletes (Buffington, 2005; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Murrell & Curtis, 1994; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005). Despite creating a “new prototype,” announcers managed to still perpetuate racial ideology by associating Woods’ Blackness with failure, “In sum, he’s only Black when he’s losing” (Billings, 2003, p. 35). Categorizing him as Black when he fails reinforces negative stereotypes associated with Black athletes.

Davie and colleagues (2010) examined media coverage surrounding Tiger Woods’ infidelity. Downplaying Woods’ African American heritage evoked a color-blind discourse. According to the authors, Woods success and emphasis on his multicultural background “diminished his Blackness” allowed White fans to embrace

him while not having to discuss race (Davie et al., 2010, p. 112). When Woods', marital indiscretions were made public however, media were able to weave subtle references to his Blackness into stories (Davie et al., 2010). While media might have depicted Woods as race transcendent through a color-blind discourse, his African American heritage was used to pathologize his indiscretions through stereotypes of Black masculinity and sexuality.

The previous body of research illustrates that sport media coverage of Black male athletes has portrayed them in ways that reinforce stereotypes. Specifically, media portrayals of Black male athletes have resulted in five categories of representation: *highly competent/natural athlete, exotic savage, deviant, emotionally immature, and race transcendent*. The next section discusses the consequences described by scholars that result from depictions of Black male athletes that reinforce stereotypes.

Consequences of Media Depictions

Scholars have been explicit about the consequences that result from persistent negative verbal and visual depictions of Black male athletes (Andrews & Silk, 2010; Berry & Smith, 2000; Ferber, 2007; Hardin et al., 2004; Hawkins, 2010a; Hoberman, 2000; Leonard, 2004; 2006; McDonald, 1996; Mercurio & Filak, 2010). The most commonly mentioned consequences are: 1) stereotypes are interpreted as reality over time (Childs, 1999; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Goss et al., 2010; Mercurio & Filak, 2010; Wonsek, 1992), 2) conditional acceptance of Black male athletes in society (Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Hardin et al., 2004; Harrison, 1998; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005), 3) perception as sport as a vehicle for upward mobility (Berry & Smith, 2000; Davis & Harris, 1998; Hoberman, 2000; Johnson et al., 1999), and 4) the perpetuation

of the myth of meritocracy (Andrews, 1996; Cole & Andrews, 1996; Buffington, 2005; Davis & Harris, 1998; Kellner, 2004). The following subsections discuss the aforementioned consequences in greater detail.

Stereotypes interpreted as reality. Although there has been some research that concluded media has moved away from historically negative representations of Black male athletes (Denham et al., 2002; Sabo et al., 1996) the overwhelming majority of research has consistently shown that media has relied on stereotypical descriptors and images of Black men (Bigler & Jeffries, 2008; Bishop, 2005; 2009; Bruce, 2004; Buffington, 2005; Carrington, 2002; Davis & Harris, 1998; Eastman & Billings, 2001; King & Springwood, 2001; Leonard, 2006; Lule, 1995; McCarthy & Jones, 1997; Mercurio & Filak, 2010; Murrell & Curtis, 1994; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005; Rainville & McCormick, 1977; Sloop, 1997). Researchers argue that media members internalize these stereotypes and then reproduce them within their work as journalists (Eastman & Billings, 2001; Mercurio & Filak, 2010). This reproduction occurs in spite of increased numbers of women and minorities in media positions (Eastman & Billings, 2001). In particular, Childs (1999) suggests that the deviant Black male athlete, has become embedded in American culture through consistent media portrayals in films and television commercials. As both White and Black audiences internalize these consistent negative depictions of Black male athletes it can have detrimental effects on perceptions of intelligence, capabilities, and access to opportunities for Black men in sport.

Conditional acceptance of Black male athletes. An over-representation of Black men in sport media coverage (Hardin et al., 2004) and their popularity when playing well (Harrison, 1998; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005) have both contributed to the

conditional acceptance of Black male athletes. In other words, society tolerates Black male athletes solely for their accomplishments as athletes not necessarily as people. Harrison (1998) observed that the adoration for Black males is quickly lost when they make mistakes; however, a reverence for White male athletes who make the same mistakes still remains. By over-representing Black athletes in comparison to their participation rates, sport media perpetuates the stereotype that Blacks are genetically predisposed to success in sport. According to Hardin et al., (2004), the overrepresentation reinforces the concept of “enlightened racism” (p. 213). Sport is seen as the only acceptable profession in which Blacks can achieve success (versus business, education, or law). The conditional acceptance of African American athletes is problematic because it perpetuates the stereotype of the Black male as naturally athletic yet intellectually stunted. “In effect, announcers have painted African American players into a corner wherein they can be accepted as athletes but only athletes” (Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005, p. 81).

Perception of sport as upward mobility. The statistical overrepresentation and media focus on African American men in professional and collegiate sports, namely football and basketball, reinforces the idea that sport is the lone vehicle for upward mobility (Berry & Smith, 2000). Despite the reality that only 3 in 10,000 high school senior athletes get drafted to the NBA, while 8 in 10,000 will be drafted by the NFL (NCAA, 2010) many believe pursuing a career in professional sport is the best option for Black males. In the following quote, Berry and Smith (2000) identified the role media plays in perpetuating the idea of sport as upward mobility, “Media sports stories constrain the visibility of everyday successes by non-athlete African Americans,

generally and particularly African American males” (p. 185). As a result, the media presents a singular view of African American male success that in turn restricts economic mobility (Johnson et al., 1999). For example, by concentrating on sport, Hoberman (2000) suggests that there has become an “oppositional relationship between Black academic and athletic achievement” (p. 50). Consequently, becoming a professional athlete is the primary focus of Black men, which comes at the expense of education (Hoberman, 2000).

Due to individual and institutional barriers resulting from stereotypes, Black men also have restricted access to leadership positions within sport (Davis & Harris, 1998). Presently, within major North American sport leagues including the NFL, NBA, and MLB only one team (out of a total of 92 teams) has a majority owner who is African American, Michael Jordan is part owner of the Charlotte Bobcats (Lapchick et al., 2012). While Black players dominate the field in the NFL (67%), at the start of the 2010 season only six Head Coaches and five General Managers out of 32 teams were Black (Lapchick, et al., 2011). While professional basketball and football players have defied the odds and reached professional leagues as athletes, Black men have hit a glass ceiling of achievement that limits their access to leadership positions as head coaches, general managers, and owners. Combined with these institutional barriers, sport media has consistently depicted Black male athletes in ways that reinforce stereotypes that they lack the acumen and emotional maturity to be successful in leadership positions. Thus, there is a need to understand how audiences interpret media narratives about Black male athletes.

Perpetuating the myth of meritocracy. The final consequence cited by Andrews (1996), Buffington (2005), Cole and Andrews (1996), Davis and Harris (1998), and Kellner (2004) is that the overwhelming presence of African American male athletes in collegiate/professional football and basketball is proof of the existence of the meritocratic principles of equality, hard work, commitment, and dedication. By perpetuating a color-blind discourse where race is not mentioned directly, the perception becomes that racism is “a thing of the past” in the United States. Buffington (2005) states that the media has measured progress towards racial equality by pointing out the growth in numbers of Black quarterbacks playing professional football. Consequently, athletes like Michael Vick or LeBron James, who rose from poverty to stardom, are championed as proof that any Black male can become a successful athlete or superstar with hard work, humility, and dedication (Andrews, 1996; Cole & Andrews, 1996). Meritocracy erases institutional barriers that people of color face. Instead, the subtle argument invoked by the concept of meritocracy is that African Americans who do not achieve success fail due to their own individual incompetency (Collins, 2009; Davis & Harris, 1998; McIntosh, 2009), which ultimately reinforces the negative stereotype of the unintelligent Black male athlete.

In sum, scholars have demonstrated that sport media has consistently depicted Black male athletes in ways that reinforce racial stereotypes (Berry & Smith, 2003; Billings, & Eastman, 2002; Bishop, 2009; Brown, 2005; Bruce, 2004; Buffington, 2005; Cole, & Andrews, 1996; Davis & Harris, 1998; Eastman & Billings, 2002; Hardin et al., 2004; Leonard, 2006; Mercurio, & Filak, 2010; McCarthy, & Jones, 1997; Murrell & Curtis, 1994; Rada, 1996; Rada & Wulfemeyer 2004; Rainville & McCormick, 1977;

Walton, 2001; Wonsek, 1992). Furthermore, scholars argue that the consequences of adverse portrayals of have lasting effects on sport media audiences ((Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Childs, 1999; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Hardin et al., 2004; Harrison, 1998; Mercurio & Filak, 2010; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005; Wonsek, 1992). The problem with this argument is that very few sport media scholars have actually examined how audiences interpret media depictions of Black male athletes.

Sport Media Audience Reception Research

Despite the extensive research on the ways in which sport media reproduces dominant ideologies, there is little research about the ways in which audiences interpret those narratives. Millington and Wilson (2010) argue that although textual analysis is important it “lacks nuance” (p. 31). In other words, textual or content analyses lack depth because they do not account for how audiences actually interpret images or words. Although few audience reception research studies exist in sport sociology, there has been an implicit assumption among some sport media scholars that audiences passively internalize dominant ideologies produced by mainstream media (Jhally, 1989; Sorice, 2009; Wenner, 1989). Scholars have also surmised that the same text could produce multiple readings depending on the previous experiences of the readers (Davis & Michelle, 2011; Michelle, 2007; Suckfull & Scharrow, 2009).

Presently, a majority of audience reception research has focused on male sports while utilizing male focus group participants (Wilson & Sparks, 1996; 2001; McCarthy et al., 2003; Mitrano, 1999). However, there have been an increasing number of studies that have utilized female focus group participants (Bruce, 1998; Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Seate, et al., 2010; Wheaton & Beal, 2003). The existing

body of knowledge generated by audience reception research in sport sociology illustrates how individual interpretations of media images differ. Since there is a growing female base of sport media consumers it is important to incorporate them into research to understand if/how their interpretations differ from their male counterparts.

Wilson and Sparks (1996) investigated the impact of media portrayals of Black athletes in apparel commercials on Canadian youth. Focus groups comprised of all male, Black, and non-Black youth from similar socio-economic backgrounds in Toronto and Vancouver viewed commercials that depicted Black athletes playing and discussing basketball. Wilson and Sparks (1996) found that the Black participants directly identified with the Black athletes; the commercial sparked spirited discussions about celebrity influence on “popular culture and style” (p. 414). Conversely, non-Black participants barely discussed the athletes, nor did they assert that the Black athletes were influential figures. “In sum, the most marked trend was the limited influence the athletes appeared to have on non-Black respondents” (Wilson & Sparks, p. 420). While, both groups shared similar characteristics: socioeconomic background, age, and knowledge/interest in basketball, race played a distinct role in interpreting the images.

In an extension of their previous study, Wilson and Sparks (2001) explored the impact of the portrayals of Black athletes in sneaker commercials. Themes emerged among the Black participants that debunked some assumptions about the differing ways in which audiences internalize images. For example, Black youth did not necessarily perceive sport as a vehicle for upward mobility, nor did the stereotypical portrayals negatively impact their self-esteem. As Wilson and Sparks (2001) stated, “it reinforced reality” (p. 27). Results illustrated that racism was ever-present in the daily lives of the

Black youth. On the other hand, the responses from non-Black participants, who often had little contact with Blacks, reinforced stereotypes of the “natural” Black athlete as well as the perception of difference between Black and White cultures. According to Wilson and Sparks (2001), non-Blacks displayed a lack of depth to the understanding of racism and stereotypes. The authors claimed that the presence of Black athletes in sport is perceived by non-Blacks to reflect “social equality” (p. 28). Consequently, Wilson and Sparks’ (1996; 2001) research illustrates the importance of recruiting diverse populations for focus groups because of the divergent ways they interpret, negotiate, and reconcile media images.

By utilizing a mixed-methods approach to audience reception research, McCarthy and Jones (1997) exposed the importance of both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The authors used a content analysis methodology to analyze 100 hours of announcer commentary in professional English football. They organized the dialogue into categories that included overall player performance, physical characteristics, and psychological descriptions of players. The analysis illustrated that the announcers described the player performances and psychological makeup of both Black and White players similarly; however, they routinely touted the physical prowess of Black players more often than White players (McCarthy & Jones, 1997).

The second component of their study utilized homogenous focus groups consisting of Black and White male participants. Both focus groups watched and then discussed the announcer commentary. Within these discussions, McCarthy et al., (2003) noted that Black participants thought that the announcers treated Black players differently, which they attributed the differences to “White ideology” and not

necessarily overt racism. However, the White focus group participants recognized the stereotypes perpetuated by the commentators, but claimed that the descriptors “reflected the needs of the position” and not necessarily racism (p. 232). The logic being that athletes who play forward in soccer are normally faster than those who play other positions so describing a Black forward as fast fits with the needs of the position. Using a mixed methods approach allowed researchers to explore in-depth, how audiences interpreted announcer commentary. The results reflect the importance of multidimensional analyses that identify contextual factors that might influence individual participants.

Buffington and Fraley (2008) explored audience interpretations of media portrayals of collegiate basketball players during the 2000 NCAA tournament. The authors had participants match announcer commentary that described physical or mental skills with pictures of either White or Black athletes. The researchers also asked participants to explain why they made that decision. Results indicated that participants more frequently matched Black athletes with comments related to physical skill in comparison to Whites. In the open-ended portion, participants routinely explained that African Americans were superior athletes, reiterating the Black brawn versus White brains dichotomy (Buffington & Fraley, 2008). Participants even related leadership capabilities of Black athletes to physical superiority, meaning that because they perceived the Black male athletes to be physically superior, they in turn assumed Black males were better leaders. In spite of the results indicating a majority of the participants associated Black male athletes with historical stereotypes, several participants demonstrated a critical understanding of stereotypical portrayals of Black male athletes.

For example, one participant noted that Black men are often portrayed as “criminal” and “violent” on television (Buffington & Fraley, 2008, p. 304). Although only a few participants critically analyzed the commentary it illustrates that not all individuals passively internalize stereotypes of Black male athletes.

In an examination of stereotypes associated with African American male athletes, Seate et al. (2010) assigned participants, the majority of which were female, to read newspaper articles in which the content of the article was manipulated in one of four ways: accusatory-mental, defensive-mental, accusatory-physical and defensive-physical. The results both conformed to and challenged existing audience reception research. In line with previous research, when the athlete was framed in an accusatory manner, participants tended to believe that they were guilty of the accusation discussed in the article (Seate et al., 2010). In contrast, the results also illustrated that there was little to no association between the mental accusatory/physical frame and the perception of the athlete’s race (Seate et al., 2010). For example, when framed as naturally athletic, the athlete was not more likely to be perceived as Black by participants. The results also illustrated the ways in which perceptions interact with framing. When participants perceived the athlete to be Black and read the article framed as accusatory, they held the most negative attitudes towards those athletes. That perception could be related to the societal perception of Black males as violent criminals. The results revealed the ways in which various combinations of framing media narratives interacted with participant perceptions that both challenged and supported previous research.

Wheaton and Beal (2003) explored skateboarding and windsurfer subcultures in the United States and the United Kingdom. The participants read magazines dedicated

to each subculture and were asked to respond to the images and text. Within these texts, White men were posited as the norm or “authentic” while women and people of color were marginalized. Respondents noted that females and minorities, needed to excel in order to have any chance of being accepted by the dominant group (Wheaton & Beal, 2003). Among participants, White skaters downplayed race while non-White skaters identified race as a barrier. The groups diverged when the topic of female representation in advertising arose. Male skaters dismissed sexist images of women as “unproblematic” while female as well as older male windsurfers rejected sexualized depictions as “inauthentic” and not representative of true female windsurfers (p. 171). The results revealed the diverse ways that individual participants can challenge or accept media narratives.

Bruce (1998) studied female fan reactions to media representations of women’s basketball through in-depth interviews. Participants actively contested negative portrayals of women’s basketball through a critique of commentators’ analyses (Bruce, 1998). For example, participants questioned gender marking of the “women’s” game and reconstructed the games as a better final product than men’s basketball. Bruce (1998) illustrated the need to move beyond a textual analysis in order to fully comprehend how consumers interpret and negotiate depictions of female athletes.

Kane and Maxwell (2011) examined the premise that “sex sells” women’s sport through focus groups. The authors presented a series of six pictures of female athletes to participants that reflected historical patterns of representation (girl next door, ambivalence, hyper-heterosexual, sexy babe, soft porn, athletic competence). Kane and Maxwell (2011), found a backlash effect among women and older men. These two

groups comprised the core fan base and took offense to how the women would be sexualized at the expense of presenting them as competent athletes. While athletic competence rated highest among all participants, men in the 18-34 year age group, indicated that the sexualized images grabbed their short-term attention, but did not inspire them to invest in attending any events. The ambivalent portrayals of female athletes seemed to alienate and confuse a majority of the participants as many indicated the use of mixed message marketing tactics made them less likely to read or attend women's sporting events.

Sport media scholars, Kane and Maxwell (2011), Mercurio and Filak (2010) and Rada and Wulfemeyer (2005) have identified the need for audience reception research. While the existing studies greatly contribute to our understanding of audience interpretations of mediated images, a greater need to examine audiences remains. In order to move forward, audience studies must continually consider the situational and contextual issues posed by individual participants because they impact how audiences respond to media narratives.

This chapter included the most recent literature regarding media portrayals of Black male athletes. Sport media research has indicated that Black male athletes are routinely depicted in ways that reinforce stereotypes. Sport media scholars have rarely utilized audiences in gauging how consumers interpret stereotypical portrayals. This study seeks to fill a gap in existing sport media scholarship by employing focus groups to examine how audiences interpret images of Black male athletes as well as how those interpretations correlate with scholarly assertions regarding consequences of stereotypical portrayals.

CHAPTER 3:

Methodology

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how audiences interpret media images of Black male athletes and how those interpretations correlate with scholarly assertions. In the study, focus groups were used to examine the research questions listed below. The methodology section will begin with a discussion of audience reception research in sport sociology, followed by an explanation of the research design. The research design section includes a brief discussion of focus group literature, the composition of the groups, and an explanation of the focus group protocol. The section concludes with a description of data analysis procedures.

Research questions

RQ1. How do audiences interpret and discuss images of Black male athletes within five categories of representation?

RQ2. How do participant interpretations correlate with scholarly assertions of the consequences of negative media depictions of Black male athletes within five categories of representation?

RQ3. How does color-blind ideology have an impact on the discussion of images of Black male athletes within five categories of representation?

Problematizing Audience Reception Research

The bulk of sport media race research has analyzed the “messages” within pictorial representations, live announcer commentary, and written articles, yet less attention among sport media scholars has been paid to how audiences interpret such “messages” (Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Millington & Wilson, 2010; Sorice, 2009). As

Wenner (1989) noted, “Looking for hegemony is one matter, but finding it prematurely without having surveyed the terrain of audience is quite another” (p. 49). Similar to the work of McCarthy and colleagues (2003) and Wilson and Sparks (1996; 2001), this project utilizes focus groups to explore how audiences interpret and understand images of Black male athletes. In comparison to individual interviews or surveys, focus groups are able to provide in depth information on a topic in a more realistic setting that may replicate “real life” conversations. Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the research plan proceeded in two stages. The first stage consisted of recruiting participants through undergraduate/graduate courses and my personal network. The second stage (focus groups) commenced after the participants were identified. Focus groups were conducted with participants who discussed photographs of African American male athletes.

As Michelle (2007) cautioned, individual experiences in such research must be contextualized as the pictures impact how people interpret media narratives. Participants’ race, sex/gender, and age, are all key components to understanding their responses. Situating these demographic factors within participant responses should allow for greater context into responses.

The images that were presented to the focus group participants reflected the five categories of representation of Black male athletes outlined in chapter two:

- Highly Competent/natural athlete (athlete portrayed in uniform, on court, in action)
- Exotic savage (representation of Black male athlete that reinforces animalistic or hypersexual stereotype)

- Deviant (off court image of well-known Black male athlete explicitly linked to deviant or criminal behavior)
- Emotionally immature (athlete depicted as selfish, argumentative, or arrogant)
- Race transcendent (off court portrayal of Black male athlete as businessman)

The images were selected from the websites of major sport media outlets, ESPN and Sports Illustrated. They were chosen because both ESPN and Sports Illustrated maintain a significant stronghold among sport media consumers (Kane & Maxwell, 2011).

Drawing from the descriptors within each category of representation (e.g. emotionally immature-selfish, argumentative) I looked for pictures of Black male athletes that matched. The SI.com photograph section had subcategories that included the “NBA’s Notorious Whiners” and “NFL Wide Receivers in Trouble” which included both action shots and mug shots of primarily African American athletes. Using those photograph galleries as well as searching photographs from ESPN.com, I narrowed it down to two images per category and then worked with a scholar in the field to pick each exemplar (see Appendix A, p. 187).

Research Design

Focus groups were utilized to gather insight into how audiences interpret the media images of Black male athletes. The research design was qualitative, with open-ended questions posed to focus group participants as the method of data collection.

Focus groups are often used to understand how and why people think a certain way in a setting that is more natural than an individual interview (Kitzinger, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Morgan (1996) stated that focus groups have the ability to provide a more in depth analysis of a topic than survey data because focus groups allow

participants to thoroughly answer questions. Slater and Tiggeman (2010) noted that, “the group context is thought to facilitate openness and disclosure” (p. 620). One of the key elements of focus groups is the interaction among participants (Bay-Cheng, Livingston, & Fava, 2010; Frey, 1991; Halkier, 2010; Hyden & Bulow, 2003; Kitzinger, 1994; 1995; Morgan & Spanish, 1984; Morgan, 1996; Sim, 1998; Slater & Tiggeman, 2010). Kidd and Parshall (2000) asserted that focus group discussions that include arguments and consensus among participants are more beneficial than individual interviews. Focus group discussions allow participants to challenge each other’s responses which forces participants to clarify statements and positions (Bay-Cheng, et al., 2010; Kidd & Parshall; Morgan, 1996). Thus, the strengths of focus groups are the detailed information participants provide through the interaction with others.

There are issues to consider when using focus groups. Although focus groups have the ability to gain in depth information (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1996), they can also silence voices and opinions of the minority (Kitzinger; Smithson, 2000). This is important when conducting the interview and data analysis. While some participants might try to dominate the conversation, it does not mean that others are silent because they are in consensus. It is important to note in focus group discussions “the absence in diversity of data does not reliably indicate an underlying consensus” (Sim, 1998, p. 348). The moderator can help to involve quiet participants in the discussion by prompting them for responses.

Another area of concern when conducting focus groups is the impact of the moderator. Marshall and Rossman (2011), Sim (1998) and Morgan (1996) noted that the moderator plays a large role in influencing the group discussion through positive

and negative body language or disrupting interactions. Focus group moderators must be acutely aware of what their verbal and non-verbal cues communicate to the group.

In order to replicate a natural discussion, researchers have suggested the use of pre-existing groups (co-workers, roommates, friends, acquaintances) (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan & Spanish, 1984; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Peek & Fothergill, 2009). Parker and Tritter (2006) warned that pre-existing groups have been problematic because researchers did not disclose that information in their final written paper. An additional issue is the difficulty in analyzing the transcripts from a session with pre-existing groups because it is hard to determine the intentions behind individual comments (Halkier, 2010; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Peek & Fothergill, 2009).

On the other hand, Kitzinger (1994) noted, “Above all it is useful to work with pre-existing groups because they provide one of the social contexts within which ideas are formed and decisions are made” (p. 105). Focus groups with participants in the same extended social networks (teammates, classmates, friends, acquaintances, parents who have children on the same team) have the ability to replicate realistic discussions about race, gender and sport. Peek and Fothergill (2009) found that utilizing pre-existing groups produced powerful and insightful discussions that otherwise might not have occurred with a random sample of participants. Focus groups provide an appropriate method to analyze how audiences interpret media images of Black male athletes because this forum offers the opportunity to explore how “some media images are reconstructed, reinforced and reiterated through social interaction” (Kitzinger, 1994). Ultimately, there are limitations within each segmentation strategy but it is up to the researcher to determine whether focus groups consisting of strangers or people within

extended social networks are most appropriate based on the goals of the project (Peek & Fothergill, 2009). For the purpose of this project, discussions within pre-existing focus groups have the ability to provide insight on social processes that contribute to individual understandings of media images of Black male athletes.

Pilot Study

I assessed the appropriateness of the images and interview schedule through two pilot focus groups (18-34 year old White male group and an 18-34 year old African American male group). In terms of the images, I evaluated their appropriateness through the words each participant used to describe the images. For the focus group, I assessed length, order and comprehension of questions. The information gleaned from the pilot focus groups was used to revise the structure and questions of the interview.

Main Study

Recruitment of participants. Permission was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Minnesota in November 2011. Participants were recruited through researcher driven recruitment approach, where the researcher is solely responsible for recruiting participants (Peek & Fothergill, 2009). I contacted instructors in the Kinesiology department via email and in person to recruit undergraduate students who fit the 18-34 age group criteria. I also visited several undergraduate courses to recruit for my project. This approach helped to yield all participants for the four 18-34 year old age groups who were enrolled as undergraduate students. I contacted other members of social and professional networks to recruit participants in the 35-55 age group that yielded all of the participants in those four groups. I also posted an advertisement on Craigslist which yielded zero participants.

Timeline and Composition of Focus Groups. The size of the groups was limited to four to six participants because a larger group (seven or more participants) might create a situation where people have fewer opportunities to share (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech & Zoran, 2009; Peek & Fothergill, 2009; Slater & Tiggeman, 2010). From February 2012 to June 2012, eight focus groups were conducted lasting from 48 minutes to 167 minutes with a mean time of 79 minutes; all sessions were audiotaped. Focus groups also yielded 209 total pages of single spaced transcripts in size 12, Times New Roman font.

The focus groups were homogenous but reflected categories of “situated knowledge:” age, gender, and race (Kane & Maxwell, 2011). The segmentation of groups is based on standardized practice in focus group research (Kane & Maxwell, 2010; Krueger & Casey, 2009). While the original intention was to include only African American participants, three participants (two in the 18-34 year old African American female group and one in the 18-34 year old African American male group) indicated on the demographic information sheet that they were bi- or multi-racial. All three participants were included in the African American groups because they self-identified as African American in response to the recruitment email.

In total, 36 people participated in the study (n=36). The following delineates the composition of each group: White males ages 18-34 (n=5), African American males ages 18-34 (n=4), White females ages 18-34 (n=4), African American females ages 18-34 (n=5), White males ages 35-55 (n=6), African American males ages 35-55 (n=4), White females ages 35-55 (n=4), and African American females ages 35-55 (n=4). The location for the focus group sessions varied based on convenience to participants (five

were conducted on the campus of the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and three were held at homes of participants).

All four of the 35-55 year old White female participants reported that they completed bachelor's degrees. Four of the five 35-55 year old White male participants reported they had completed a graduate degree with one participant reporting he completed a bachelor's degree. The 35-55 year old African American female participants' education included the following: completed some high school, completed a GED, completed some college and completed an associate's degree. Three of the four 35-55 year old African American male focus group participants reported having completed a graduate degree, with one participant having completed a bachelor's degree.

All of the 18-34 year old participants were enrolled at the university at the time of the focus group interview. Three of the four 18-34 year old groups were comprised primarily of varsity student athletes. The only group that did not have any varsity athletes was the 18-34 year old White male group. Specifically, all four participants in the African American male 18-34 year old group, four of the five African American female participants and three of the four White female focus group participants were varsity student athletes at the time of the focus group interview.

At the time of the focus group interviews I had a professional or personal relationship with four participants. Two in the 18-34 year old African American female group (students in a class I taught), one in the 35-55 year old African American female group (co-worker) and one in the 35-55 year old African American male group (friend). While I introduced the purpose of the focus group to the participants, I did not moderate

those groups as I left the room for the duration of the focus group interviews with those participants.

Individual perspectives of focus group participants should help to facilitate a discussion as heterogeneous groups might have difficulty creating “common ground” from which to discuss the images of Black male athletes (Schroder et al., 2003). Due to some degree of common experiences based on racial background, age of participants or gender, homogenous groups can create a sense of comfort and confidence so people are more willing to share their thoughts (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Peek & Fothergill, 2009; Sim, 1998).

Focus Group Protocol. I moderated three of the four focus groups comprised of White participants (18-34 year old White females, 18-34 year old White males, and 35-55 year old White males). A researcher trained in qualitative methods moderated the focus group with 35-55 year old White female participants. It is important to acknowledge that discussions predicated on race (e.g., the images of Black male athletes) are often deemed sensitive and people might be more willing to share their thoughts with a moderator of the same race (Smithson, 2000). Consequently, an African-American female researcher trained in qualitative methods led all four of the focus groups with African American participants.

Interview Schedule. A semi-structured focus group interview format was used based on previous sport media audience reception research studies (e.g. Kane & Maxwell, 2011). Pre-determined open-ended questions were posed to the participants and each person was given an opportunity to answer. The moderator utilized clarifying questions and probes to help understand the meaning behind participant responses as

well as eliminating personal biases when interpreting the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The focus group interview schedule consisted of four sections (see Appendix B, p. 200). The first section was comprised of the introduction that included an overview of the purpose of the study and background of the researcher(s). During this section, the participants also completed the consent form (see Appendix C, p. 209) as well as the demographic information form (see Appendix B, p. 204). Section two included a “free association” format where participants were shown each image (five total) and were asked to write down their initial thoughts without sharing them with the group. The moderator reminded them to write down the first thoughts that came to mind. There were no probes or discussion during this section.

The third section consisted of the group discussion where the participants were again shown the five images and were asked to share their “free association” responses by reading them aloud. The moderator then asked participants the following four questions about each image: what they wrote down for each image, what stuck out to them, had they seen similar images and how the image represented Black male athletes. This series of questions was intended to gain greater insight into how participants interpreted the images. Once all of the images were discussed, the moderator then asked questions of the participants regarding their perceptions of Black male athletes, the influence of media portrayals on Black male athletes themselves, if/how sport has impacted race relations in American society (see interview schedule, Appendix B, p. 200).

The fourth section consisted of debriefing questions that provided participants an opportunity to share any additional thoughts or ask any questions they had about the images or discussion with the group. Additionally, the moderator had the chance to make any clarifying comments and/or to summarize participant responses. This was used as a member check to establish trustworthiness of the data.

Data Analysis

Coupled with race-based critical theory, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is useful for exploring how audiences interpret and discuss images of Black male athletes. CDA as a product of critical theory seeks to identify, explain and find the cause of social inequity (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). CDA is also rooted in social justice and emancipation (Wodak & Meyer). Recognizing that racism and discrimination have moved from overt to covert language and actions, CDA focuses on subtleties in language that attempt to consciously or subconsciously mask beliefs. According to van Dijk (1993), CDA explores “the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance” (p. 283). This means that individuals who hold power in society often reproduce dominant ideologies through everyday language. For example, sport media literature has shown that media has often portrayed Black male athletes in ways that reinforce stereotypes of the natural athlete who lacks intelligence or is deviant.

CDA complements race-based critical theory’s focus on the ways in which individuals reproduce racial inequities through social processes. “Racism and sexism are thus not merely abstract systems of social inequality and dominance, but actually ‘reach’ down in the forms of everyday life, namely through the beliefs, actions and discourses of group members” (Van Dijk, 2009, p. 82). Since some scholars do not

assume that audiences passively internalize dominant narratives, CDA researchers explore how minority groups resist dominant ideologies through rhetorical strategies (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Consequently, it is necessary to examine how power and ideology impact discourses about images of Black male athletes within focus groups segmented by age, race and gender. With an emphasis on how power and inequality are reproduced through language, CDA coupled with race-based critical theory framework will inform the analysis of the focus group transcripts.

There has been some debate about what constitutes “text” when employing CDA. Leitch and Palmer (2010) pointed out that van Dijk has used a narrow view defining the written word as texts. Scholars including Fairclough (2003) as well as Philips and Hardy (2002) have defined text more broadly to include written words, visual images, artifacts and sound. Despite the varying definition of text, Wodak and Meyer (2009) claim that scholars have rarely examined “interactional texts” that encompass dialogue (p. 10). Focus groups ultimately produce dialogue that can be considered an interactional text because participants talk with and challenge each other. In fact, Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2010) argue that discourses emerge as distinct ways of “representing and interpreting” certain components of social processes (p.1215). Subsequently, employing focus groups allows for a critical examination of an underutilized type of text in CDA.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument of data collection. Therefore it is important to describe my background and qualifications in order to establish trustworthiness (Patton, 2002). I am a White upper-middle class female who has been involved in sport for 30 years, primarily in team sports (soccer, basketball,

softball) as well as more recent involvement in individual sports (snowboarding). In addition to my playing experience, I am an avid sport consumer who regularly watches games and reads sport media. My background in sport and zeal for sport media will enable me to understand how to interpret the responses of participants who consume or participate in sport. I am trained in qualitative methodologies through academic coursework and previous qualitative research experience. I have conducted individual qualitative interviews with adult female athletes, scholars, as well as sport media professionals from differing racial backgrounds.

All focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, into a word document, using Dragon Dictate 3 for Mac speech recognition software. I used three additional steps to establish trustworthiness including a member check, working with a collaborator and the use of an external coder (Creswell, 2009). For the member check, after each interview was transcribed, I emailed it out to participants so that they could review their comments, make any changes necessary and also to ensure their comments were interpreted appropriately. The collaborator was a doctoral student trained in qualitative methods and the external coder was a master's student also trained in qualitative methods. The external coder, who was unfamiliar with the results, read and coded two transcripts. We worked together to place raw data quotes into themes and subthemes. Any quotes or themes we disagreed on were discussed until we reached consensus about whether or not they should be included in the data analysis.

According to Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007), using multiple coders to analyze the data will help “strengthen the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings” (p. 575). The data was subjected to both deductive and inductive analyses which are appropriate

for exploratory research. The analysis was deductive in that participants' responses to the images were organized within the five categories of representation reflected in the literature: *highly competent/natural athlete*, *exotic savage*, *deviant*, *emotionally immature* and *race transcendent*. Similarly, a deductive approach was taken when organizing statements that pertained to the scholarly assertions: *stereotypes interpreted as reality*, *conditional acceptance of black male athletes*, *perception of sport as upward mobility* and the *myth of meritocracy*. The five categories of representation comprised themes and similar raw data quotes pertaining to each image were grouped together to form subthemes under that umbrella. Since there is overlap among the scholarly assertions and color-blind ideology, in that the assertions reflect aspects of color-blind ideology, both inductive and deductive analysis was used when categorizing participants' similar raw quotes into themes and subthemes. Furthermore, the analysis focused on the group discussion about the media image. The words participants wrote down about the media images during the free association period were used as a segue into a conversation about Black male athletes. In the results section, I included some of the words participants used to indicate their initial reaction to the images as a way to transition from group to group into the subthemes that emerged in discussions.

The researcher and a collaborator trained in qualitative methods read and coded each transcript independently. Next the researcher and collaborator met to discuss the data, and quotations were used if both researchers reached consensus. We initially coded one transcript together to assess our consistency in coding. After it was clear we had similar codes, we continued to independently code each remaining transcript. Then we met and coded roughly two transcripts per session to cross check the themes and

subsequent subthemes. With responses pertaining to the five categories of representation, raw data quotes with similar meanings were categorized into subthemes and named to capture their meaning. Consensus was reached at each stage of analysis before moving on to the next theme. Themes were developed based on whether multiple groups responded similarly to certain images or interview questions. In addition, relevant themes were based on whether issues or points were discussed multiple times or for a long period of time during one focus group, thus indicating its importance among that group. After each meeting, I updated a themes list to reflect the additional subthemes that emerged from the transcripts. The data analysis was considered complete when we agreed that no further meaningful information could be gleaned from the transcripts and parceled into themes or subthemes (Patton, 2002).

In sum, focus groups are an underutilized methodology within sport media research. In order to facilitate an in-depth discussion, the focus groups were segmented by age, race and gender. During data analysis, trustworthiness was improved through reflexivity in research, (recognizing contextual factors that might influence the researcher), member checks, and collaborating with a second researcher. The following chapter presents the results in terms of themes that emerged in the focus group discussions.

Chapter 4:

Results

Focus group participants were asked questions about each image reflecting the five categories of representation. Additionally, open-ended questions pertaining to Black male athletes, societal and individual perceptions of Black male athletes, as well as their perceptions of the existence or absence of discrimination in sport and society were also explored. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section of the chapter pertains to focus group responses to the each of the images reflecting the five categories of representation. Table 1 illustrates the themes and subthemes pertaining to the five categories of representation. The second section contains results regarding the ways in which color-blind ideology impacted focus group discussions. In order to clarify the main points, a summary is provided at the end of the each section.

Section 1: Focus group discussions of media images of Black male athletes

Section one contains the ways in which each focus group described/discussed images reflecting the five categories of representation: *highly competent/natural athlete*, *exotic savage*, *deviant*, *emotionally immature*, and *race transcendent*. Each image is explained individually with themes specific to how focus groups discussed that depiction. The following consists of focus group discussions pertaining to each image reflecting the five categories of representation.

Highly competent/natural athlete: Kevin Durant/NBA. Participants across all eight focus groups noted that this was the most common media image of Black male athletes. Within the discussion of the *highly competent/natural athlete* image two primary subthemes emerged: *athleticism as a positive representation* and

acknowledging hard work. The following paragraphs explain how the themes pertain to the focus group discussion of the *highly competent/natural athlete* image.

Subtheme-Athleticism as a positive representation. This subtheme emerged in the focus group discussions with White participants as well as the 35-55 year old African American female group. The crux of *athleticism as a positive representation* is that athletic ability, in this case dunking the basketball, was to these participants, symbolic of success. This was made clear when the older White male participants compared the *highly competent/natural athlete* depiction to the *deviant* portrayal, stating that this was much more positive than getting arrested.

The 35-55 year old White male group described Kevin Durant as “athletic,” “confident,” and “gifted.” When asked about how the image represents Black male athletes a participant responded with “success.” He elaborated by comparing the *deviant* image with the *highly competent/natural athlete* image and stated, “This one [*deviant* image] was not success, he was getting booked. This one he’s going to jam a ball in the basket.” Much like the 18-34 year old White female group, the older White male group perceived athletic competence as success. Similarly, one of the White male participants noted, “It’s a positive image for them [Black people].”

The 18-34 year old White female group described the athlete in the image as “muscular,” “athletic” and “concentrated (sic).” When asked what stuck out to them, the group discussed his muscular, lanky build, how high he appeared to be above the rim as well as the look of concentration on his face. When asked about how this image represents Black male athletes, an 18-34 year old White female stated,

I think you see this a lot and its always it's a positive thing. It's not like they're dunking and it's a bad thing. They're helping out their team to like a win and they're beasts on the court because they're just sick jumping and stuff.

The responses from the group indicated that they perceived the image to be positive because it demonstrated that are Black males are “extremely athletic” and excel at basketball.

The ways in which the 35-55 year old African American female group described the athlete in the image were: “talented,” “paid,” and “successful.” Although the term “success” was also used in some of the White focus groups, the older African American female group contextualized the definition of success slightly differently. For example,

I wrote down slam dunk, successful, but if you think about it, it's really powerful. It does also portray the image of, what we as Black folks think of success in this particular environment. It's like ‘Yeah we doing it, doing it big!’”

Instead of perceiving this image of success in general terms, the participant viewed “success” specific to the sport.

Some adjectives used to describe the image by the 18-34 year old White male group included: “beast,” “athletic,” and “focused.” Similar to the 35-55 year old White males and 18-34 year old White females, the younger White male group perceived this image positively, as one participant noted this image portrays, “[Black male athletes] in a positive light, at the best, at the top of their game.” Other participants noted that the image depicted Black male athletes as “dominant” and “being the best in their sport.” Again the perception of this image was that athletic competency is a positive depiction

which was similar to the younger White female focus group as well as the older White male focus group.

Some words or phrases used by the 35-55 year old White female group to describe the athlete in this image were “intense,” “slam dunk,” and “strong.” When asked what stuck out about the image, a participant noted, “The expression. He is so focused on the basket.” When asked if this image was an accurate representation of Black male athletes, a 35-55 year old White female participant responded, “I think you see more of this than you see of the guy getting fingerprinted.”

Subtheme-Acknowledging hard work. While the other focus groups described the *highly competent/natural athlete* category in terms of success, the subtheme of *acknowledging hard work* emerged in the three remaining groups. Specifically, the 35-55 year old African American male group, 18-34 year old African American female group, and 18-34 year old African American male group who described the “hard work” it took for Kevin Durant to perfect his craft ultimately resulting in playing in the NBA. While the 18-34 year old African American female group discussed the ways in which announcers dismiss the effort/intelligence of Black male athletes, the African American male groups asserted that Kevin Durant’s dominance is a function of years of practice.

The discussion from the 18-34 year old African American female group brought up some similar issues pertaining to the stereotyping of Black male athletes discussed in the 35-55 year old African American male group. Participants used the following words to describe the image: “power,” “strong” and “determined.” When asked how this image represented Black male athletes, a participant immediately responded with, “Stereotypical, the Black male that can jump, athletic.” Another participant stated, “It’s

interesting, it showed the Black male on top and a lot of images don't show that often."

When asked if this was an accurate portrayal, a younger African American female participant stated,

You never see Black male athletes getting rewarded for like "Oh you're a smart player, you make smart decisions." It's like "Oh look at that dunk, look at that pass, look at his athleticism, look at what he can do with the ball." It's never more of "You're a smart player, you make the right decisions." It's nothing like that.

The 35-55 year old African American male group described the image using terms including "confidence," "powerful," and "talented." The participants in this group were careful to note that the image accurately depicted Black male basketball players but not Black male athletes as a whole group. They also discussed how it might represent Black male dominance in that particular sport. At the same time, they were quick to point out that dominance was based on hard work as well as talent which Black males are not necessarily credited for. As an older African American male participant stated,

All the preparation, [this is] someone who clearly knows what he's doing. He did not just pick this [playing basketball] up last year. You can see some little, little kid doing this every afternoon for *many* years and he's got the coordinates dialed in. This is again it's very professional he's worked up to this point.

During the discussion of the *highly competent/natural athlete* image, the 35-55 year old African American male participants made it a point to note the hard work it takes for an athlete to reach the professional level.

The 18-34 year old African American male participants described Kevin Durant as “explosive,” “athletic,” and “tall.” When asked what stuck out about the image, a participant commented, “The concentration, just all the hard work he put in to even get to that point.” Another participant noted the “intensity of him pushing.” The group also discussed how Kevin Durant as a person might influence their perception of him. One participant described him as a “good person,” someone who gives back to the community, in comparison to athletes who might be on what he called the “hated list of athletes.” Although the descriptors crossed over with the ways in which the 18-34 year old White female group described the image, the younger African American male participants went on to discuss the hard work and intensity it took to get to dunking in a professional basketball game.

In sum, this image in particular evoked responses that reinforced and challenged the *highly competent/natural athlete* stereotype. Table 2 illustrates the subthemes and groups in which they emerged. All eight focus groups noted that this image was the most common image of the five categories of representation of Black male athletes. In the 18-34 year old White female group, 18-34 year old White male group, 35-55 year old White male group and 35-55 year old African American female focus group, the subtheme of *athleticism as a positive representation* emerged. This meant that being able to dunk the ball was viewed as symbolic of “success” for Black males. While the 35-55 year old White male group compared the *highly competent/natural athlete* depiction to the *deviant* image saying it was a better example of success than the *deviant* image, the 18-34 year old White group responses equated athletic dominance

with success. The 35-55 year old African American female participants contextualized success, framing the term in light of that particular sport.

In comparison, the 18-34 year old African American female group, the 18-34 year old African American male group, and 35-55 year old African American male group discussions focused on *acknowledging the hard work* of the Black Male athlete in the image. Participants noted that it took years of practice to become an NBA player. They also described the ways in which media portrayals reinforce stereotypes of Black male athleticism and White male intelligence.

Theme-Exotic savage: Patrick Willis/NFL. The mostly naked image of Patrick Willis prompted several subthemes. Several groups discussed how the image depicted *strength and hard work* reflected by the muscularity of Patrick Willis. At the same time, the 35-55 year old African American male group noted that media outlets rarely associate hard work with Black male athletes. In other groups, the subtheme of *deeper meaning* materialized. Finally, the 18-34 year old White female group, the participants asserted Patrick Willis had what they perceived as a *typical physique for Black male athletes*. The following paragraphs provide more specific information from each group regarding the *exotic savage* image.

Subtheme-Strength and hard work. In many of the focus group discussions related to the exotic savage image participants described him as “strong” and also used the terms indicating that it took hard work for Patrick Willis to develop his physique. While not directly addressing the hypersexual nature of the image, responses included in this theme discussed the image within the *highly competent/natural athlete* frame.

The following paragraphs illustrate the ways in which the *strength and hard work* subtheme emerged.

Older White male participants used adjectives like “strong,” “determined,” and “impressive.” When asked what about the image stuck out to them, one participant noted, “There is a lot of hard work behind that,” while another called it “impressive.” The responses from the 35-55 year old White male groups challenged stereotypes associated with the depiction of athlete in this image. For example, adjectives like “determined” and how the group discussed the ways in which hard work played a role in the physique of the athlete challenged the *exotic savage* stereotype.

The 18-34 year old White male participants described the athlete in the image as “scary,” “committed,” and “naked.” Following the discussion of the adjectives, participants also noted that it took hard work for the athlete to maintain his physique. In this discussion, the 18-34 year old White male group challenged the presumption that Black males are naturally athletic by stating the following, “I put down committed because you don’t look like that sitting, eating pizza.”

When discussing how prevalent this type of image was the 18-34 year old White male participants also brought up how they had not seen White male athletes, shirtless, holding weights as frequently as Black male athletes. When asked if the image was an accurate representation, participants stated that it depended on the athlete and the sport. For example, “The culture of football kind of makes the picture not as surprising but the spectrum of sports in which Black athletes participate makes this picture probably not typical of most Black athletes.” Meaning that since Black male athletes participate in a

number of different sports this image might not be representative of all Black male athletes.

The 18-34 year old African American male group described the athlete in the image in the following ways: “strong,” “meathead,” “muscular.” They also were quick to note that he “needed to put on some clothes.” When asked about how accurately the image represented Black male athletes, the group vacillated between saying it was representative of the whole group to equating the muscular body displayed in the image to hard work and athletic success. For example, “My take on it is if he didn't look like this, I wouldn't think of him as a good football player. If he isn't working hard, if he doesn't look like that, he's not a hard worker.” The participant responses indicated that hard work was an important component of building this physique, which challenged stereotypes about Black male athletes being lazy.

The 35-55 year old African American male group were the only participants to discuss and challenge the history behind the stereotypical narrative that the image represented (hypersexual Black males). The descriptors used by the older African American male group included: “strong,” “disciplined,” and “beastly.” One participant noted, “...to me there is sort of a Mandingo aspect of it. The sort of historic stereotypical uber-strong Black male sort of image that goes way back to the plantation era.” In comparison to the other groups, the 35-55 year old African American male group's responses provided the strongest challenge to media narratives that reinforce the *exotic savage* stereotype of Black male athletes.

Within the 35-55 year old African American male group the conversation turned to a debate over the role media plays in perpetuating the myth of Black male natural

athleticism. The older African American male group maintained that while media portrayals have become more positive over time, stereotypical narratives have not completely disappeared. One participant explained,

Maybe there has been some improvement. I wouldn't say, earlier you almost suggested that there are no messages of the old racism or old bias left. Until I hear a White person called, "Oh he's a gifted athlete," until I hear that phrase for a White athletes, I'm sorry. But you know, I follow NFL, basketball and baseball and hockey, I also watch hockey, whether it's Sidney Crosby or Alex, I've never heard them say, "He's a gifted athlete." Never. I've never, ever heard that phrase used for any White athlete, not even in hockey. I just recall this profile of Wayne Gretzky and his son happened to be there and his son was like four years old and this kid who's been watching his father, sees what his father does is rather normal because that's his father. I mean this kid can skate backwards. He can flick hockey pucks through his leg. This kid does not *even know* how good he is and never did they [media] say "*Oh he's so gifted.*" So until I hear that used for White athletes I won't be convinced.

The quote illustrates how media depictions reproduce the *highly competent/natural athlete* stereotype pertaining to Black male athletes. The overall discussion pertaining to the *exotic savage* depiction in the 35-55 year old African American male group covered a lot of ground. The participants identified the historical basis for the image and it led them into a discussion of the perceived natural athleticism of Black males and the ways in which media narratives perpetuate stereotypes.

Subtheme-Deeper meaning. The image of Patrick Willis, half naked, holding dumbbells prompted several groups to comment on his facial expression. In these groups, participant responses indicated that they perceived the look on Patrick Willis' face to be intense which they subsequently related to his past. The following paragraphs provide further explanation on the *deeper meaning* subtheme.

The 35-55 year old African American female group used words like “sexy,” “strong” and “muscular” to describe the athlete in the image. Similar to the 18-34 year old White male group and the 35-55 year old White female group, the older African American female group related the intensity on his face to a deeper meaning. For example,

From what I kind of see in his face, a Black male, is that the expression on his face, he's looking out, he's kinda going back to where his ancestors came from, the strength and the way they had to keep, you know, especially the males, keep their bodies strong and intact to get through the slavery and stuff like that. I see that sometimes in a lot of like, not on a negative, but you wonder if that thought is there when they're doing what they're doing.

The responses of the participants in the older African American female group correspond to some degree with the 35-55 year old White female group and 18-34 year old White male group in that they perceived his facial expression to have a deeper meaning related to problems in his life or of his ancestors who may have been slaves.

The 35-55 year old White female group described him as “ripped,” “strong,” and “intense.” While one participant noted the hard work it took for him to develop his

physique another commented, “It's like there is something behind it all, like he is trying to prove something or overcome something.”

Some adjectives used to describe the athlete in the image by the 18-34 year old African American female group were “sexy,” “naked,” and “effortless.” Participants also discussed how the image was typical for men’s magazines. As one participant noted, “This looks like it came straight out of Men’s Fitness.” Similar to the responses found in the older African American female group, older White female group and younger White male group, a participant related his facial expression to trying to escape from a tough childhood. For example, “And just with his expression, the fact that he is so determined like there are so many African American males who have tough lives so they have to be that determined to keep on going.” Similar to several other groups, the participant responses included an assumption about how the expression on Patrick Willis’ face is a reflection of his “tough” background.

Similarly some of the 18-34 year old White male initial responses were “intense,” “scary,” and “sex.” Once again participants attempted to discern the look on Patrick Willis’ face. One participant pointed out the expression on the athlete’s face and stated the following:

With his facial expression I would say it shows that like they [Black male athletes] are focused and passionate I guess you can say. It almost looks like they [media] are trying to say he has some built up rage is that he is getting out with the weightlifting. I can see now that this picture could say that I don’t know if it does but...

While the groups attributed the physique of the athlete to hard work, they associated his facial expression to some *deeper meaning*.

Subtheme-Typical physique for Black male athletes. This subtheme only emerged in the focus group discussion with the young White female group. It refers to their perception that most Black males have physiques similar to that of Patrick Willis or in the words of one participant, “jacked.” The 18-34 year old White female focus groups participants used words like “intimidating,” “strong” and “naked” to describe the athlete in the image. A participant explained how the image represented Black male athletes to her, “...When I think of like a Black athlete, I think of, I think that they are jacked and super-defined...” Another participant followed the previous response with,

Yeah that’s what I was thinking. When you think of like, a Black athlete, a guy, you think really muscular, you don’t think Tiger Woods. That’s never the first guy that pops into your head even though, he’s not buff or anything but he is an athlete. But you always think like Adrian Peterson or something.

In addition to associating power and strength with Black male athletes, these participants also linked tattoos and branding to Black male athletes as well.

Altogether, this image prompted a variety of subthemes. Table 3 illustrates the subthemes and groups in which they emerged. The 35-55 year old White male group, 18-34 year old White male group and 18-34 year old African American male group included discussions of *strength and hard work* associated with Patrick Willis’ body. Within the *strength and hard work* theme, the 35-55 year old African American male group, identified and decried how media members rarely call attention to the hard work

that Black male athletes put into their profession. Instead, they noted that media describes White male athletes as hard workers much more often than Black males.

The 18-34 year old White male group, 35-55 year old White female group, and 35-55 year old African American female group discussions regarding the *exotic savage* image all contained assumptions about the meaning behind the facial expression of the athlete. Primarily, participants perceived that there was a *deeper meaning* behind the intense look on his face. Furthermore, the group discussions included assumptions about perceptions of rage (18-34 year old White male group,) ancestral slavery (35-55 year old African American female group), attempting to “overcome something” (18-34 year old African American female group, and 35-55 year old White female group). The concept of rage can be equated with the angry Black male stereotype which the *exotic savage* category draws from to some extent. In contrast, the 18-34 year old White female responses discussed the athlete as “intimidating” and “scary.”

Theme-Deviant: Donte Stallworth/NFL. The image of Donte Stallworth getting fingerprinted elicited responses from participants that comprised a few different themes. Some groups said the picture was a symbol of how Black males athletes *can't escape the past*. Other groups discussed how there is *disproportionate media coverage of Black male arrests*. A final subtheme, *deviance and distrust* describes the ways participant responses reflected some internalization of the deviant narrative but also their distrust of the way the criminal justice system treats Black males. The following paragraphs explain the ways in which each group discussed the *deviant* image.

Subtheme-Can't escape the past. In this subtheme, participant responses indicated that they believed Black males grow up in desperate environments that come

back to haunt them later in life. Furthermore, participants perceived that people or behaviors Black males knew/learned in the past end up influencing the athlete, resulting in *deviant* behavior. The following paragraphs illustrate how the subtheme *can't escape the past* emerged in several focus groups.

The 35-55 year old White female group used the following words to describe the athlete in this image: “guilty,” “regretful,” and “despair.” For example, a 35-55 year old White female participant said, “I have fear and despair. He looks really worried. You can see his eyes but he looks kind of submissive.” Their responses seemed somewhat empathetic to the athlete in the image but when pressed about if they thought other images would more accurately represent Black male athletes the participants had a difficult time answering the question. For example,

Speaker1- I think it's kind of hard...

Speaker 2-...They're just a lot, they came from really bad situations I think that adjustment to that kind of world is hard for anyone is probably harder in a way regardless of color, the more desperate your circumstances were before. It just that there are more desperate circumstance Black athletes I think than...

Speaker 3- Or at least that we hear about.

This exchange indicates participants may have internalized the stereotype of the *deviant* Black male in that participants had a hard time describing a more accurate representation of Black males. The last response also alludes to the idea that media coverage of Black males might be biased in that participants “only hear about” Black men escaping “desperate circumstances.”

For the 35-55 year old White male group the conversation covered various topics ranging from his arrest being due to an overrepresentation of Black male athletes playing basketball or football, the relationship between media coverage of football/basketball in comparison to other sports, inflated egos of athletes who play those sports, a reflection of the violence inherent in sports like football, as well as the perceived tough upbringing of Black male athletes. Similar to the 35-55 year old White female group and the African American female groups, the older White male participants brought up that Black males grew up in the “ghetto” and have difficulty leaving that behind. The following quote from a 35-55 year old White male exemplified this subtheme:

What I've seen the various, particularly football players and basketball players that have been in the news you know Randy Moss, it's the way they grow up. Because he got to the Vikings, an example is Randy Moss, he's making, he's made it and he was still stealing cologne and cell phones. It was like “Jesus crymany you couldn't stop then?” I think that a lot of the guys come from tough, tough places and I think you certainly have less tennis players coming out of the streets of Warren, Ohio....

Despite the previous quote, that speaks to the *can't escape the past* subtheme, the 35-55 year old White male group discussion settled on two reasons for images that reinforce the *deviant* stereotype: the idea that this image was common not because the athlete was Black, but because he was a professional athlete. Additionally, several participants also noted that “bad stuff” is what sells newspapers. One 35-55 year old White male summed up the conversation by saying the following, “. . .It [athlete crime] is always

covered, athletes in trouble, that's the news." Responses from the older White male group indicated that they did not perceive that race played a role in media coverage. Instead, they believed media coverage was simply due to the social status of athletes who engaged in *deviant* behavior.

There were similar responses among the 35-55 year old African American female group and 18-34 year old African American male group. These two groups concluded that the image represented this Black male athlete's inability to escape the past. Here an older African American female commented, "...some of them just can't leave the past behind and stay on the straight and narrow..." Another participant stated, "You could take the boy out of the ghetto, you can't take the ghetto out of the boy and that's regardless as to how much money you do or don't have." In other words, people who grew up in the "ghetto" retain deviant behaviors regardless of whether they still live there or not.

The 18-34 year old African American male group described the deviant depiction with the following words: "trouble," "stupid," and "messed up." Similar to other groups the subtheme of *can't escape the past* emerged in their discussion. A younger African American male stated, "Some of them just hang around the wrong people from the ghetto. Some people like from way back...I mean if you're hanging out with the wrong crowd bad things are gonna (sic) happen that's just the way it is." The perception that bad people surround and follow Black males throughout their life and eventually cause trouble does reflect some aspects of the *deviant* representation.

The younger White male group used the following terms to describe the athlete in the image: "in trouble," "nervous," and "innocent." The participants said that

regardless of the race of the athlete, they would still assume the person getting fingerprinted is “in trouble.” One participant explained,

Criminal, that’s the first thing that came to my mind, fingerprinting him in court.

I mean I wouldn’t just put it on his race though because if you put a White male in his position, if I saw him getting fingerprinted with two guards standing and it’s clearly in court, I think I still would’ve written down criminal...

When asked how prevalent an image like this was participants noted that it is fairly common. An 18-34 year old White male participant commented, “I think the fact of the matter is it seems like a lot of African American sports stars, in comparison to White sports stars find themselves in trouble with the law.” While initially stating that the race of the athlete did not matter when it came to their initial reactions to the image, participants did assert that Black male athletes get into more trouble than White athletes.

Subtheme-Disproportionate media coverage of Black male arrests. While not necessarily discounting that Black males may participate in *deviant* activities some groups discussed the role that media plays in perpetuating stereotypes of Black males. Specifically, their perception is that media disproportionately depicts Black males as criminals in comparison to White males. The following paragraphs elaborate on this subtheme.

Participants in the 18-34 year old African American male group discussed the ways in which media portrays Black males in comparison to White males. For example,

In one of my classes we talked about how the percentage of crimes that are done, that they show in the media, its more African American than they portray

White people, even though the actual crimes committed are more White people than Black people.

In other words, the media over-represents crimes committed by African American males in news stories. Another participant went on to state, “Its like the media, the media is always gonna (sic) take something bad, they’re always gonna find the dirt...” These quotes illustrate how participants in the 18-34 year old Black male group distrust media portrayals of Black males.

The discussion among the 18-34 year old White female group of the *deviant* image of Donte Stallworth getting fingerprinted reflected that they may have internalized stereotypes of Black male athletes. One younger White female explained why she wrote down “bad,” “mistakes” and “athlete” for that image,

...I feel like I see a lot of like football players that kind of have that look [long dreadlocked hairstyle]. And you kind of always hear about them in and out of the court rooms and stuff like that so it kind of came to my mind. And just from looking at previous pictures of athletes, it just kind of popped up.

Due to previous media narratives, the idea of Black males as criminals has been ingrained, so much so that when she first saw the image that was the first thing that she thought. The conversation then progressed to how the image represents Black male athletes. The younger White female participants discussed the role media plays in reinforcing stereotypes. For example,

Speaker 2- I feel like the news would probably report, all the reports are usually like some sort of Black gang or something that had some gun charges. Its never any White gang or I don’t know. Like the press and all that really report like the

colored, I feel so and on tv and stuff you see a lot of this, especially like in sports.

Speaker 3- Yeah I feel like the media portrays Black athletes as bad people or people that get into a lot of trouble even though there are White guys that are just as much punks or whatever that are on the field. They just don't, it's not as normal or they don't want to show it but its okay if they show this [deviant] kind of picture cuz (sic) its okay with a certain image.

Their analysis of media narratives reflects to some extent the 18-34 year old White female participants' awareness of stereotypes of Black male athletes as well as how media depictions may reinforce them.

The 35-55 year old African American male participants used terms including "defendant," "accused," and "unfortunate" to describe the athlete in the image. One participant noted the "gravity" of the situation when he said the following,

So to me this is a court situation, and he's the defendant. Plaintiffs don't get fingerprinted. And then gravity was the other word. This is a very serious situation. Nobody's cracking a smile, there is a little bit of tension.

When asked if they had seen images like this before all of the participants in this group said yes. One participant went on to state,

I can't believe nobody said O.J. This is how it got famous that whole O.J. fiasco that we see every day. I don't know for how many years, Black men in the courtroom, in the defendant position are presumed guilty, immediately, before any evidence was even in. So I mean I've seen too much of this.

The participants also noted that this image did represent Black males to the extent that,

You get athletes that are criminals like you have lawyers and White collar criminals or Whites that are criminals, Bernie Madoffs, the Sons of Sam killers. I mean its part of society so there is a criminal element in athletics just like there is a criminal element in architects and engineers.

The responses also indicated that the image was more of a reflection of society as a whole, in that every industry has some element of criminal behavior, than it was a reflection of *deviant* behavior specific to Black male athletes.

The older African American female group used the following terms to describe the image: “arrested,” regretful,” and “disappointed.” The group was also somewhat critical of both the athlete and the symbolism of the image. For example, a 35-55 year old African American female participant stated, “They [athletes] get all that money and they get big-headed like ‘you can't tell *me* what to do.’” This comment was similar to the 35-55 year old White male focus group whose responses indicated that being a professional athlete led to an inflated ego and contempt for authority. While the 35-55 year old African American female participants did perceive that the athlete themselves had some agency, they also described how Black male athletes are or may be unfairly portrayed by the media. An older African American female participant noted the differences in media portrayals of White versus Black males, “But the thing about it is to me is there is White athletes being arrested too but they [media outlets] don't put that out there they don't put that *strong* image out there like that.” In other words, by not paying as much attention to White athletes getting arrested, media reinforces stereotypes of Black males as *deviant*.

Subtheme-Deviance and distrust. This subtheme is based on responses from the 18-34 year old African American female participants. For example, one 18-34 year old African American female participant stated, “I put drugs, money or sex case because it has to be one of the three.” This response reflects the stereotype of Black men as hypersexual criminals. Yet in the discussion of the *deviant* image the 18-34 year old African American female group responses indicated a distrust of the legal system. One participant commented, “I put evidence. They're [the prosecutor] probably trying to get evidence, they probably ain't (sic) have evidence yet, but they fitting to have it.” While these participant responses indicated they were not immune to characterizing the athlete in stereotypical terms, they also were not completely sold that the criminal justice system handled cases involving Black men fairly.

Altogether there were some shared subthemes among groups. Table 4 illustrates the subthemes and the groups in which they emerged. The 35-55 year old African American group and both White female groups as well as 18-34 year old African American male participant responses indicated they believed Black male athletes *can't escape the past* and also reflect to some degree, an internalization of the *deviant* stereotype. Also, the 35-55 year old African American female group, and 35-55 year old White male groups also shared some commonalities through their discussion of the idea that professional athletes, regardless of race, have inflated egos which results in trouble with the law.

Several groups including, the 18-34 year old White female group, 18-34 year old African American male group, and both 35-55 year old African American group responses discussed how there is *disproportionate media coverage of Black males*

arrests. The 18-34 year old White female group also described how the disparate coverage may influence their perceptions. The 35-55 year old African American male group challenged the *deviant* stereotype but noted that the media narrative unfortunately was “all too common.” In their discussion, they did not deny that some Black male athletes are criminals, but participants also asserted that every profession has a criminal element to some extent, as they are all a reflection of American society at large.

Theme-Emotionally immature: Josh Smith/NBA. This image of Josh Smith and the NBA referee prompted the most varied set of responses. Some groups described the athlete, in line with the *emotionally immature* stereotype, as “cocky” and “confrontational” for what they perceived as argument with the referee. This sentiment is reflected in the *Josh Smith is a punk* subtheme. Other groups characterized Josh Smith and the referee as professionals who may have a disagreement but are working within the context of their respective roles (athlete and referee) to resolve the issue. That subtheme is called *Josh Smith is a professional*. The following paragraphs explain the ways in which the eight groups discussed the *emotionally immature* image.

Subtheme-Josh Smith is a punk. This subtheme is based on responses from participants indicating that they perceive Josh Smith to be initiating an argument with the referee. As a result, they used descriptors that fit within the emotionally immature stereotype such as “cocky” and “disrespectful.” In other words, they perceive Josh Smith as a bit of a punk, a self-absorbed athlete who lacks maturity. The following paragraphs illustrate this subtheme.

The 35-55 year old White female group responses indicated that the image evoked stereotypes of the *emotionally immature* Black male athlete arguing with the

referee. Participants in the 35-55 year old White female focus group used terms like “cocky,” “aggressive,” and “confrontational” to describe the athlete in the picture. For example, a 35-55 year old White female stated, “His body language is very cocky.” Another participant noted that, “It doesn’t look like there’s a lot of respect to the referee.” When asked if they have seen images like this, the first participant to speak said, “In most NBA games.” Another participant perceived that there seemed to be a trickle down effect into youth sport, as she is now seeing younger athletes arguing with referees more frequently. Yet when asked if there was another image that would better represent Black male athletes, the group resoundingly said no. The emphasis on Josh Smith’s body language and assumption that he is arguing with the referee reflects the subtheme *Josh Smith is a punk*.

Some of the initial descriptors from the 18-34 year old White female group included words like “emotional,” “rude,” and “confrontational” were similar to that of the 35-55 year old White female group. As a whole, the 18-34 year old White female group perceived the athlete in the image to be arguing a call with the referee. A younger female expressed the views of the group with: “He’s making a crazy face and he’s emotional too, because that’s a really, I don’t know, a confrontational pose.” These participants also noted similar to the 35-55 year old White female group and the 18-34 year old White male group, they have seen like images in other sports like soccer, football and baseball. When asked how the image represents Black male athletes one 18-34 year old White female participant noted that this image could reinforce stereotypes because “...it’s everybody who does it [argues with referees] so that could be misrepresenting [Black male athletes].” The responses of the 18-34 year old White

female participants were in part consistent with the 35-55 year old White female group in that the descriptors both groups used corresponded with the ways in which media depicts Black male athletes as *emotionally immature*.

A variety of initial responses emerged in the 35-55 year old African American female focus group, some of the terms ranged from “worried” to “obnoxious” to “bad call” which were similar to the 35-55 year old and 18-34 year old White female groups. A 35-55 year old African American female participant explained her responses,

I wrote down confrontation, obnoxious and oppositional because a lot of them [Black male athletes] you know when the ref says something to them they just like really go overboard. So I'm just thinking he's kind of probably being a little obnoxious. You know he's got his mouthpiece out like he had to take that out so “I can tell you [the referee] a few things.”

As the conversation progressed regarding how accurate the portrayal was some participants expressed that Black male athletes do have a tendency to “run they (sic) mouth.” For example,

I see a lot of Black males that play sports and stuff like that. Now I have seen quite a few of them get out of hand just because they think that they're all that and just have negative attitudes.

On the other hand, one 35-55 year old African American female participant challenged the *Josh Smith is a punk* subtheme. This participant viewed it as a positive image because it depicted a Black man “sticking up for himself” which she felt was a rarity in mainstream media. The responses to this image corresponded with the comments from participants in the White focus groups, that the player arguing with the referee was

perceived as mostly negative. Although one 35-55 year old African American female did challenge the other participant responses by viewing the argument as “standing up for what’s right.” This view stood in stark contrast to the rest of her group whose responses indicated that they viewed *Josh Smith as a punk*.

The 35-55 year old White male group responses were similar to the other focus groups in that they perceived the athlete in the image to be complaining or arguing with the referee over a call. The participants used descriptors like “argumentative,” “disrespectful,” and “frustrated.” When asked where they had seen images like this before, a participant stated, “Different NBA city, different player. You see it all the time in sports.” Although the participants, similar to some of the other focus groups, initially stated that arguing with the referees was typical in all sports, not just basketball and football, the conversation ended up focusing on those two sports, with basketball targeted as the sport with the most complaining to the referees. As one participant stated,

There is always more complaining [in basketball] than in any other sport.

Football you can take your talent and go after people, in this [basketball] you see that in every game you watch. In basketball it’s always that way, “It wasn’t me, it wasn’t me.”

One older White male participant related arguing to the subjectivity of refereeing in basketball and another went on to state that, “Yeah the NBA is what, 99/95% Black? Of course you’re going to see more Blacks arguing because there are more of them.” In other words since the league is primarily Black, audiences would be more likely to see more Black players than White players for example, arguing with the referee.

The younger White male group used various terms or phrases in their initial reaction to the image including: “what the hell,” “cocky,” and “unfair.” The 18-34 year old male group explained that the image was typical of NBA players and other professional sports. A younger White male stated,

It’s pretty typical of what NBA players do. Nothing really sticks out. I think that NBA players of all races, actually sports players of all races, at the professional level, it’s kind of like culture to chip the officials I guess.

Although they discussed that arguing with the referees was typical of both White and Black male athletes, one younger White male participant brought up how he felt Black people were more likely to complain to over not getting foul calls than White people. He explained,

I think Black people, they do though, they make a bigger scene though. It’s just like they always complain about it a little more I feel like. Yeah I think Black people they always like to bitch about being fouled.

An 18-34 year old White male participant who at first called the athlete “cocky” did reflect on why he wrote that down,

I wrote down cocky...I mean and I don’t know if this is a race thing, is that for some reason when I see NBA players talking back to officials I just think their egos are just really swollen you know because they are going to make mistakes so...

Despite the 18-34 year old White male participants noting that from their perception, all athletes are guilty of complaining or “chipping the officials,” the responses from the participants illustrate that the image did evoke the stereotype of the *emotionally*

immature Black male athlete. The idea that Black athletes complain more and are “cocky” support the *Josh Smith is a punk* subtheme.

Subtheme-Josh Smith is a professional. In comparison to most of the other groups, the 18-34 year old African American groups as well as the 35-55 year old African American male group discussed this image quite differently. Their responses indicate that they assessed Josh Smith as “competitive” person trying to excel in his job. Within that assessment, engaging with the referee fit within the parameters of his profession and was a less an argument and more of a conversation. The following paragraphs elaborate on this subtheme.

The initial adjectives used by the 18-34 year old African American male group to describe the *emotionally immature* image were quite similar to those of the other focus groups. Participants called the athlete in the image a “cry baby” and “soft” and described the situation as an “argument.” Yet the participants also related the perceived argument to “caring about your job,” meaning that they viewed Josh Smith arguing with the referee as a part his job responsibilities. As one participant explained,

If you don't do it [argue with the referee] I feel like you're not really caring about your job of the game. Even if you know that you might've done wrong but it might be the right call. If you're not doing it [pleading your case with the referee] you let the fans down because it might change the course the game.

The 35-55 year old African American male group made a similar point about the communicating with the referee as part of the requirements of the job which is discussed in the next paragraph. This “part of the job perspective” however, was not

shared by any of the White focus groups or the 35-55 year old African American female groups.

The older African American male group also challenged the idea that the image depicted an *emotionally immature* Black male athlete in a similar manner than the 18-34 year old African American male group. The 35-55 year old African American male group described the athlete, Josh Smith as “composed,” and offered the following explanation of the situation in the picture: “These are coworkers, doing their jobs. They both clearly know the dance and the parameters of it and are working on a negotiation as they do every day and they do have a respect for what each other does.” The idea that the athlete displayed composure in the image and that he and the referee were coworkers just doing their jobs, diverged drastically from responses from all the other groups with the exception of the 18-34 year old African American male group.

The younger African American female group used similar terms like “crybaby” and “[bad] attitude,” to describe Josh Smith. Yet their overall discussion differed from most of the other focus groups. Along with the aforementioned terms, the 18-34 year old African American female group also perceived him as “competitive.” One participant noted, “To me he doesn’t look like he has an attitude. I felt like if he was real angry about it his mannerisms or his gestures would have been something completely different...its just looks like he’s asking like ‘why?’” In addition, participants in this group called attention to the ways in which media frames White versus Black athletes. When asked if they had seen images like this the group responded yes and one participant asserted, “Which is so weird because I don’t think I’ve ever seen a White person in this situation, when I see pictures like this.” To which another

member of the group stated, “That’s so true.” These responses reflect their perceptions of the ways in which media narratives reinforce stereotypes; it led to a discussion on the emotional maturity of Black male versus White male athletes.

Similar to the younger White male group, the 18-34 year old female African American female group engaged in a discussion about the emotional state of Black male athletes in comparison to White male athletes. The 18-34 year old female group came to a slightly different conclusion. One participant summed up the conversation with the following,

You’re saying that they’re [White and Black male athletes] both emotional.

You’re just saying that the Black athlete expresses their emotions in, I don’t know the word, in a different way than the White athlete, aggressively yes. But they’re both emotional *for sure*.

The initial reactions from the 18-34 year old African American female group were similar to the younger White male group; however during the conversation about the *emotionally immature* image, the African American female group noted that both White and Black athletes are emotional.

Subtheme-Leadership. This image also evoked positive responses from the younger African American groups about having what appeared to be a Black player, referee and coach (e.g. Black men in positions of leadership) in the picture. An 18-34 year old African American male stated, “...it’s good to see a Black official.” An 18-34 year old African American female expressed a similar view, “I like that the coach in the background is Black and I like that the NBA player is too.” She explained further, “because it shows we’re not just the athlete, we’re also the coach and the ref.” While

not speaking directly to the *emotionally immature* narrative addresses the importance of Black men in positions of leadership to these younger African American participants.

In comparison to the other images within the five categories of representation, the *emotionally immature* picture prompted the largest array of responses. Table 5 illustrates the subthemes and the groups in which they emerged. While the 18-34 year old and 35-55 year old African American male group discussed the image similarly, in terms of the context of the professionalism, several groups described this as another case of a professional athlete “complaining” to the referee. The 35-55 year old White male and female groups, the 35-55 year old African American female group, and the 18-34 White female groups perceived complaining to the referee as an unnecessary but common part of the sporting world. Their responses also included stereotypical descriptors such as “confrontational” and “obnoxious.” However, the 18-34 year old White female group did point out that the *emotionally immature* image could reinforce stereotypes because from their perspective most athletes argue with the referees.

The 18-34 year old African American female group and 18-34 year old White male group discussions also included overt comparisons to the perceived level of emotions of White and Black male athletes. Participants questioned whether Black male athletes were more emotional than White male athletes. In comparison, the 18-34 year old White male group responses indicated that they perceived Black males to be more emotional than White males. In comparison, the African American female group ultimately settled on the idea that both are emotional, but Black males might be more expressive of their emotions.

Both of the 18-34 year old African American groups had a unique element of their discussion not present in other groups. They took note of that all of the people in the image appear to be African American and viewed that as positive because from their point of view it showed Black males in positions of leadership. Responses to the *race transcendent* image further explore issues surrounding media representation of Black males in leadership positions and are found below.

Theme-Race transcendent: Magic Johnson. The image of Magic Johnson on the phone, in a large office did not necessarily prompt a conversation pertaining to Black male athletes transcending race (although race transcendence did emerge later in several focus group discussions). The common response across all groups was that this was not a prevalent image in mainstream media. African American groups said when they did see this image or something similar it was primarily through Black media sources or through their social networks (friends, family, or mentors). Some subthemes emerged, including a few groups noting that the depiction was *uncommon yet familiar*, with two groups describing it as both *uncommon and unfamiliar*. Two groups question whether the portrayal was “*needed*” or “*not news*,” While one group noted that *exceptionalism* may play a role in achieving success following retirement as an athlete. The following paragraphs discuss how each of the eight focus groups described/discussed the *race transcendent* image.

Subtheme-Uncommon yet familiar. As noted in the previous paragraph, all eight focus groups asserted that the *race transcendent* depiction was the least common of the five images they viewed. Despite being described as uncommon in media, three groups claimed that it was not entirely unfamiliar to them. The African American male

groups based the familiarity on their friends or family members who work in similar fields. In other words, they see their brother in their work environment and can relate that experience to this image. For the 18-34 year old White males, the *race transcendent* image was familiar to them because they believed it was “commonplace” for Black males to be NBA executives. The following paragraphs explain participant response in greater detail.

The 18-34 year old African American male group used the following words to describe the person in the image: “educated,” “successful,” and “rich.” When asked where he might see an image like this, a young African American male noted, “I guess we see it in like our mentor, we have an African-American mentor group where there are businessmen there to help us with opportunities like after school with internships and stuff.” Another participant noted that his brother is a lawyer so the picture was familiar to him. For example, “This picture it reminds me of my brother, my brother is a lawyer up here in [location] so this is what he does every day. That's the first thing I thought about.” The discussion of this image also included some optimism about progress towards racial equity. Two participants noted that although the business world is “predominantly Caucasian” society is “moving towards equality.” When asked about how the image represents Black male athletes, a few participants noted that the image reflects “life after sports.” Even still, they told stories that warned of the dangers of professional athletes getting swindled by financial advisors.

For the older African American groups the image evoked responses that challenged existing stereotypes of African American male athletes. Specifically, the groups discussed how the person in the picture exuded “independence” and autonomy.

While not initially recognizing it was Magic Johnson in the picture, an older African American male participant noted that the picture could be staged but the person displayed too much confidence to be an actor, "...his posture, he's in control, he's got it, that ownership component, kind of that corner suite ownership." From another 35-55 year old African American male, "...there is this sort of impression of independence that it gives off that he's making some independent decisions. You know he's actively, sort of engaged in the world in an independent way." Similar to the 18-34 year old African American group the image was not entirely unfamiliar due to real life experiences with the profession of family members. An older African American male stated,

I guess I've seen it a bunch of times in real life so I mean this could be a photo of my brother, you know in his corner office out there in San Diego, a portfolio manager. Just asked to open an office in Singapore for his company, a former athlete.

The older African American male group noted that while this was an uncommon image in mainstream media, their personal connections to successful Black males did not make it entirely unfamiliar.

Some words used to describe the person in the image by the 18-34 year old White male group were "businessman," "educated," and "smart." Despite agreeing that images or stories regarding Black and White people in management were rare, an 18-34 year old White male focus participant stated,

People might be surprised in the past to see that, but to see a Black NBA executive but its kind of commonplace nowadays because they have a lot of

former players. So that doesn't stand out to me because there are plenty of pictures (another participant chimes in "Michael Jordan for example, wearing a suit") commanding, being the president of the team or the figurehead of the Charlotte Bobcats.

Another 18-34 year old White male participant stated, "It's not like I look at that image and go, 'Wow I haven't seen an NBA executive who is African-American.' It is that it is more prevalent nowadays and accepted." The younger White male participants seemed to agree that although the *race transcendent* image was not necessarily common in mainstream media, it was also not that surprising to them to see a Black male in a leadership position within sport.

Subtheme-Uncommon and unfamiliar. In comparison to the discussions described above, the White female participant responses indicated that the image was both *uncommon and unfamiliar* to them. In other words, they rarely saw media images of Black males in business settings nor did they indicate they had any real world experience with Black males in a business setting. The following paragraphs provide more specific reactions to the *race transcendent* image.

The 35-55 year old White female group used words like "educated," "executive," and "businessman" to describe the person in the image. When asked where they see images like this one, the first response from a participant was, "I don't." When pressed on if the image was an accurate representation of Black male athletes, the group responded simply with "no." Although one participant did suggest that Black males might have opportunities in "coaching or team management in some form." The

responses indicate that for the older White female group this image was fairly uncommon and rare for them to see.

The 18-34 year old White female group described the person in the image as “successful,” “professional” and a “businessman.” When asked how common the image was an 18-34 year old White female asserted, “I don’t think there’s really a lot. I don’t see a lot of pictures of people really working in their offices.” The participants in this group did not recognize that the person in the image was Magic Johnson. This seemed to have an impact on their responses to a question about how the image represented Black male athletes. As one participant noted, “Maybe if I knew he was an athlete, maybe I would think it was possible to make it in the business world after I guess.” This response indicates the perception that Black male athletes may have more social capital than Black males who are not athletes. As a result of that social capital, this participant believed Black male athletes have more ability to leverage that into success in business.

Subtheme-“Needed” image versus “not news?” This image prompted very different responses from the 35-55 year old African American female and 35-55 year old White male focus groups. The older African American female group felt this image was important and needed to provide inspiration for younger African American males. While the older White male group essentially dismissed the image as irrelevant because they did not feel it was not newsworthy. The following paragraphs elaborate on their responses.

The 35-55 year old African American female group described the person in the image as “powerful,” “successful,” and “hard working.” An older African American female explained, “He’s in charge of his own destiny and he’s sure about himself.”

When asked if they had seen images like this before the, a participant stated, "...like I said we don't see very many pictures of our strong, Black, successful men like that and so normally when you see it, we'll say its in a magazine or something so it kinda (sic) looks staged." Similar to the 35-55 year old African American male group, the participant responses indicated that since images of Black businessmen are rare in mainstream media, this image seemed like it could be staged. Despite the idea that it could be a staged image, this group noted the importance of such depictions. One 35-55 year old African American female stated, "...We need more of those [images of Black businessmen] so that our young men and women alike can believe that's possible, that this lifestyle could be for us." In this quote, she notes the idea the range of media portrayals that depict Black males in leadership positions could have a positive impact on the career aspirations of African American youth.

In contrast, the 35-55 year old White male group used the following adjectives to describe the athlete in this image: "professional," "educated," and "successful." To the 35-35 year old White male group this picture was uncommon because it was not what one participant deemed "newsworthy." For example, "...I think you see the drug busts and other stuff more...I don't think you see this, yeah you see this, but I don't think you see as much of this because it is not news." Another participant went on to say, "If someone has been very successful, it might be newsworthy, if someone has been very unsuccessful, it might be very newsworthy. If it's in the middle, you don't know what 99% of former or current professional athletes are doing." In other words, an image or a story about a Black male athlete as a businessman is not necessarily news, unless there is something extremely positive or extremely negative about the story.

The 18-34 year old African American female group noted that they had not seen many images of Black males in a business or office setting. For example, a younger African American female participant stated that she rarely saw images of successful Black men, “Unless you are reading Black Enterprise magazine.” This group also described the person in the image as “wealthy,” “successful,” and “accomplished.” One participant also noted that they did sometimes see Black males in a business setting in movies but that they were “...usually like doing work for some other big White guy.” When asked how this image represents Black male athletes, an 18-34 year old African American female participant stated, “I don’t see this [image] representing Black male athletes at all.” Others noted that the image provided an additional way to represent them, “as serving the community, as an athlete doing business, as managing your own money.” Another participant discussed how the idea of a Black male athlete managing his own money challenges the idea of the irresponsible and unintelligent Black male athlete. Although she also wondered whether hiring a financial planner might reinforce stereotypes of the irresponsible Black male. For example,

I wonder how that’s depicted though because if you try to show an athlete doing business, managing your own money and managing estates and all that stuff it’s like, “Oh you not only played whatever sport, but you actually have some kind of what am I trying to say, like it’s not all about sports, you can actually manage your own, your own life,” you know what I mean? Opposed to if you play sports and you hire somebody else to manage your money, to manage your life behind basketball, behind football, whatever, then it makes it seem as if it’s like, “Oh

you have all the money from whatever sport you played and you can hire other people to do the stuff we think you can't do.”

This discussion among the younger African American female group illuminates their perceptions of stereotypes of Black male intelligence, as well as the lack of representation of Black men as competent businessmen in mainstream media.

Subtheme-Exceptionalism. While discussing this image, the 18-34 year old White male group was the only group that discussed the role that being an elite athlete like Magic Johnson played in post-retirement career. One participant felt that this image did not necessarily accurately represent athletes. For example, “I feel like most of them retire and just sit at home and play with their kids. I don't feel like most of them retire and work an office job.” Other participants noted that the more famous athletes like Magic Johnson or Keyshawn Johnson are the ones you see on SportsCenter or as broadcasters. When asked if professional but non-elite athletes have opportunities to gain office jobs participant responses were mixed. One said, “Every time, if they wanna (sic) do it. I mean they've been around the sport, their own sport, I don't see why they wouldn't be able to move into the business side of it.” While another participant noted that multiple factors play a role in post-retirement success including length of playing career, as well as their on-field success during their career. The group was somewhat split on how easy it was to transition from being an athlete to having a successful career in business.

Altogether, the eight focus groups stated that this was the least common image of the five categories of representation of Black male athletes found in mainstream media. Table 6 illustrates the subthemes and the groups in which they emerged.

Although the image did not prompt a discussion of Black male athletes transcending race the subthemes that emerged are important. All of the White focus groups stated that this was a rare image. Whereas, even though all of the African American groups also stated this was a rare image, they were more likely to see media images of Black men in business settings through Black media sources like BET or Black Enterprise Magazine. The African American male groups also relayed stories that indicated they had some personal experiences (relatives or friends) with professional Black businessmen, which did not make the image unfamiliar to them. The 18-34 year old White male group also noted that prominent athletes in positions of leadership like Michael Jordan are now “commonplace” so the image was also not surprising to them. Despite this example from the 18-34 year old White male group, none of the White focus groups discussed personal experiences with Black men or women in a business setting.

The 18-34 year old White male group also engaged in a discussion of whether or not *exceptionalism* plays a role in whether or not an athlete can achieve success in the business world, but did not come to a definitive conclusion. The 18-34 year old White female participants did not recognize that the person in the image was Magic Johnson, but still described the image as a symbol of “success.” The 35-55 year old African American female group expressed how the image represented something rare in media, a Black male as independent and powerful. In comparison, the 35-55 year old White male group dismissed the image as unimportant or irrelevant based on what the media deems “newsworthy.”

Summary of section one

Numerous subthemes emerged for each of the five categories of representation. During discussions of the *highly competent/natural athlete* image all of the White focus group responses indicated their beliefs that equated *athleticism as a positive representation* of Black male athletes. The older White groups in particular, compared the *highly competent/natural athlete* to that of the *deviant* image stating that the picture of Kevin Durant was a much more positive representation. While the subtheme of *acknowledging hard work* emerged in the younger African American groups as well as the 35-55 year old African American male group. In this the 18-34 year old African American female discussed how media depictions can perpetuate the athleticism versus intelligence binary while the African American male groups focused on the effort it took Kevin Durant to become an NBA player.

While talking about the *exotic savage* image three subthemes emerged. Both White male groups and African American male groups noted that Patrick Willis muscular physique reflected *strength and hard work*. Several groups, the 35-55 year old White female, 35-55 year old African American female, 18-34 year old African American female, and the 18-34 year old White male groups responses indicated they felt there was a *deeper meaning* behind the facial expression of Patrick Willis. Finally, the 18-34 year old White female group, viewed muscularity as the *typical physique of Black male athletes*. The 35-55 year old African American male group was the only one to recognize the historical stereotype of the Black male athlete as “mandingo” or hypersexual beast.

The conversation about the *deviant* image featuring Donte Stallworth getting fingerprinted resulted in three subthemes among the eight focus groups. The most common subtheme, *can't escape the past*, emerged in the 35-55 year old White focus group, the 35-55 year old African American female group, and the 18-34 year old African American male group. In this subtheme, participants noted that many Black athletes grew up in the “projects” and that upbringing influenced their present day behavior. In other words, Black male athletes were deviant because immoral people and behavior surrounded them. A second subtheme, *disproportionate media coverage of Black males arrests* materialized in the 18-34 year old White female group, the 18-34 year old African American male group, the 35-55 year old African American female group, and the 35-55 year old African American male group. The group responses reflected that they perceived disparate coverage of Black males to the extent that it may reinforce the *deviant* stereotype. The subtheme *deviance and distrust* emerged in the younger African American female focus group. The younger African American female group responses indicated that while they may have internalized the *deviant* stereotype, they did not trust the criminal justice system to treat Black men fairly.

The *emotionally immature* image of NBA player Josh Smith and the referee prompted three subthemes. The responses from several groups including the 35-55 year old White male group, the 35-55 year old White female group, the 35-55 year old African American female group as well as both 18-34 year old White groups indicated that they perceived *Josh Smith as a punk*. All of these groups assumed that Josh Smith had initiated an argument with the referee and therefore was described as “confrontational” and “obnoxious” among other adjectives. In comparison, both of the

African American male group discussions as well as the 18-34 year old African American female group indicated their belief that *Josh Smith as a professional* who was engaged with the referee not necessarily trying to provoke him but trying to negotiate as colleagues would. In both of the younger African American groups, participants commented on how all of the people in the image (referee, athlete and coach) all appeared to be African American. They equated this to *leadership* and noted that it was important.

While the *race transcendent* image did not necessarily invoke a conversation about Black male athletes being “raceless” several other subthemes emerged. The 18-34 year old White male group, the 18-34 year old African American male group, and the 35-55 year old African American male groups all asserted this was an *uncommon but familiar* image. There were, however, differing reasons behind their beliefs. Both African American groups discussed relatives or mentors who were successful in business much like the symbolism *race transcendent* image projects. While not referencing any personal connections to successful Black businessmen, the 18-34 year old White male group instead stated that media coverage of professional athletes like Michael Jordan makes the image familiar to them.

On the other hand, both of the White female focus groups stated that the *race transcendent* image was both *uncommon and unfamiliar* to them. In fact, neither group perceived the image to be an accurate reflection of Black male athletes. The 35-55 year old African American female and the 35-55 year old White male focus groups had divergent perspectives on the race transcendent image that resulted in the “*needed*” versus “*not news?*” theme. The 35-55 year old African American female group felt this

was a *needed* image for African Americans as they thought it could help create a positive vision for young African Americans to strive towards. In comparison, the 35-55 year old White male group viewed this image as irrelevant and as one participant stated “*not news.*” The 18-34 year old White male group also discussed the image in terms of *exceptionalism*, meaning that they debated over whether any athlete could achieve success or if only elite athletes like Magic Johnson or Michael Jordan could leverage their championship pedigree into fame and fortune.

Section 2: Impact of color-blind ideology on focus group discussions

Section two contains themes and subthemes pertaining to how color-blind ideology impacted focus group discussions of Black male athletes within five categories of representation. Color-blind ideology refers to the web of beliefs and ideas in which race is considered a non-factor in society, particularly when trying to explain inequities or discrimination. In other words, because society has dismantled discriminatory legislation, inequality is attributed to market dynamics, and cultural deficiencies of minority communities (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Wise, 2009; 2010). This section includes several themes: *sport as racial utopia*, *minimizing racism/discrimination*, *differing realities and perceptions of racism/discrimination*, *perceptions of color-blindness* and *paths to upward mobility*. Table 7 includes the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. The following paragraphs explain the themes and subthemes pertaining to how color-blind ideology impacted focus group discussions.

Theme-Sport as racial utopia. The theme of *sport as racial utopia* emerged in all four White focus groups as well as the 35-55 year old African American male group.

Under this theme four subthemes emerged: *sport unites*, *sport opened doors for Black people*, *race transcendence* and *progress but not perfect*.

Subtheme-Sport unites racial groups. Responses from several groups indicated that they perceived sport to be a vehicle that united racial groups, particularly White and African American people. An 18-34 year old White male explained how sport unites different racial groups, "...everyone is kind of working for one common goal, for one team and you no longer saw someone as Black or White you saw someone as, you're my teammate." A 35-55 year old African American male also stated something similar,

"...when you're on the field, with your teammates, in the dugout, up to bat, everybody is rooting for you, everybody has your back. If I got into a fight or a brawl, all my boys White, Black, whoever, my team has my back, when you go out to eat after the games are after whatever it's your team. And so when you have Black, White people and Asian people also and Latinos on our baseball team in college, it's like the team mentality replaces the us against them tribal mentality."

An 18-34 year old White female also stated, "I don't know, competition wise I just think like that [integration] brought together Black and Whites for baseball and that brought in every [racial] category in sports." An older White female pointed to the movie *Remember the Titans* which was based on a true story, when discussing how sport has impacted race relations, "Well it brought a community that was forced with segregation to come together and they had to work together and they had to make a team and they did."

Subtheme-Sport opens doors for Black males. A 35-55 year old White male participant discussed how sport opened doors for African Americans,

Absolutely, yeah I think that Black Americans have, going through the cultural evolution of race in America, I think that they, some of the early Black athletes forged where at that point they could forge, where that was one door that some people had. And I think to some degree one door that some people had both as an opportunity but also as an aptitude, as a physically capable person, a good athlete and that was a place that they could forge ahead and become successful in America, where you couldn't before.

An 18-34 year old White female participant also stated, "And I'm thinking with it [sport] opened more opportunities for Black people or Black guys that were good enough." This idea that sport helped open doors for African Americans fits into the theme of sport as racial utopia because it positions sport as the site where racial integration started. From this perspective, integration of sport allowed African American male athletes opportunities to achieve success in society while they were denied the same opportunities in other parts of society.

Subtheme-Race transcendence. In addition to sport opening doors for Black males, responses from three groups (35-55 year old White female, 35-55 year old African American male, 18-34 year old White male groups) discussed the role sport played in *race transcendence* for Black male athletes. An older White female noted how sport has allowed Black male athletes to transcend race, "I think most kids nowadays just look up to great athletes it doesn't matter what color they are. They don't think of LeBron James as a Black basketball player, they think of him as [a basketball player]."

Similarly, a 35-55 year old African American male explained, “When I watch my nephew’s little basketball team play, 10-year-old league in California, they all have Carmelo Anthony jerseys. It doesn't really, they don't even think about what race the player is.” In addition, an 18-34 year old White male said,

The more popular sports are showing Black people in a good light being athletic, dominant and respected for working hard and being good at what they do. I don’t know, a lot of the top, favorite athletes, I’m sure, in a public poll would be Black and that’s how it is.”

Another participant noted the documentary about the University of Michigan “Fab Five” as well as portrayals of Black males as champions to illustrate how Black males are well-received by society.

Subtheme-Progress but not perfect. Responses indicated that participants perceived that race relations have improved and while discrimination may be lessening, it has not completely disappeared. The 35-55 year old African American male group while reiterating that sport united people of all races, still perceived sport to have some racially discriminatory practices. An older African American participant explained,

There is discrimination in terms of contracts. I think Black players on the whole, still don’t get the benefit of the doubt in terms of the contracts and the long term contract negotiations that some of the White players can demand.

This participant went on to clarify that, in the moment, on the field, however sport is “the most color-blind, nondiscriminatory place on the planet.” In response to a question about whether there is absence of discrimination in sport an older White female participant alluded to discrimination with the following,

I think particularly more in the coaching level they [Black males] have come a long way in the past few years but if you just look at, especially sports that are dominated by Black athletes there is not that same proportional mix when it comes to coaches especially head coaches. So it's hard to know why.

In noting both the progress and disparity of Black head coaches, they reiterate the point made by the older African American group in that discrimination may be waning but it is certainly not absent.

A 35-55 year old White male commented that there is still discrimination in sport but pointed to audience perceptions of Black males,

I think there is still a lot of White people that look at the, go back to the NBA because the NBA is predominantly black, that think you know a bunch of hoods, you know because they are, I mean *black*.

In contrast, the younger White male group pointed out the how sport is perceived as a sanctuary free from discrimination. An 18-34 year old White male participant explained,

Some people in society might freak if there was any major discrimination in sports. Just because the point where we are right now it's, it's getting away from slavery it's getting away from the racism and everything so, I believe in society right now we're really trying to make it so every man is equal, even though some smaller portions and might not be equal like a Black male coming out of Detroit trying to get a job, but for athletics wise I think Blacks and White are treated very fairly.

The statement above reiterates their perception that sport is primarily free from discrimination against Black male athletes. Table 8 illustrates the subthemes and the groups in which they emerged. Overall, the 35-55 year old White male and female, the 35-55 year old African American male, and the 18-34 year old White male focus group discussions demonstrated that they primarily viewed *sport as a racial utopia*. The responses indicated that *sport united racial groups, opened doors for Black male athletes*, contributed *race transcendence* of Black male athletes and indicated *progress but was not perfect*. However, responses from the 35-55 year old African American male group and 35-55 year old White female group indicated that discrimination may exist in other aspects such as contract negotiations and Black males obtaining leadership positions or as the older White male group indicated, societal perceptions.

Theme-Minimizing racism/discrimination. This theme emerged through responses from participants that downplayed the existence of discrimination against Black males or people of color in general. Several subthemes are discussed including: *reverse racism, equitable media coverage?, semantics*, and the idea that most *racism occurs primarily in the South*. The following paragraphs explain the subthemes in greater detail.

Subtheme-Reverse discrimination. All four White focus groups asserted that while racial discrimination against people of color may exist in the rest of society, discrimination against White people may also be increasing. In comparison, when asked about if discrimination existed in sport and/society not one participant in the four African American focus groups brought up *reverse discrimination*. To illustrate their point, participants in each of the four White focus groups provided stories or examples

of the ways in which White people are discriminated against based on their race both in and out of sport. Within these discussions at least two groups (White female) indicated that they did not recognize when discrimination against people of color occurred but could identify instances of discrimination against White people. As one older White female stated, “Yeah I’m sure it’s there is and we just don’t see it.” White participants also made the point that the institution of sport is relatively absent from discrimination against Black male athletes. An older White male participant asserted, “That’s just athletics, if you’re good enough you’re gonna play, doesn’t matter if you’re Black-White, or whatever, if you’re good enough you’re gonna play.”

Responses from the 18-34 year old White male and female focus groups indicated that since it is assumed that Black male athletes are naturally talented, White male athletes are disadvantaged or passed over. They perceived that stereotypes of natural athleticism may result in *reverse discrimination*. A younger White female explained,

...I think it almost influences coaches or the professional field of it. If you were to have a muscular Black athlete and then a muscular White athlete I mean, I feel like throughout the years a coach would probably choose the Black athlete because he’s intimidating, more athletic...

A younger White male also expressed similar views,

I guess it's really only really relevant basketball and football, I almost feel like if you're not Black you're kind of discriminated against like in a slight way. Because the sports that are dominated by Black athletes and it's just like, like White men can't jump, kind of like that. “What’s a White guy doing on a

basketball court?" I feel like it's not like discrimination against, it's not bad but I feel like if you would say there is discrimination in the, it wouldn't be against Blacks that are athletic that are out there playing.

In other words, they perceive that stereotypes pertaining to the natural athleticism of Black males ends up limiting athletic opportunities for White male athletes.

The 35-55 year old White male and female group responses also indicated that they felt discrimination in society was actually harming White people more than people of color. They pointed to affirmative action hiring policies to bolster their arguments. For example an older White male spoke about hiring practices in the NFL, "I mean it's just kind of ironic to say that, imagine that it's your job is to say, 'You must hire regardless of education, you must hire.'" In addition, the 35-55 year old White female group had the following exchange pertaining to the presence of discrimination in society,

Speaker 1- And probably again where you live.

Speaker 2- But I think it goes all the way around because if you're a White educated male and you are applying for a company that has to meet certain whatever, you're the last one that is going to be hired. So it's not Black it's all the way around. So if you're a White female, over 50, with no kids, "We have to hire you." So I think it's all...

Moderator- So it kind of depends on the circumstances as to who is experiencing the discrimination?

Speaker 4-I had someone tell me once that, "I could hire you if you were a Black female."

Speaker 5- And I've heard that before, not personally for me but I have heard that before.

These comments demonstrate that White focus group participants felt that while discrimination against people of color may exist, *reverse discrimination*, may be a growing problem. This can be contrasted with the discussions from African American focus groups in that, *reverse discrimination*, never entered the conversation. Instead, as the previous theme indicated, African American focus group participants recounted both personal stories and provided examples within the media of how discrimination against Black people was fairly prevalent.

Subtheme-Equitable media coverage? This subtheme emerged during the 35-55 year old White male focus group discussion. Responses from this group indicated that they perceived media coverage of Black and White male athletes to be similar and impartial. Yet they also went on to discuss how media coverage was overly focused on the lack of Black males in leadership positions which contradicts the idea that coverage is equitable. When asked if they had seen the *deviant* image before, one 35-55 year old male participant stated, "There've been various athletes that have been in that spot." Another said, "There have been very few American cities that would not have that picture of a professional athlete in a courtroom." Another participant explained, "I don't see it as a Black-White thing. It's the same thing it's, 'I'm entitled. I'm more powerful than you. I can kill somebody and what are you gonna (sic) do about it?'" These responses reinforce the idea that media coverage has little to do with race, meaning that Black and White athletes get fair treatment from the media. From the perspective of the

35-55 year old White male group, if a professional athlete gets arrested it will be in the news, regardless of the race of the athlete.

As the conversation of the *deviant* image progressed, the 35-55 year old White male participants brought up media coverage of athlete arrests in predominantly White sports, like tennis, and swimming in comparison to sports like football and basketball. One participant shifted the conversation with the following observation, “But think it is [getting arrested] more common in certain sports than others. It could just be the numbers.” He later clarified that he meant that the NBA/NFL consisted of larger roster sizes (“demographics”) than other sports. Another 35-55 year old White male participant followed that observation with, “Yeah you don’t see swimmers getting in trouble or tennis players.” Despite other participants citing arrests of White athletes, swimmer Michael Phelps and tennis player Jennifer Capriati, the group seemed to settle on the idea that since football and basketball get more media coverage than the other sports that is the reason for the coverage of athlete arrests, not because of the race of the athletes.

The 35-55 year old White male group was also the lone group to discuss the idea that media stories are too focused on the lack of Black men in sport leadership positions. This exchange among participants illustrates this subtheme:

Speaker 1-You still hear about them [Black males] not getting enough an opportunity to be coaches or in like general manager positions.

Speaker 2- And I have a problem with that [speaker 1- I’m not saying, I’m not saying] no, no [speaker 1- I’m saying that’s what you hear]. I get it because they are 11-12% of the population or whatever it is, if they are 11-12% of the

coaches, general managers than that is normal right? [speaker 4- right] I think that's, that's media cropping stuff up again, I think it is.

Speaker 1- I know that's what I've heard.

Speaker 2 - You're right I hear it too.

The 35-55 year old White male participant responses indicated that they viewed media coverage of athletes as fair. From their perspective, if a professional football or basketball player were arrested it would be news because of the heightened coverage of those sports not because of the race of the athlete. Table 9 illustrates the subthemes and the groups in which they emerged.

Subtheme-Semantics. The theme *semantics* emerged in the younger White male group. *Semantics* refers to the rhetorical tools that participants utilized when discussing Black male athletes. For example, the 18-34 year old participants used an example-counter example(s) scenario that seemed like they intended to debunk a stereotype. Instead they ended up reinforcing the stereotype they tried to counter. For example, a younger male stated,

There are a lot of really well-spoken Black athletes, Larry Fitzgerald comes to mind for me, but for every one of them there is also somebody who speaks in typical or in African American vernacular you could say. And that maybe comes off to most people who haven't heard it very much as ignorant. And then there is also the whole stereotype of Derrick Rose didn't take the ACT by himself...

In this subtheme, a positive example of a Black male athlete is presented but then it is consistently followed by multiple negative examples that reinforce some existing stereotype of Black male athletes.

In addition, a younger White male participant deflected racially charged comments with “I’m not saying, I’m just saying...” For example, here is his response to a question about societal perceptions of Black male athletes, “I just feel, you asked like society so I am not 100% saying myself but like I just feel like society thinks maybe Black athletes are a little less educated a little, in that part.”

Subtheme-Racism is found primarily in the South. Responses also indicated that participants in the 18-34 year old African American male, 18-34 year old White male and 18-34 year old White female groups thought geography (where you lived in the United States) also played a role in racism/discrimination. Specifically, they perceived the South to be more racist and discriminatory than other parts of the country. An 18-34 year old White male explained, “I feel like it's still there especially like if you go to the South there is definitely still a lot of racism going around and stuff like that.” An 18-34 year old White female participant also told a story about an African American teammate who was subjected to racial abuse during a summer tournament in a southern state. After she told the story another 18-34 year old White female participant commented, “I think it was specifically because you're in the South too.” The 18-34 year old African American male group argued that since the North is more of a “melting pot,” defined by them as a place with more racial diversity than the South, and as a result led to decreased racism. The common perception among these groups was that the South is still a bastion of racism and discrimination. In comparison, from their perspective much less discrimination occurs in other regions of the country.

Theme-Differing perceptions of and realities of racial discrimination. This theme refers to the ways in which participants discussed instances of racial

discrimination against people of color. For the African American focus group participants, responses indicated that racism and discrimination is ever-present in their lives. In comparison, when asked about racial discrimination the two White female focus groups also shared their own personal stories of dealing with discrimination against African Americans. However, their takeaways from those experiences were quite different than that of the African American participants. Table 10 illustrates the subthemes and the groups in which they emerged.

Subtheme-Racism/discrimination is ever-present. When asked if they thought that discrimination existed in sport and/or society African American participants said yes to both and relayed examples of ways in which racism operates in their lives. For example, they explained that racism/discrimination can be both hidden and overt, and some perceived that Black male athletes were targeted. An older African American female participated stated, “Bottom line racism still there, it's hidden. They might be a little better at hiding it or cleaning it up but it's a different type of slavery.” When asked if discrimination still exists in sport the younger African American female participants stated yes and immediately pointed to media coverage of Jeremy Lin (the Taiwanese-American NBA player) who at the time of the interview was wreaking havoc on NBA opponents. Furthermore, the responses of the 18-34 African American female group to *highly competent/natural athlete* image in particular, the brains versus brain dichotomy reproduced by sport announcers, illustrate their awareness of racism/discrimination against Black male athletes.

Not all instances of racism/discrimination occurred from a distance. One 18-34 year old African American male explained a personal experience with overt racism:

When I was in high school, no middle school, I was supposed to get MVP. I went to an all White middle school for the football season. I basically scored all the touchdowns, they told me I was gonna (sic) be MVP. I went to go get the award and they said, “We gave the MVP to the coach’s son” who happened to be White. So after that I knew I couldn’t stay in that school anymore so I left. I mean I know for a fact where I’m from racism in sports exists, it might be a subtle as not winning an award or maybe not as much playing time...

When asked about societal perceptions of Black male athletes, an older African American male participant contended,

Well, it [societal perceptions] could get us killed as Trayvon Martin shows. He's a young Black, just turned 17-year-old, high school athlete but I would say that the images that we have, the stereotypes that we have, that we hold societally are more important than the images that we hold from an athletic standpoint. If there wasn't the image of the dangerous buck, Negro, slave, you know raping the White woman and robbing and all the B.S. that they would lynch people for in the South...if there wasn't that reality there wouldn't be the perception of guilt of the Black athlete.

These quotes reflect how societal perceptions contribute to the ways in which Black males have been and continue to be discriminated against. From the view of the participant, these perceptions and stereotypes have led to the deaths of many Black males.

Furthermore, two African American focus groups described Black male athletes and Black people in general as targets in general or from media focus. As an 18-34 year

old male participant commented, “I mean they're always looking for something, people will always be looking for something on African American athletes.” An older African American female remarked,

Then you have the media and the commentaries and they just don't know how to let stuff die down. With an athlete I've seen, I've heard I've seen a couple of them that's gotten in trouble whatever. You know they got suspended for a while then they come back and then here comes this story all blown up again so they are constantly keeping that image of a [deviant] Black athlete in the forefront instead of letting it die away.

While the younger groups were slightly more positive about the idea that discrimination has lessened, all four groups were willing to concede as the 35-55 year old male group did that while “things are *changing* they're not *changed*.”

Both male groups were slightly more positive than the female groups in their outlook as they asserted that although discrimination exists, society is moving toward equality. One younger African American male participant commented, “I mean there is more popping up, like successful African-American people in the business world. It's still predominantly Caucasian or White but I mean we are still working our way up there.”

Subtheme-Racism/discrimination is unexpected. African American participants recounted examples and personal stories of the ways in which various sources, media, coaches, and/or society has unfairly treated Black males. In contrast, only two White focus groups, both female, participants provided examples of the ways in which discrimination impacted people of color. In response to whether or not there was an

absence of discrimination in sport, a 35-55 year old White female participant relayed the following story,

It's interesting because we have been involved with some kids who kind of looked for discrimination, is that the correct way to say it? Some of my older daughter's teammates, two of them were Black and, they actually tried to find situations, and they would turn, it's not that they would turn things about, but they would kind of almost create situations where they could say that, you know they were discriminated against. We finally had long conversations about it because it wasn't really, it wasn't that [discrimination]. I mean that's kind of where they came from. It was, it was hard so I don't think it's all gone.

While this participant does provide an example of racial discrimination against African Americans, she also simultaneously downplays the experience of her daughter's teammates.

When asked if sport has influenced race relations, a participant from the 18-34 year old White female group also relayed a story about when one of her teammates was subjected to a racial epithet during a tournament.

...One time we are playing this is gonna (sic) sound really bad too, we were playing in the South. We were in like Texas or something. Someone called a girl on the team the "N" word and it just all blew up. I always knew why the "N" word was bad but then when I heard her family explain it to me it made it a huge difference on how I saw the whole culture of African Americans.

This participant discussed how the incident helped her to understand how certain words can be hurtful. On the other hand, the White male participants did not provide any stories of racial discrimination against people of color.

Subtheme-Utility versus acceptance. The premise of this subtheme is that although Black male athletes have progressed to the point of dominating the playing fields in football and basketball that does not necessarily mean that they have been accepted by White society. Participants in both of the older African American groups questioned whether Black male athletes are unconditionally accepted by society or whether it was a question of utility. An older female stated,

...as long as *they're* [White people] still in power and they're still in control and that's what it's all about. "Yeah okay I'm gonna (sic) accept you and then go ahead and use you because that's what we're doing, we're *using* you." So they keep this façade of caring about you. "We're going to give this façade of supporting you. We're going to give this façade it's all equal and it's all lovey-dovey now" but bottom line, it's a different type of slavery.

Essentially, this participant notes that some organizations have not actually accepted or supported Black males. In fact, she argues that their utility to the organization is the most important factor. An older male participant, while noting society is changing, stated the following,

I think African-Americans, African-American athletes tend to be valued more for their utility and, I think it's more of an evaluation of their utility more than an acceptance of who they are. But even if you just simply value them for their utility, you avail to them to certain opportunities. And maybe if they're

successful in those opportunities than maybe something else, “Well they're [Black men] not smart enough to be a quarterback, not smart enough to be a coordinator, not smart enough to be a head coach,” you maybe start to defeat some of those notions. I still think their value is due more to their utility versus an acceptance.

This view of acceptance based on utility, takes into account that it may lead to increased opportunities for Black males in leadership positions within sport.

The 35-55 year old African American male group also noted that while society idolizes Black male athletes, it may treat Black males in other professions quite differently. When responding to a question about how sport has helped with race relations, an older male participant posed an the following question,

And so who is the likeliest to be welcomed into the available house in a gated community among Africans [Americans], is that the humble super accountant who's been trained for many years or is it the fellow in the ring?

After posing that question, other members of the group responded “the celebrity athlete.” In other words, society is more accepting of Black male athletes than Black men in other industries.

Both commentaries take a critical view of the whether or not Black males have been accepted by society. Both groups had participants who asserted that Black males are accepted based on the athlete's utility to the organization. The older African American male group also noted that society is not necessarily accepting of Black males, just superstar Black male athletes.

Theme-Perceptions of color-blindness. This theme encompasses two subthemes. First is the notion that being color-blind is an ideal to strive towards which is included in the subtheme *idealizing color-blindness*. This subtheme emerged in both of the 35-55 year old White focus group discussions. The older White female and White male groups noted that society has progressed, becoming less discriminatory towards African Americans since they were young. On the other hand, the 35-55 year old African American female, 18-34 year old African American female and 18-34 year old White female responses indicated that they did not view being color-blind quite as positively. Their responses are found under the second subtheme *problematizing color-blindness*.

Subtheme-Idealizing color-blindness. Both of the 35-55 year old White groups felt that younger generations, including their children, are in fact color-blind. One White male participant commented, "I think you [another participant] said it, every generation gets different. I think, you know, a generation ago, there was more prejudice." Another older male participant followed that comment with,

... My daughter is bringing home some girls from school and one is a Black girl and you would never, and it means nothing. But if my father, who is no longer with us, heard that he'd say, "What the hell is she doing?" Now again it is from a different part of the country, where we were from its different. She [daughter] never even thinks twice about.

The 35-55 year old White female focus group responses indicated that they had similar views of the generational differences in race relations, particularly that their children are color-blind. For example, one participant stated, "It [being color-blind] depends on your

age because I don't think my kids see color like I did." Another participant linked color-blindness with Black male athletes in the following statement, "I would have to say the Black athletes have been positive because everyone looks up to, well most children look up to great athletes whether they are Black or White, so that I would have to say it's positive." Later in the conversation in response to a question about what they thought of the concept of color-blindness, a participant reinforced the generational differences point with, "I think it gets better generation after generation. I mean when I think about [husband's] dad, for example, compared to [husband] there is a huge difference there so I think it is getting better." Despite the 35-55 year old White female group's positivity about a color-blind society, with one person commenting that "it would be *great*." Another participant acknowledged that it a color-blind society is not necessarily a complete reality yet, "We're many, many years away from that [being color-blind]."

These comments from both of the 35-55 year old White focus groups indicate their perception that society has made significant progress in terms of race relations since they were younger. While sharing anecdotes from their youth they contrasted an overtly racist society of the past with a more inclusive society of the present. The older White participants perceive their children as color-blind due to their inter-racial friendships as well the idea that their children do not see color because they look up to Black athletes. Unlike the focus group participants discussed below, the 35-55 year old White focus group responses signified that they saw few, if any, problems with a color-blind society.

Subtheme-Problematising color-blindness. While the older White focus groups discussed and perceived color-blindness to be a positive ideal to strive towards, the 18-

34 year old White female, the 18-34 year old African American female and the 35-55 year old African American female group responses demonstrated that they held very different, negative, perceptions of color-blindness. For example, an 18-34 year old White female stated, "By being colorblind it's kind of like being the same thing as being racist I guess. Kind of like race has something to do with who you are." Another 18-34 year old White female participant discussed the difficulty of being color-blind when she explained,

I don't think people are ever going to be able to look at, if the team is half White, half Black, I don't think they are going to be able to see them as all athletes.

They are immediately going to have their judgments and assumptions and stuff like that. Like they can say they don't see color, in the back of their mind they might have. You can't disregard everything you ever grown up with or heard about or all that stuff. I don't know if there's really such a thing as being color-blind.

In other words, racial stereotypes might be too hard to overcome. When asked if society has the ability to be color-blind, a 35-55 year old African American female responded without hesitation and simply stated, "No, no." Another 35-55 year old African American female explained, "Not the ability, no. We have the potential but the history is too strong." Essentially, this participant is asserting that race and the history of racial discrimination in society is too difficult to move past. When asked the same question, an 18-34 year African American old female also asserted, "Oh that would be a *great* concept but it's not reality." Another followed with, "I don't think that [color-blindness] will ever work." Another response from an 18-34 year old African American female

participant also indicated that she thought a color-blind society might open up opportunities for African Americans that are presently restricted. For example, “Stuff like that I feel like if we were all color-blind if you like *you'd see* Black people playing hockey. You'd see Black people surfing, doing stuff that's out of the ordinary.” These responses contrast with those of the 35-55 year old White participants, in that the African American female groups and 18-34 year old White female group feel that color-blindness, although it might be a decent concept that could help create opportunities, may never work. Table 11 illustrates the subthemes and the groups in which they emerged.

Theme-Paths to upward mobility. The theme of *paths to upward mobility* emerged in several groups. Yet the ways in which groups viewed how upward mobility could be achieved differed. All of the African American female groups discussed obtaining a college degree as more important than turning professional which encompassed the subtheme of *education as upward mobility*. The 18-34 year old White female group conversation turned to an analysis on the ways in which stereotypes could influence career choices and ultimately, upward mobility. In comparison, three of the four White groups perceived the only way for Black males to move into the middle or upper class was through sport.

Subtheme-Education as upward mobility. The context for this subtheme is that while sport may play a role for Black male athletes in upward mobility, it was also a way for them to obtain a college degree. An 18-34 year old male explained,

I think there is life after the sport and so that's another thing I thought of because I mean a lot of athletes, some, a lot of us go to college and we're on athletic

scholarships. You go to college and with hopes of going to the NFL or to pro in some sport but now the big thing is what can you do if you don't make it?

An 18-34 year old female discussed the ways in which collegiate athletes take advantage of their athletic scholarships to get an education. An 18-34 year old African American female stated,

I have a bunch of friends that play college sports right now but they're only playing because they want their *degree*. They just couldn't, they couldn't afford it. As soon as they're graduated there like "Forget it. I don't really care if I'm going professional or not, I have something else I want to do with my life."

All four African American groups concluded that education provided a "back up plan" or helped to establish credibility in case of a career ending injury. An older female participant detailed,

Make sure you have a plan, a backup plan if you break your leg or your Achilles is torn and you're not able to play. Move beyond the injury on the field in that particular avenue, there is (sic) still other ways in life that you can make it so you have to have that backup plan.

Embedded in this discussion is the notion that while sport might open the initial door, obtaining a college degree is or should be important to Black males.

To further reinforce the idea that education is important, the older African American male groups also provided examples of family and friends who competed in collegiate as well as professional sport and then pursued other avenues after their athletic careers ended. A 35-55 year old African American male stated,

There's (sic) a lot of successful cats at least when they end their sports career they still have that competitive drive and it goes into business. I've got a cousin that won a national championship, Sugar Bowl with Notre Dame and he's an executive at an internet company in North Carolina now...

The quote suggests that many Black male athletes can have successful careers in business following their playing days.

The 18-34 year old White female group also discussed sport as a way for Black males to get an education,

Yeah they [Black males] can get college educations and stuff because let's face it even now though they all think, the hundred guys for football team you know they're not all them go pro. Without football they might not get the same education.

Responses from the 18-34 year old White female group also reflected the role that stereotypes may play in choosing a path to upward mobility. In this conversation is the idea that while sport may be the sole vehicle for upward mobility for Black males, White males focus on their education. Here is the exchange among participants,

Speaker 4- I think there's more White guys that play in college than there are that play in the NBA. I mean just from like thinking back, obviously I don't have any statistics, in college they [White males] are good at what they do but I think that their number one thing isn't necessarily to play in the NBA or the professional league, whatever they're are going into because they don't think they can so they are going for an education.

Speaker 1- I think people start believing that Black male athletes are like better and stuff I guess so more of them make it maybe or like you said more of them are trying to make it.

Moderator- More Black male athletes are trying to make it to the professional level?

Speaker 1- Professional game, because maybe if you go along with the stereotype that Black male athletes are like not as smart then you would say, “Oh they need to make it in this or else what are they gonna do?” Whereas if you assume that maybe White male athletes, can make it in the business world then they aren’t necessarily...

Speaker 2- They’re not pressured to make it to the league because they can have a different future.

This exchange illustrates the differing perspectives about *paths to upward mobility* for Black males as well as White males. Table 12 illustrates the subthemes and the groups in which they emerged.

Subtheme-Sport as upward mobility. In comparison, the other three White focuses group responses indicated that they perceived sport as the primary way for Black males to achieve upward mobility. A 35-55 year old White female illuminated this theme when she said the following, “I just think it’s more of a prevalence (sic) for Black athletes coming from, because it’s their ticket out for a lot of them. It’s how they get out of the projects.” This quote reflects the common media narrative espousing sport as the sole vehicle for upward mobility for Black male athletes. A younger White male made a similar assumption about black male athletes when he said, “Most of the stories

are of NFL players or NBA [players], they came from nothing and they were the star of their city...” A 35-55 year old White male participant again shared a similar mindset, when he noted that many black male athletes “come from nothing, hellish areas.”

Summary of section two: how color-blind ideology impacts discussions of images of Black male athletes within five categories of representation

Various aspects of color-blind ideology emerged in the focus groups discussions. All four White groups as well as the 35-55 year old Black male group, discussed *sport as racial utopia* including the following subthemes: *sport united people of different racial groups*, *sport opened doors for African Americans*, *race transcendence* and *race relations in sport have progressed but it is not perfect*.

Racism and discrimination against people of color was minimized during several focus group discussions. All four White focus groups asserted that discrimination against White people, *reverse discrimination*, may be more prevalent than discrimination against people of color. While the 35-55 year old White male focus group responses seemed to dismiss media coverage of Black male athletes as having nothing to do with race, ensuring that it was equitable. The older White male group also noted that media makes too big a deal out of the lack of Black males in leadership positions within sport. The 18-34 year old White male group focus group discussion was littered with *semantics* or rhetorical tools that seem like they are saying something positive then in turn end up reinforcing stereotypes. Finally, several groups including the 18-34 year old White female, 18-34 year old White male and 18-34 African American male groups all attributed racism and discrimination to something that primarily occurred in the southern part of the United States.

In addition, all four African American groups discussed the existence of racism and discrimination against African Americans, as these experiences communicated that they are *racial discrimination is ever-present*. In contrast, the White female groups responses indicated that racism/discrimination against African Americans was something unexpected and perhaps unfounded. The older African American groups also discussed the concept that while Black male athletes may dominate certain sports, it does not mean that society has fully accepted them.

Two primary subthemes emerged under the theme *perceptions of color-blindness*. The older White focus groups *idealized color-blindness* as generational, their children are color-blind, and something to strive towards. In contrast, the 18-34 year old White female, 18-34 year old African American and 35-55 year old African American groups, *problematized color-blindness* stating that it dehumanized African American people and essentially that history of race relations in the United States would be too hard to overcome.

Several group responses indicated they had differing views on *paths to upward mobility* for Black males. The African American groups discussed the role education plays in obtaining upward mobility and success. The younger White female group responses seemed to indicate that they think sport helps Black male athletes obtain college degrees. The 18-34 year old White female group discussion also included an analysis of the ways in which stereotypes impact the career choices of both Black and White male athletes. In comparison, the older White female group, older White male group and younger White male group responses suggested that they believed sport was the primary vehicle to escape the “projects.” The next chapter situates the information

from the results section within the literature pertaining to the scholarly assertions:

stereotypes interpreted as reality, conditional acceptance in society, sport as upward mobility and the *myth of meritocracy*, the scholarly literature relevant to color-blind ideology as well as race-based critical theory.

CHAPTER 5:

Discussion

Sufficient research has shown that media outlets have presented Black male athletes in ways that reinforce stereotypes (Goss et al., 2010; Halone & Billings, 2010; Hawkins, 2010a; 2010b; Lewis & Proffitt, 2012; Mastro et al., 2011). Scholars have also argued that these depictions impact audiences in distinct ways, yet few have utilized audiences to examine these claims. The purpose of the study was to contribute to the knowledge base in sport media research by exploring the “goodness of fit.” In other words, examining how audiences interpret media images of Black male athletes within five categories of representation and the ways in which those interpretations align or contradict scholarly assertions.

In terms of “goodness of fit,” the results from the focus group discussions both support and challenge scholarly assertions. The first section examines the results that emerged from the focus groups in light of the scholarly assertions: *stereotypes interpreted as reality, conditional acceptance of Black male athletes, perception of sport as upward mobility* and the *perpetuation of the myth of meritocracy*. Some aspects of color-blind ideology are discussed within the scholarly assertions as they are primarily founded on color-blind ideals. Following the scholarly assertions section, other aspects of color-blind ideology that emerged in the focus group discussions are situated within the literature. Next, the implications of the key findings are discussed. The limitations of the study are discussed following the implications. After the limitations section, future directions for research are discussed. Finally, I provide some concluding remarks.

Stereotypes interpreted as reality

Considering the dearth of sport media audience reception research that exists, it is difficult to make generalizations on the ways in which media narratives have an impact on consumers, especially considering the dynamic construction of race. While previous research from McCarthy et al. (2003) as well as Wilson and Sparks (1996; 2001), illustrated common responses among similar racial groups (e.g. White participants minimized racism, while Black participants challenged existing stereotypes) regarding portrayals of Black male athletes, those results are at least nine years old and potentially outdated. For example, results from a more recent study of media framing of athletes by Seate and colleagues (2010) indicated that White participants might be more aware of stereotypes than in the past. The divergent responses from the 18-34 year old White female group in this study and their self-awareness regarding their own internalized stereotypes supports findings by Seate et al. (2010). This data advances our understanding of audience reception research, particularly how audiences interpret images of Black male athletes within five categories of representation. The following explains how responses from each group may indicate that they have internalized and/or challenged stereotypes of Black male athletes.

Responses from the 35-55 year old White female group, for example, indicated that they appear to have internalized some stereotypes of Black male athletes. Comments pertaining to inability to escape the past, or overcoming things from the past assume that Black male athletes grew up in deviant environments and therefore must escape that or succumb to deviant behavior themselves. In addition, the discussion

pertaining to the *emotionally immature* depiction in which participants deemed Josh Smith “cocky” and “argumentative” illustrates that participants may have internalized stereotypes of Black male athletes.

In comparison, the 35-55 year old African American female group responses contained both stereotypical narratives as well as challenges to those depictions. Similar to the older White female group, the older African American female group expressed the notion that Black male athletes cannot escape the past, “you can take the boy out of the ghetto but can’t take the ghetto out of the boy.” The older African American group responses to the *emotionally immature* image and *exotic savage* were very similar to the older White female group in that they relied on assumptions about the athlete trying to overcome things in his past and generalizations about Black male athlete’s emotional immaturity. At the same time, participants questioned whether or not media coverage perpetuated stereotypes of Black male athletes, pointing out that when White males get arrested they are rarely the focus of media stories.

Although the 35-55 year old White male focus group responses to the *exotic savage*, in discussing the depiction in terms of hard work, does challenge the Black male as natural athlete stereotype, most of their other responses provided support for the assertion that consumers have interpreted stereotypes as reality. For example, the deviant image prompted the *can’t escape the past* narrative. This focused on the idea that the deprived upbringing of Black males leads to deviant behavior. The *Josh Smith is a punk* subtheme also emerged in the older White male group, in that they perceived that there is “more complaining” in basketball, a sport that is also primarily African American.

In contrast, the 35-55 year old African American male group contested almost all stereotypes associated with Black male athletes. They identified the historical basis for the *exotic savage* image, that of hypersexual beast, yet discussed the hard work it takes for Black male athletes to achieve the pinnacle of success. The older African American male participants also discussed the ways in which media portrayals perpetuate dominant narratives pertaining to the supposed natural athleticism of Black male athletes. The discussion of the *emotionally immature* image also challenged that stereotype of Black males, in that they viewed it as colleagues engaging in a conversation, as opposed to a “cocky” athlete arguing with the referee.

In spite of discussing some images in stereotypical terms, the 18-34 year old White female group displayed some self-awareness of their own biases. At several different instances, participants reflected on the depictions and discussed how media portrayals may reinforce stereotypes that the image evoked in their responses. This occurred during the discussions of the *emotionally immature* and *deviant* image as well as in the conversation following the discussion of the pictures. While the younger White female group did seem to touch on certain stereotypes including the natural athlete and *emotionally immature* categories, their reflexivity and recognition of the stereotypes challenges the scholarly assertion that participants passively accept the stereotypes as reality.

Similarly, the 18-34 year old African American female focus group discussion contained elements in which it appeared they had internalized some stereotypes. At the same time, the younger African American female participants presented numerous instances where they identified existing stereotypes and discussed how media portrayals

reinforce those narratives. The discussion of the *highly competent/natural athlete* image stands out in terms of how specifically the participants were able to explain the ways in which announcers routinely comment on the athleticism of Black males and not their effort. On the other hand, the *deviant* and *emotionally immature* depictions seemed to evoke some stereotypical descriptions of Black males. For instance, one 18-34 year old African American female participant's initial reaction to the deviant image was "drugs, sex, or money."

For the most part, the 18-34 year old White male participant responses indicated that they may have interpreted stereotypes as reality. With the exception of the *exotic savage* depiction in which they categorized the athlete as a hard worker, they often relied on stereotypes when discussing the categories of representation. The comments regarding the excessive emotions of Black males, attempting to channel "inner rage," and idea that most Black males get into trouble more than White males, illustrate the internalization of various stereotypes. In fact, during their discussion the younger White male group rarely challenged existing stereotypes. As discussed in the color-blind ideology results section, when they did attempt to challenge stereotypes they actually ended up reinforcing them.

Responses from the 18-34 year old African American male group provided some support for the idea that they may have interpreted some stereotypes as reality while challenging the existence of others. For example, the idea that Black males *can't escape the past* emerged in their focus group discussion of the *deviant* image. In comparison, they discussed the *highly competent/natural athlete* and *exotic savage* image in terms of hard work and effort as opposed to natural athleticism. Along with the

35-55 year old African American male group, they perceived the *emotionally immature* image to be less of an argument and more a discussion within the parameters of the profession.

In sum, the bulk of the research on audience perceptions of Black male athletes utilized segmented focus groups based on race. This paragraph situates the findings within that body of research. Responses from White focus groups often corresponded with stereotypical narratives of Black male athletes which is consistent with results from McCarthy et al. (2003) as well as Wilson and Sparks (1996; 2001). In general, White participant responses indicated that they appeared to have limited contact with African Americans or more specifically Black male athletes. As Hawkins (2010a) has argued when people have little contact with those from other racial groups, media becomes the primary form of “cultural awareness.” If media portrays Black males in ways that reinforce stereotypes, and White focus group participants have few real life interactions with them, then media becomes an important conduit of information. Responses from African American focus group participants were also consistent with previous research (McCarthy et al., 2003; Wilson & Sparks, 1996; 2001) in that African American participants were more likely to interrogate existing stereotypes of Black male athletes.

That being said, some responses diverged from previous research in terms of how racial groups internalized or challenged stereotypical depictions of Black male athletes. For example, the African American focus groups, particularly the 35-55 year old female group were not immune to verbalizing some stereotypical narratives of Black males (*emotionally immature* and *deviant*). In comparison, some of the 18-34

year old White female participant responses challenged said research when they recognized and problematized stereotypical depictions of Black male athletes.

The positive reaction to and subsequent discussion of the *race transcendent* image by African American participants reinforced how images of Black males as criminals or natural athletes are still the norm. African American participants also indicated that few images of successful Black businessmen existed in mainstream media. Additionally, they were outspoken about how more *race transcendent* images or an equivalent was needed to reinforce positive portrayals of Black men in the face of overwhelmingly stereotypical and negative depictions. Their responses echoed what scholars have been asserting for years: that Black males have been overwhelmingly portrayed in ways that reinforce stereotypes and that these portrayals have lasting negative consequences (Goss et al., 2010; Mastro et al., 2011; Mercurio & Filak, 2010).

In several of the groups (35-55 year old White male and female, 18-34 year old White and African American male), participants used the term “educated” to describe the person, Magic Johnson, in the *race transcendent* image. Based on stereotypical associations of Blackness with physicality and Whiteness with intelligence, participant responses indicate that they may have internalized the brawn vs. brain dichotomy and subsequent stereotypes. This begs the question, would participants use the term “educated” to describe an image of a White man in a similar setting?

Conditional acceptance in of Black male athletes in society

Scholars have asserted that the overrepresentation of Black male athletes in media coverage as well as the ways in which their athletic accomplishments are lauded has led to the conditional acceptance of Black male athletes (Hardin et al., 2004; Rada

& Wulfemeyer, 2005). In other words, Black males are admired for their athletic prowess and entertainment value but little else. This is partly because society rarely sees Black men in professions other than sport. In turn, this subsequently reinforces the myth of meritocracy, or a level playing field, which will be discussed in the following subsection. The following reflects the ways in which focus group results related to the scholarly assertion that Black male athletes are conditionally accepted by society.

The older African American groups spoke directly to the idea of *conditional acceptance of Black male athletes* in their responses to the question of whether sport impacted race relations. While acknowledging that sport has played a role in improving race relations, questions remained for the participants as to whether the acceptance of Black male athletes was actually a function of their utility to the organization. Furthermore, the 35-55 year old African American male participants described an additional problem in that society is more willing to accept a Black male athlete than a person who has a “regular” job like an accountant. This extends the concept of conditional acceptance in that it takes into account the role of social capital. Meaning the social capital that Black male athletes hold gives them a slight advantage in being “accepted” over other Black people. The issue being that “acceptance” is still conditional, based on social capital, and reflects underlying and perhaps unacknowledged racism.

The responses by the 18-34 year old White male group equating popularity with acceptance, reflects what Hardin and colleagues referred to as “enlightened racism” (p. 213). Meaning that component of genetic prowess “being athletic, being dominant” is tied to success, with little interrogation of what the disproportionate numbers of Black

male athletes in professional sports might mean. The younger White male group and older White female group also mentioned that success for Black male athletes is confined to the athletic realm as television analysts or coaches. As Wilson and Sparks (2001), asserted the media narrative of Black male as athlete only coupled with the lack analysis by participants, allows the depiction to persist.

In addition, the differing conversations regarding the *race transcendent* image speaks directly to the conditional acceptance assertion. The idea of Black male athletes transcending race is itself an example of the *conditional acceptance of Black male athletes*. The belief that Black males can overcome their race and be viewed as just “athletes” not “Black athletes” is limited to Black males, as White males are hardly ever described as *race transcendent*. Instead, the assumption is White males appeal to everyone regardless of race because Whiteness is normative and viewed as non-threatening.

All groups deemed the *race transcendent* image the least common depiction out of the five categories of representation. Rada and Wulfemeyer (2005) asserted that narrow depictions of Black males as athletes and athletes only, has led to a situation where society has a difficult time accepting them as anything else. The comments from the White focus groups seem to support this statement. For example, in their conversation the older White male participants deemed the image irrelevant. In general, White participant responses indicated that they appeared to have limited contact with African Americans or more specifically Black male athletes. In contrast, the older African American female group discussed the importance of the *race transcendent* image in opening the minds of youth. These comments speak to the impact limited

media portrayals have on individuals. In other words, expanding the depictions of Black males will also help youth realize they can pursue careers in other fields where opportunities may be more plentiful and realistic to achieve.

Perception of sport as upward mobility

This category asserts that sport is a way, often perceived as the only way, in which Black males can climb the socioeconomic hierarchy in the United States. Similarly, the statistical overrepresentation of Black male athletes in professional basketball and football supports the perception that sport is a way out of the “ghetto.” As Lapchick and colleagues (2012) have noted, there are few people of color in leadership positions: coaches, general managers, and owners, within those professional sport leagues. Thus, a glass ceiling exists for Black male athletes that limits their upward mobility, in that they are underrepresented in leadership positions within those sports. Within the focus group discussions, upward mobility for Black male athletes did emerge in varying forms. In sum, since most media stories focus on, as one older White female participant described, “rags to riches” anecdotes, the *sport as upward mobility* narrative is perpetuated. This comment supports claims by scholars that media narratives restrict the ways in which Black males are depicted and present them as poor with sport as their only saving grace (Berry & Smith, 2000; Hawkins, 2010a). Not only is the *sport as upward mobility* myth perpetuated by media, responses indicated that some focus group participants may have internalized it, as references to sport as the “only way out of the projects” emerged specifically in the White female focus groups.

Some of the African American focus groups responses indicated that while sport may open the door, obtaining a college degree is the desired end result. This became

personal for the 18-34 year old African American male participants all of which were current varsity athletes at the time of the focus group interview. The responses from the other African American focus groups also indicated that they did not buy into the myth that sport was the end all be all, in that the 35-55 year old African American female group responses supported that education was a more stable path to upward mobility. The responses from African American participants support Wilson and Sparks (2001) findings in that African American participants recognized the challenges with *sport as upward mobility*.

The 18-34 year old African American groups were primarily composed of varsity college athletes. Thus, their responses pertaining to *paths for upward mobility* are impacted by their own experiences as well as the experiences of their peers. As their responses indicate, sport might help pay for their college education but obtaining a college degree is important because a future as a professional athlete may not be realistic. Similarly, the 35-55 year old African American male group offered examples of former college athletes, college graduates, who have leveraged their education to success outside of sport.

In comparison, the older White female group responses suggested that they had internalized the view that sport was the sole path to upward mobility for Black males. For the 35-55 year old White female group this was predicated on the assumption that most Black males grow up in the “projects.” In comparison, the younger White female group responses indicated that societal stereotypes about Black athleticism and White intelligence, may lead more Black athletes to pursue a career in professional sports while White males instead pursue their college degree.

Perpetuation of the myth of meritocracy

This scholarly assertion encompasses the idea that people of color and White people have an equal opportunity to be successful, success is due to hard work and failure is due to individual deficiencies. In terms of the other three scholarly assertions, the *myth of meritocracy* had the most pronounced responses that differed along racial lines. The following paragraphs situate the results pertaining to this scholarly assertion within the literature.

Since the *myth of meritocracy* is based on color-blind ideology, participant responses related to this assertion will be situated within research by Bonilla-Silva (2010). While none of the eight focus group discussions indicated that participants believed discrimination in American society has ceased altogether, African American responses indicated that people of color face discrimination regularly. In comparison, White focus group participants described discrimination against people of color as waning. White participants also wondered aloud about whether discrimination against White people was actually increasing. Furthermore, results from the focus group discussions indicated that the two White male groups either attempted to minimize the existence of racism and discrimination against Black males. According to Bonilla-Silva (2010), the *reverse discrimination* narrative and the minimization frame stems serves to as a way for Whites to express animosity towards Blacks without seeming racist. These results support previous research by Bonilla-Silva (2010) regarding how perceptions of a “level playing field” in society are very different based on race.

The results also provide insight into an understudied area, how people of color, specifically, African Americans utilize color-blind ideology when discussing Black

male athletes within the five categories of representation. The 35-55 year old African American male group discussion contained some color-blind elements, describing sport as a site of both racial harmony and race transcendence. One participant noted that young people buy NBA player jerseys regardless of race of the athlete. Research by Buffington and Fraley (2011), Griffin and Calafell (2011), Hartmann (2007), and Leonard (2004; 2010) demonstrates the importance and complexity of how color-blind ideology manifests itself in the sporting world but certainly there is room for further research in this area. Subsequently, this component of my dissertation addresses and adds to the scarcity of research pertaining to how color-blind ideology impacts discussions of Black male athletes within five categories of representation audiences, utilizing both White as well as African American participants.

Despite this study being conducted from nine to twelve years after the research on which it was based, results were consistent with previous research by McCarthy and colleagues (2003), and Wilson and Sparks (1996; 2001). African American focus group participants perceived that some level of media bias against Black male athletes still exists. The consistency among responses from Black participants provides insight into a slightly more disconcerting issue pertaining to media narratives of Black male athletes. In essence, the more things change the more they stay the same. Black participants across all four studies were quick to recognize media depictions that reinforced stereotypes. Their responses also indicated that they believe that racism and discrimination are still present in society.

Ideally, the consistency of reactions from Black participants to media portrayals of Black male athletes across thirteen years would be enough to prompt the sport media

industry to make changes in their approach. Unfortunately, four studies are probably not enough. Yet the most recent results from my dissertation can serve as a spark to reinvigorate audience reception research pertaining to Black male athletes in the hopes that by growing the body of knowledge scholars and activists will be able to utilize the results to pressure the sport media industry to re-evaluate their practices.

Impact of color-blind ideology on focus group discussions

Beyond the scholarly assertions, which are founded in tenets of color-blind ideology, other themes in section two warrant initial analysis, particularly the minimization of racism against people of color in comparison to the inflation of discrimination against Whites. According to Bonilla-Silva (2010), this allows White people to maintain a liberal façade while conveying subtle messages that reinforce dominant racial narratives of White superiority and Black inferiority. Thus, the ideas that White male athletes are discriminated against or that the media is perpetuating an unjust narrative of Black male underrepresentation in leadership positions serve to reinforce the idea that presently, discrimination affects White males more than people of color. In addition, any attempt to further “level the playing field,” like the Rooney Rule in the NFL, only serves to put Whites at a disadvantage. Essentially, this perspective ignores the fact that in the NFL, NBA, NCAA football, White males maintain a stronghold in powerful positions while people of color are severely underrepresented in positions of leadership.

Furthermore, color-blind ideology can be found in the ways in which White people, use what Bonilla-Silva (2010) called “rhetorical shields” to either deny the existence of a race-based problem, or attribute the issue to everything and anything but

race. These “rhetorical shields” allow White participants to soften statements about race, meaning that although they are not making blatantly racist statements, their comments are still infused with racial ideology. In the case of the 35-55 year old White participants “demographics” of the sport contributed to the media coverage of black male athlete arrests. The “I’m not saying, I’m just saying” rhetorical tool allowed younger White male participants to reproduce a negative stereotype while claiming that they did not feel that way but other people do. This tool allows them to perpetuate racial stereotypes while not taking ownership for them. In addition, the older White male group references to tennis and swimming indicate to some extent that they were cognizant of racial demographics and relative media coverage of those sports. In other words, the older White male participants know the NFL and NBA consist of more African American athletes than tennis and swimming. Yet they downplayed media coverage of arrests and passed it off as having little to do with race.

The comments from African American participants indicate that color-blind frames had a minimal impact on their discussions of the presence or absence of racial discrimination. In other words, their lived experiences are littered with examples of race-based discrimination. In comparison, White focus groups, either provided no examples of discrimination against people of color (White male groups), provided an example then minimized it (35-55 year old White female) and or provided an example that indicated that they had not been aware of the impact of racial abuse (18-34 year old White females). These anecdotes and lack thereof from the White participants are also important in that they demonstrate how White participants reacted when racial discrimination was either perceived or witnessed. The dearth of anecdotes by White

participants may be indicative of their relative social segregation from people of color which can reinforce racial and subsequent color-blind ideology. The lack of anecdotes also illuminate how, by virtue of skin color, discrimination does not permeate the lives of White participants like it does the lives of African American participants.

This idea that racism can be located and contained in one section of the country fits in with color-blind ideology from one respect in that Whites do not want to perceive that they are racist. By locating the root of racism in the South, especially for those who do not live there, reinforces the perception that they, their friends and family are inclusive and therefore not racist. This dichotomy ends up reinforcing misinformation about how/where racism exists and persists, and as a result makes it difficult for people to combat because they do not believe their actions or institutions located in their communities are capable of reproducing racism.

Collectively, more race-based differences than similarities emerged on how color-blind ideology impacted discussions of images of Black male athletes. African American groups were much more willing to directly address the issues of racism/discrimination while White focus group participants often either dismissed racism or attributed negative portrayals to everything but racism. The 18-34 year old White female group however, proved to be somewhat of an outlier as they provided a different analysis of topics than the other White focus groups. Responses from the 35-55 year old African American male group in some instances, sport as racial utopia, also proved to be somewhat of a racial outlier as well. The next section delves deeper into the implications of the findings.

Implications of Key Findings

The findings contribute to our understanding of audience reception research, particularly how audiences interpret and discuss media images of Black male athletes in five categories of representation in several ways. Situated knowledge (age, race, gender) plays an important role in how audiences perceive media images of Black male athletes. Based on the responses from participants, however, race seemed to play the most significant role in terms of how focus groups interpreted and discussed the images of Black male athletes. These findings also confirm previous research that indicated the significant role media plays in depicting Black males in ways that reinforces stereotypes. As the results illustrate, media portrayals seemed to have impacted participant perceptions of Black male athletes. In light of previous research, the following paragraphs describe several key contributions of this work.

The first implication is related to the importance of education for White participants on the impact of racial micro-aggressions and color-blind ideology. According to Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, and Esquilin (2007), “Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). Similar to other theories pertaining to race, race-based critical theory interrogates how actions or inaction among the dominant racial group contribute to societal inequity (Hartman & Bell, 2010). According to race-based critical theory, “race is a defining and foundational feature of society” (Hartmann & Bell, 2010, p. 262) Since the election of President Obama in 2008, the term “post-racial America” has become ubiquitous and obscured the role race plays in every facet of the United States, including housing, the

criminal justice system, and education among others (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011). Responses from White participants, with the exception of the 18-34 year old female group reinforced the “post-racial America” concept.

In comparison to the other White focus groups, there were clear differences between the perceptions of the 18-34 year old White female group regarding racial stereotypes and color-blind ideology. Perhaps the primary reason behind the divergent responses from the 18-34 year old White female group was that three of them completed a course centered on racial micro-aggressions and color-blind ideology. The 18-34 year old White female group’s understanding of the detrimental affects of ignoring the race of a person of color stemmed directly from the course they took as they mentioned learning about racial micro-aggressions and color-blindness during the discussion. This supports research showing that Whites are often unaware of the “power we hold until it is pointed out to us” (Katz, 2003, p. ix) as well as research that indicates racial inter-group dialogues can facilitate “interest in bridging differences” (Nagda & Zuniga, 2011). While the 18-34 year old White female group was certainly not immune to internalizing stereotypes, they were much more willing than other White participants to question the validity the dominant narratives pertaining to Black males including natural athleticism and deviance.

For White participants, who as research indicates are more likely to believe that racism and discrimination have decreased or ceased completely (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Buffington & Fraley, 2011; Gallagher, 2003; Wise 2009; 2010), education on racial micro-aggressions, color-blind ideology as well as White privilege is important. For example, college students who enrolled in courses centered on racism, racial prejudice

and White privilege had greater awareness that racism existed, and felt more comfortable discussing issues pertaining to racism by the end of the course (Case, 2007; Hogan & Mallott, 2005). A study by Kernahan and Davis (2010), illustrated that one year following the completion of a “diversity” course, that while the initial impact of the course waned, students still interacted more with people of other races than in the past and were more at ease discussing racial issues than they were prior to taking the course. The discussion among the 18-34 year old White female group is consistent with research on the impact of courses focused on racism and racial prejudice. Thus indicating that in this study, education on racism, and micro-aggressions appeared to increase awareness and sensitivity to the ways in which media portrays Black male athletes as well as their own self awareness regarding how media depictions might impact their perceptions of Black male athletes.

A second theoretical implication emerged among White focus groups regarding how a race-based critical theoretical framework can be used to analyze “common sense” notions of Black athletic superiority. As Hartmann and Bell (2010) noted, there are “underlying cultural beliefs” that inform how people talk about race and racism. Responses from participants indicated several “underlying cultural beliefs” regarding Black male athletes including: assumed genetic superiority, overrepresentation in the NFL/NBA and the collegiate equivalent, a culture of poverty in the Black community which is fueled by the overwhelming media coverage of those sports. Again, the culture of poverty narrative means that it is assumed that problems in the African American community stem from their perceived lack of morals/values, laziness and family structure (single mothers/absentee fathers) (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). The stereotype of the

naturally athletic Black male athlete has become embedded in society through historical narratives stressing difference, media portrayals that reinforce stereotypes as well as overrepresentation in sports that dominate media coverage (Leonard, 2006; Lumpkin, 2009; Mercurio & Filak, 2010). Thus, it becomes “common sense” for Whites who have little contact with African Americans that Black male athletes gravitate to and subsequently dominate football and basketball. Since the responses of White participants linked Black athletic superiority and overrepresentation in sports, they rarely questioned the validity of that relationship. By not questioning the “common sense” information, their silence allows such stereotypes to persist perhaps without White participants even realizing it (Hartmann & Bell, 2010).

Additionally, the culture of poverty narrative emerged in both White and African American focus groups. This is the idea that most if not all Black male athletes grew up in impoverished and immoral environments. As indicated by some responses, media coverage of Black male athletes reinforces this depiction by continually focusing on “rags to riches” stories of Black males. As a result, some participants reiterated this through the *sport as upward mobility* narrative as well as the *can't escape the past* theme. Bonilla-Silva (2010) also attributes the culture of poverty narrative appearing in both White and African American responses as an indication of the pervasiveness of color-blind ideology. Again when the culture of poverty narrative goes unquestioned, it may become the basis for how society perceives Black male athletes.

A third finding supports the importance of depicting Black males as leaders, specifically in non-sport settings to African Americans. Consistent with previous research (McCarthy et al., 2003; Wilson & Sparks, 1996), African American

participants were well aware of how media reinforces stereotypes pertaining to Black male athletes (naturally athletic, lacking leadership skills, emotionally immature, deviant). Subsequently, the African American discussions of the *race transcendent* image provided insight into the importance of depicting Black males as leaders as opposed to images that reinforce stereotypes. The *race transcendent* image and surprisingly the *emotionally immature* image prompted positive reactions during the discussions, pertaining to ways in which Black males can achieve success and leadership both in and out of sport. Consistent with conclusions drawn by Berry and Smith (2000) regarding how media can “constrain the visibility” of success by Black men who are not athletes, all four African American groups noted that the image of a successful businessman was rare in mainstream media, yet was needed to reinforce the idea that careers other than sport, exist for Black males.

The need for visible positive role models is significant due to the ways in which the White dominated media industry can contribute to reinforcing the racial status quo that promotes an absence of non-sport role models. White responses indicated that they viewed success primarily as athletic dominance with little challenge to the naturally athletic stereotype. For White groups, the image of Magic Johnson did not spurn a conversation on the need for more images of Black male athletes in leadership positions. Instead it prompted a discussion of how the image was “unrelated to sport” and “not news.” As Hartmann and Bell (2010) explained, cultural mechanisms (White dominated media) play an important role in contemporary racial formations.

Research by Lapchick and colleagues (2011) illustrates the extent to which White people dominate sport media departments in the newspaper industry. Lapchick

and colleagues (2011) examined 320 newspapers in the United states, illustrated that in 2010, 97% of sports editors, 85% of assistant sports editors, 86% of columnists, 86% of reporters and 90% of copy editors and designers were White. Within the realm of newspapers, this research makes it clear that Whites dominate positions of power. The responses of the White participants (dominant group) suggest that they perceive images of successful Black men as unimportant thus failing to challenge mainstream media depictions. By minimizing the significance of the image, White participants end up supporting both the prevalence of media portrayals, as well as an industry dominated by White people that continues to portray Black male athletes in ways that reinforce stereotypes. As Katz (2003) stated,

Whites created racism through the establishment of policies and practice that serve to benefit us and continue to oppress people of color. It is perpetuated by Whites through our conscious or unconscious support of a culture and institutions that are founded on racist policies and practices (p. 11).

The reproduction of the status quo pertaining to media depictions of Black male athletes and White journalists' failure to publish images other than those that highlight athleticism, illuminates how cultural mechanisms (media portrayals and audience passivity) can potentially fuel inequity.

A fourth contribution is based on the complex role sport plays in race relations. As previously discussed, overt discrimination and segregation have been outlawed yet still persist in society. While media outlets have often described sport as a site of racial harmony, scholars have been reticent to support that hypothesis. Instead, many scholars have argued that sport is a microcosm of society in which racism, sexism, classism and

homophobia are reproduced in varying capacities (Edwards, 2010; Harrison, 2000; Hartmann, 2002; Kane & Maxwell, 2011). Consistent with mass media narratives however, the theme of sport as site of unity emerged in the White focus group as well as the 35-55 year old African American male group discussions. Their responses exposed how for White participants in this study, sport still serves as the lone place where people of different races interact. This is a significant point because it implies that for these participants, segregation persists to the extent that they rarely interact with people of color besides in the realm of sport. For example, the 18-34 year old White female group and 35-55 year old African American male group relayed personal stories of relationships with White and Black teammates. Their anecdotes illustrated the importance of those relationships and the role that sport played in fostering them. For the 35-55 year old White female group and 18-34 year old White male group, their responses indicate that movies such as *Remember the Titans* and *The Blind Side* perpetuate the idea that sport brings people together.

While glamorizing sport as an exemplar of racial harmony it obscures the point that society is still divided along inequitable racial lines. Instead of interrogating why the rest of society is still segregated, White participants in particular, can point to sport as an example of racial equality, which draws attention away from the role White people in positions of power play in maintaining the present racial order (Griffin, 2012). While recognizing that the interracial friendships forged through sport are very real and important to this group of participants, it is important to question media narratives that perpetuate the sport as utopia narrative, keeping in mind sport as and will continue to be “contested terrain” (Hartmann, 2002).

A fifth point pertains to the normalization of Whiteness and the “myth of White monoculture” (McIntosh, 2009, p. 3). While White participant responses demonstrate norms of White privilege, some stories relayed by African American participants reflect to some extent the internalization and confirmation of White normativity and monoculture as well. McIntosh (2009) explains that White monoculture assumes there is one culture in the United States, everyone experiences this monoculture similarly and that people of color will adapt to White norms. Similarly, Bell and Hartmann (2007) also suggest that White normativity stems not only from the individual but also because Whites “occupy an unquestioned and unexamined place of esteem, power, and privilege (p. 907). For White participants, the normalization of Whiteness can be analyzed through stories that exposed their limited contact with Black people, noting that African Americans have a “different culture” than Whites, which is perceived as worse, as well as an inability to identify discrimination.

The impact of the normalization of Whiteness is significant for African American participants. For example, despite her undergraduate status at a major university, an 18-34 year old African American female explained that people often perceive her to be uneducated because the words/terms she uses do not conform to norms of language (White language). The extent to the pervasiveness of the ways in which Whiteness has been normalized can also be seen in the story relayed by an older African American male participant. When talking about how societal perceptions toward Black male athletes are changing, he discussed how the Black male athlete would be seen as something more than “running stats” to the White college student following personal interactions between them. The stories relayed by these participants

reinforce the normalization of Whiteness and White monoculture that in turn denigrates anything both subtly and overtly, that does not conform to White norms. This point is consistent with a primary component of race-based critical theory that emphasizes how individual social interactions contribute that often go unnoticed contribute to inequity (Hartmann & Bell, 2010). Ultimately, while responses indicate an internalization of White normativity, an underlying commonality of these stories is the onus is placed on Black people to be accepted by Whites, fit into White culture and not the other way around. This corresponds to previous research highlighting the White racial frame where it is assumed people of color will assimilate into White culture (Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Bonilla-Silva, 2010).

A final implication to consider is related to the potential for lost income among sport media organizations. There is a growing population of people of color in the U.S. with “economic clout” who are avid consumers of sport (Armstrong, 2008, p. 218). As discussed earlier, African American participants were quite aware of the ways in which sport media depicts Black male athletes and how those portrayals often reinforce stereotypes. As Eagleman (2012) pointed out, if sport media outlets continue to depict people of color in ways that reinforce stereotypes a backlash could occur in the form of boycotting publications. This in turn could directly affect the revenue generation of organizations. Since many sport media organizations are focused on their profit margin, the potential to lose revenue by alienating a growing consumer base might be something for these organizations to take more seriously.

Limitations

First, the relatively small number of participants from each segment is a methodological concern because their responses may not be representative of other people of their age, race and gender. Second, only participants who identified as White and African American were included as sources of information about how audiences interpret images of Black male athletes. Since many people belonging to different racial groups consume sport media, it is important learn how responses from people of different racial backgrounds compare to responses from White and African American participants. Also, there is increasing difficulty in conceptualizing focus groups based on the Black-White racial binary, as there is a growing population of people who identify as bi- or multi-racial, including two participants in the 18-34 year old African American female group and one participant in the 18-34 African American male group. Third, since some participants were quick to mention that discrimination and racism are more prevalent in the South, it is important to explore if geographical differences play a role in prevailing attitudes on race. To accomplish this, data needs to be gathered from a broader geographic area outside of the Midwest. Finally, the images utilized provided a limited range of representations of Black male athletes in primarily two sports, football and basketball. Some focus group participants indicated that they watch other sports more often, golf or tennis for example, so utilizing images of Black male athletes in other sports both team and individual might be worth exploring.

Future Directions

Goss and colleagues (2010), Kane and Maxwell (2011), Mercurio and Filak (2010), Rada and Wulfemeyer (2005) all have called for the continuing assessment of fan interpretations of sport media. Most media studies have focused on depictions of

Black male athletes have also discussed archetypes related to the ways in which White male athletes have been portrayed (hard working, unathletic/smart, possessing leadership skills) as these portrayals have been dichotomous in nature (Bishop, 2009; Mercurio & Filak, 2010; Rada, 1996). While scholars have long been researching media depictions of Black male athletes and more recently utilizing audience reception research, few studies have utilized audiences to interrogate the ways in which White male athletes are perceived. Exploring how audiences perceive images/narratives of White male athletes would give us a more complete understanding of this complex racial binary.

A longitudinal study by Messner and Cooky (2012) illustrated that sport media spends 72% of its coverage on the “big three” sports (baseball, football and basketball). Black male athletes are overrepresented in two (football and basketball) sports that receive a majority of the coverage. Some participants noted that the NBA and NFL athletes for instance, conjured up negative thoughts for them. The amount of coverage related to the NFL and NBA obscures the fact that Black male athletes do participate in a range of other sports including baseball, tennis, golf, and soccer. Subsequently, the question arises how would participants interpret images of a Black golfer? Future studies could employ images of Black male athletes in sports such as golf, tennis or soccer to compare and contrast the responses from previous research.

Despite women comprising a rapidly growing segment of the sport media audience they have rarely been integrated into sport media audience reception research. While Kane and Maxwell (2011), Bruce (1998), Wheaton and Beal (2003), incorporated women, their discussions focused on female athletes and women’s sports. Since this

was one of the few studies pertaining to Black male athletes that included women as participants, it is imperative that future studies continue to assess their relationship with sport media depictions that reinforce stereotypes. Specifically, to create a greater understanding of the role intersectionality (race, gender, class) may play in interpreting media narratives.

This study only utilized participants who identified as African American and White who presently reside in the Midwest. Sport fans comprise many racial groups residing all over the country. Since race relations are dynamic and are subject to change among various groups, it is important to assess how people outside the Black-White binary as well as people who identify as bi- or multi-racial interpret images of Black male athletes. Also noting if or how geographic regions may influence their interpretations.

Conclusion

This study was designed to extend the knowledge base about how audiences interpret and discuss media images of Black male athletes within the five categories of representation and how those fit with scholarly assertions. The findings illustrate the nuances and complexities of audience reception research and challenge the antiquated notion of the “passive audience.” The 18-34 year old African American female and 35-55 year old African American male and female groups were the most vocal in terms of recognizing and challenging stereotypical depictions of Black male athletes. On the other hand, other groups (older White groups) presented little challenge to stereotypical narratives. Subsequently, these factors also support scholars’ assertions that the same

text can produce multiple readings (Davis & Michelle, 2011; Michelle, 2007; Suckfull & Scharkow, 2009).

A secondary purpose was to also explore the impact that color-blind ideology had on focus group discussions. The results indicate that color-blind ideology was more likely to be present in White focus group discussions regarding the images as well as racial discrimination and race relations in society. In contrast, African American discussions were less likely to be infused with tenets of color-blind ideology. There were some outliers, as the 18-34 year old White female group displayed the least amount of color-blind frames while the 35-55 year old male group did perceive sport as a racial utopia. According to Bonilla-Silva (2010), since color-blind ideology is the dominant way society makes understands race, its centrality will affect Whites as well as people of color. The results indicate support for that thesis. There remains a need to call attention to how color-blind ideology permeates discourses pertaining to racialized media depictions.

Ultimately, the results illustrate the complexity of audience reception research. Despite groups sharing some commonalities such as age, race or gender their readings of the texts did not always necessarily conform to the set of shared demographics just mentioned. Furthermore, few studies pertaining to how audiences negotiate depictions of Black male athletes have included women, let alone segmented focus groups based on age, race and gender. In order to fully comprehend the nuances of how audiences interpret images of Black male athletes as well as how their analysis correlates with those of sport media scholars, future research is needed.

Table 1

Categories/themes and subthemes pertaining to focus group discussions about media images of Black male athletes

Categories/themes	Subthemes
Highly competent/natural athlete	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Athleticism as positive representation • Acknowledging hard work
Exotic savage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strength and hard work • Deeper meaning • Typical physique for Black male athletes
Deviant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can't escape the past • Disproportionate media coverage of Black male arrests • Deviance and distrust
Emotionally immature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Josh Smith is a punk • Josh Smith is a professional • Leadership
Race transcendent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncommon yet familiar • Uncommon and unfamiliar • "Needed" image versus "not news" • Exceptionalism

Table 2

Highly competent/natural athlete theme/subthemes and group in which subtheme emerged

Theme/Subthemes	Group in which subtheme emerged
Highly competent/natural athlete Athleticism as positive representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White female • 18-34 year old White male • 35-55 year old White female • 35-55 year old African American female • 35-55 year old White male
Acknowledging hard work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18- 34 year old African American female • 18- 34 year old African American male • 35-55 year old African American male

Table 3

Exotic savage theme/subthemes and group in which subtheme emerged

Theme/subthemes	Group in which subtheme emerged
Exotic savage	
Strength and hard work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White male • 18- 34 year old African American male • 35-55 year old White male • 35-55 year old African American male
Deeper meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White male • 18-34 year old African American female • 35-55 year old White female • 35-55 year old African American female
Typical physique for Black male athletes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White female

Table 4

Deviant theme/subthemes and group in which subtheme emerged

Theme/subthemes	Group in which subtheme emerged
Deviant Can't escape the past	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old African American male • 35-55 year old White female • 35-55 year old African American female • 35-55 year old White male
Disproportionate media coverage of Black male arrests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old African American male • 18-34 year old White female • 35-55 year old African American male • 35-55 year old African American female
Deviance and distrust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old African American female

Table 5

Emotionally immature theme/subthemes and group in which subtheme emerged

Theme/subthemes	Group in which subtheme emerged
Emotionally immature	
Josh Smith is a punk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White female • 18-34 year old White male • 35-55 year old White female • 35-55 year old White male • 35-55 year old African American female
Josh Smith is a professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old African American female • 18-34 year old African American male • 35-55 year old African American male
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old year old African American male • 18-34 year old African American female

Table 6

Race transcendent theme/subthemes and group in which subtheme emerged

Theme/subthemes	Group in which subtheme emerged
Race transcendent	
Uncommon yet familiar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old African American male • 18-34 year old White male • 35-55 year old African American male
Uncommon and unfamiliar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White female • 35-55 year old White female
“Needed” versus “not news”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old African American female • 35-55 year old African American female • 35-55 year old White male
Exceptionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White males

Table 7

Themes and subthemes pertaining to the impact of color-blind ideology on focus group discussions

Themes	Subthemes
Sport as racial utopia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sport unites racial groups • Sport opens doors for Black males • Race transcendence • Progress but not perfect
Minimizing racism/discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reverse discrimination • Equitable media coverage? • Semantics • Racism occurs primarily in the South
Differing realities and perceptions of racial discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racism/discrimination is ever-present • Racism/discrimination is unexpected • Utility versus acceptance
Perceptions of color-blindness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idealizing color-blindness • Problematizing color-blindness
Paths to upward mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education as upward mobility • Sport as upward mobility

Table 8

Sport as racial utopia and group in which subthemes emerged

Themes/subthemes	Groups in which subthemes emerged
Sport as racial utopia	
Sport unites racial groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White female • 18-34 year old White male • 35-55 year old White female • 35-55 year old African American male
Sport opens doors for Black males	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White female • 35-55 year old White male
Race transcendence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White male • 35-55 year old White female • 35-55 year old African American male
Progress but not perfect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White male • 35-55 year old White female • 35-55 year old White male • 35-55 year old African American male

Table 9

Minimizing racism and group in which subthemes emerged

Themes/subthemes	Groups in which subthemes emerged
Minimizing racism	
Reverse discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White female • 18-34 year old White Male • 35-55 year old White female • 35-55 year old White male
Equitable media coverage?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35-55 year old White male
Semantics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White male
Racism occurs primarily in the South	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White female • 18-34 year old White Male • 18-34 year old African American Male

Table 10

Differing realities and perceptions of racial discrimination and group in which subthemes emerged

Themes/subthemes	Groups in which subthemes emerged
<p>Differing realities and perceptions of racial discrimination</p> <p>Racism/discrimination is ever-present</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old African American male • 18-34 year old African American female • 35-55 year old African American male • 35-55 year old African American female
<p>Racism/discrimination is unexpected</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White female • 35-55 year old White female
<p>Utility versus acceptance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35-55 year old African American female • 35-55 year old African American male

Table 11

Perceptions of color-blindness and group in which subthemes emerged

Themes/subthemes	Groups in which subthemes emerged
Perceptions of color-blindness	
Idealizing color-blindness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35-55 year old White female • 35-55 year old White male
Problematizing color-blindness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White female • 18-34 year old African American female • 35-55 year old African American female

Table 12

Paths to upward mobility and group in which subthemes emerged

Themes/subthemes	Groups in which subthemes emerged
Paths to upward mobility	
Education as upward mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old African American male • 18-34 year old African American female • 18-34 year old White female • 35-55 year old African American female • 35-55 year old African American male
Sport as upward mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-34 year old White male • 35-55 year old White female • 35-55 year old White male

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Appendix A

Media Images Reflecting the Categories of Representation

Highly competent/natural athlete



Exotic savage



Deviant



Emotionally immature



Race transcendent



Appendix B

Research Protocol and Interview Schedule

Research Protocol

Section 1-Introduction

- Introduce researchers
- Review general purpose of study (to understand how audiences interpret media images of Black male athletes)
- Participants complete consent and demographic forms

Viewing the Image Exemplars

Section 2-Free Association

- Categories of representation shown to participants in randomly selected order via PowerPoint.
- Participants will be asked privately to free associate and respond in open-ended written responses regarding what their initial reactions are to the image.
- Participants will be reminded in each phase there are no right or wrong answers.
- Remind participants not to spend too much time thinking about answer, write the first thing that comes to mind
- Let them know they will turn in the written responses
- No probes or discussion in this phase

Section 3-Group Discussion

- Participants will be shown each exemplar again
- “Around the Horn” - Each participant share their responses to Section 2 aloud to the group
- The moderator will probe the participants for more detailed explanations of their responses
- Subsequently, moderator will then ask participants to talk freely about why they responded the way they did to each image
- After discussing each image, open-ended questions are asked of participants
- See interview schedule for complete list of questions and probes

Section 4-Debrief

- Moderator summarizes discussion asks group for clarification
- Group is asked if they have anything else to share about images of African American male athletes
- Group is asked if they have any questions or concerns
- Thank participants for contributing to study

DISSERTATION: GOODNESS OF FIT**GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE****Section I-Introduction**

Welcome, and thank you for agreeing to meet with us to discuss images of Black male athletes. My name is Emily and I will be asking you the questions. If at any point you are unclear about a question or wish to discontinue the interview, please let me know. The information you share with me will be kept confidential. I appreciate your willingness to share your time and thoughts.

To help with our discussion, let's lay some ground rules. I ask that you allow each individual to speak and share his/her opinions without interruption. All members of the group will be afforded the same opportunity to speak. There may be times during the discussion where I feel we need to move on to a new topic. I ask that you move with me to this new topic. Please be aware that I will only be moving on for the sake of time, not because I feel that what you are saying is unimportant. To ensure accuracy when transcribing your comments, this focus group will be audiotaped.

Before we begin, we have a consent form for you to sign as well as a demographic information form. Please read it over and sign it when you are ready.

Are there any questions before we start? If there are no questions, I would like to begin.

START AUDIO AND VIDEO TAPE

SECTION II – FREE ASSOCIATION

I am going to show you 5 images of Black male athletes. After you view each image, privately, write the first thoughts that come to mind. Eventually I would like you to share these thoughts with the rest of the group but for now just write them down. At the end of our discussion I will collect what you have written down.

SECTION III- GROUP DISCUSSION

Now that we have viewed and responded individually, we are going to discuss what you wrote...[Show the images in random order cycle. Move on to the next image when participants have saturated their responses.]

MAIN QUESTIONS:

1. What did you write down for this picture? [Ask questions 1-4 for each image.]
 - a. Why do you think you wrote this down?
2. What about this image sticks out to you?
 - a. What qualities or characteristics do you associate with the athlete in this image?
3. Have you seen images like these before?
 - a. Probe: If so, where?
 - b. How prevalent do you think this image is?
4. How does the image represent Black male athletes?
 - a. How accurately do these images reflect Black male athletes in American culture?
 - b. Are there other images that would be more accurate?
 - c. If so, what would those look like?
5. What kind of pictures have you typically seen about Black male athletes? [Ask questions 5-8 after discussing each image individually]
 - a. How do the pictures represent them?
 - b. What do you think the perception is of Black male athletes?
 - c. What is your perception?
6. How might these portrayals have an impact on Black male athletes?
 - a. Would you talk a little bit more about the consequences or stereotypes?
7. How do you think these depictions have an impact on your views of Black male athletes?
8. Do you think sport has impacted race relations in the United States?
 - a. If so how?

- b. Do you think there is an absence of discrimination in sport?
- c. What about the rest of society?
- d. What do you think about the concept of being “color-blind?”

Section IV- Debrief

I just have two more questions for you, but first I will summarize a few of the key points that I've heard you say today. This will give you the opportunity to let me know if what I summarized is what you were telling me.

[SUMMARY]

Wrap-Up Questions:

1. Is there anything else that you would like to share about the images we viewed or the quote we discussed that we haven't talked about today?
2. Do you have any questions that you would like to ask us?

END AUDIO TAPE

Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions and be a part of this study. This information will help inform people about how audiences interpret media images. So, thank you again for helping us with this study. If you have nothing further to add, then this concludes our group discussion. Thanks again!

Focus Group Questionnaire
Phase One

Image # _____

Write down privately (meaning do not share with the group) 2-3 words (or more if you like) that pop into your head when looking at this image.

Image # _____

Write down privately (meaning do not share with the group) 2-3 words (or more if you like) that pop into your head when looking at this image.

Image # _____

Write down privately (meaning do not share with the group) 2-3 words (or more if you like) that pop into your head when looking at this image.

Image # _____

Write down privately (meaning do not share with the group) 2-3 words (or more if you like) that pop into your head when looking at this image.

Image # _____

Write down privately (meaning do not share with the group) 2-3 words (or more if you like) that pop into your head when looking at this image.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Your gender: Male Female
2. Your current age: _____
3. Your current relationship status:
 - Single
 - Married
 - Civil Union
 - Committed Relationship
 - Other (specify) _____
4. Do you have children? YES NO
 - a. If YES: # of boys _____ # of girls _____
5. Your racial/ethnic identification:
 - White/Caucasian
 - Native American/Alaskan Native
 - African American
 - Asian-American/Pacific Islander
 - Hispanic
 - Other (specify) _____
6. Highest level of education you have completed:
 - Some high school
 - Some college/Trade school
 - Bachelor's degree (B.A., B.S)
 - Graduate degree (Masters, PhD, J.D, J.M)
 - Other (specify) _____
 - High school/GED
 - Associates degree
 - Some graduate credit
7. What was your college/university major/specialization?
8. How many courses have you had in sociology (please provide a number)?

Appendix C
Human Subjects Protocol

12/01/2011

Emily J Houghton
1900 University Avenue SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

RE: "How audiences interpret images of Black male athletes"
IRB Code Number: 1111P06303

Dear Dr. Houghton:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) received your response to its stipulations. Since this information satisfies the federal criteria for approval at 45CFR46.111 and the requirements set by the IRB, final approval for the project is noted in our files. Upon receipt of this letter, you may begin your research.

IRB approval of this study includes the recruitment letter received November 1, 2011, and the consent form and advertising text, both received November 22, 2011.

The IRB would like to stress that subjects who go through the consent process are considered enrolled participants and are counted toward the total number of subjects, even if they have no further participation in the study. Please keep this in mind when calculating the number of subjects you request. This study is currently approved for 48 subjects. If you desire an increase in the number of approved subjects, you will need to make a formal request to the IRB.

For your records and for grant certification purposes, the approval date for the referenced project is November 16, 2011 and the Assurance of Compliance number is FWA00000312 (Fairview Health Systems Research FWA00000325, Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare FWA00004003). Research projects are subject to continuing review and renewal; approval will expire one year from that date. You will receive a report form two months before the expiration date. If you would like us to send certification of approval to a funding agency, please tell us the name and address of your contact person at the agency.

As Principal Investigator of this project, you are required by federal regulations to inform the IRB of any proposed changes in your research that will affect human subjects. Changes should not be initiated until written IRB approval is received. Unanticipated problems or serious unexpected adverse events should be reported to the IRB as they occur.

The IRB wishes you success with this research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at 612-626-5654.

Sincerely,

Christina Dobrovolny, CIP
Research Compliance Supervisor
CD/ks

CC: Mary Jo Kane

Recruitment Text

subject line for email: Media representation study

Hello!

I trust your school year has started well.

I'm writing to ask for your help in a research project that looks at media representations of Black male athletes. This is my dissertation which aims to find out how people perceive images of Black male athletes. Participants will view media images of Black male athletes and discuss their perceptions of the images with four to six other people in a focus group.

If you would like to help, what I need from you is simple.

First, respond to this email and tell me you are willing to participate. The focus group session will take place on the campus of the University of Minnesota. Your participation will take approximately one (1) hour and you will be provided with food and beverages during the session.

I would like to start conducting these focus group sessions during the first two weeks of December, so if you would like to participate please respond as soon as possible. Upon confirmation of your participation I will provide you with more details regarding location, time, etc.

Thank you in advance for your willingness to assist me with this study.

Emily Houghton, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate
School of Kinesiology
University of Minnesota

CONSENT FORM
HOUGHTON DISSERTATION

You are invited to be in a research study of examining the how audiences interpret images of Black male athletes. You were selected as a possible participant because you responded to the email or advertisement describing the study. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Emily Houghton, PhD student in the Kinesiology Department.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to explore media representations of Black male athletes and the ways in which people discuss them.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to participate in a focus group. The focus group will be audiotaped.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The risks include a possible breach of confidentiality and the possibility that subjects may experience discomfort talking about potentially sensitive issues.

There is no direct benefit for participating in this study.

Compensation:

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality:

The interview will be audiotaped for the purpose of capturing the discussion. The primary and co-investigators will have primary access to the data.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time with out affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researchers conducting this study are: Emily Houghton. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Emily at 20 Cooke Hall, 603-491-7986, houg0131@umn.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____