

BREAKING INTO THE BOYS' CLUB:  
AN ANALYSIS OF THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS  
ENTERING THE SPORTS JOURNALISM ARENA

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Master of Arts

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School,  
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BREAKING INTO THE BOYS' CLUB:  
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ENTERING THE SPORTS JOURNALISM ARENA

presented by Emma Moloney,  
a candidate for the degree of master of arts,  
and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## DEDICATION

I would not be where I am today without the unwavering support of my family and friends who stood by me through each and every phase of this thesis. You have encouraged me daily to become the best version of myself, and I can't thank you enough for all you have done. I feel incredibly lucky to have your love and support, and I am forever grateful for the ways you've made me believe I can do anything I set my mind to.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	v
ABSTRACT .....	vi
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	5
Acker’s Theory of Gendered Organizations	
Background on Gender and Sports Journalism	
The Heterosexual Matrix	
Four Challenges Faced by Women Sports Journalists	
Explicit and Implicit Obstacles Encountered by Women Sports Journalists	
3. RESEARCH QUESTION .....	18
4. METHODS .....	18
Sample	
5. FINDINGS .....	24
Construction of Divisions Along Lines of Gender	
Construction of Symbols and Images that Explain, Express, Reinforce, or	
Oppose Divisions	
Interactions Between Women and Men that Enact Dominance and Submission	
Production of Gendered Components of Individual Identity	

Implication of Gender in the Fundamental, Ongoing Processes of Creating  
Social Structure  
Outside of the Gendered Organization  
Summary

6. DISCUSSION ..... 38

REFERENCES ..... 45

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. Interviewee Demographics .....	20



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ABSTRACT

Historically, women sports journalists encounter frequent instances of objectification, harassment, and discrimination from sources, colleagues, and higher ups (Hardin & Shain, 2005), and women in the current sports journalism industry remain greatly outnumbered compared to their counterparts who are men (Lapchick et al., 2021). This study examines the challenges new women sports journalists face during their first few years in the sports journalism industry in a current, postfeminist context utilizing Joan Acker's theory of gendered organizations to analyze gendered practices within the field. Challenges experienced by new women sports journalists found in this research suggest ongoing explicit and implicit gender-based harassment, discrimination, and obstacles to their professional endeavors; however, these challenges do not always persist in the same form as those seen by women in the past and are more indicative of a current, postfeminist sports journalism field. The positive professional experiences of new women sports journalists indicate growing acceptance of the presence and upward mobility of women in sports journalism, as well as the breaking down of previous traditional assumptions of male superiority and female inferiority within the industry.

## Introduction

Lisa Olson, a *Boston Herald* sports journalist, entered the locker room of the New England Patriots football team to conduct interviews for a professional assignment. Instead, she was sexually harassed as various players exposed their genitals to her while asking “Do you want to take a bite out of this?” and shouting ‘Did she look, did she look?’ ‘Get her to look;’ ‘That’s what she wants;’ ‘Is she looking?’ ‘Make her look’” (Disch & Kane, 1996, p. 278). Debates ensued when news of the incident broke, with one side claiming issues of gender difference and sexual tension to defend the athletes — in other words, boys will be boys — and the other arguing that women sports journalists have the same right as their counterparts who are men to do their job (Disch & Kane, 1996). The publicity and commentary surrounding the incident effectively ended Olson’s professional career in the United States, and her harassers went unpunished and celebrated. This occurred in September 1990.

Julie DiCaro, a freelance sports journalist and former criminal attorney, tried to report on the sexual assault investigation against Chicago Blackhawks athlete Patrick Kane. While reporting, she received a barrage of rape and death threats via Twitter and was sent numerous other vicious tweets, including “a really horrific picture of a woman who was naked and bound and gagged and was being held by a group of men. Her throat was slit, and they were holding her over a bucket of blood” (Martin, 2021, para. 8). To publicly highlight this harassment, DiCaro participated in Just Not Sports’ #MoreThanMean campaign in which DiCaro, alongside *ESPN*’s Sarah Spain, was filmed as randomly selected men were asked to sit across from the women and read derogatory, abusive tweets directed at DiCaro and Spain’s Twitter accounts to their faces (Antunovic, 2019). This occurred in April 2016.

Over 40 years ago, *Sports Illustrated* sports journalist Melissa Ludtke took Major League Baseball and MLB commissioner Bowie Kuhn to court in a civil suit, claiming a violation of the 14th Amendment had occurred when Ludtke was barred from entering the locker room of the New York Yankees baseball team following a game because she was a woman (McInerney, 2018). Although Ludtke's triumph in this 1978 case should have served as a landmark victory for expanding the rights of women sports journalists across the country, the more recent experiences of women such as Olson, DiCaro, and many more demonstrate just how little has changed. While an increasing number of women have entered the field in the years since Ludtke's lawsuit, literature on the relationship between gender and sports journalism (Antunovic, 2019; Claringbould et al., 2004; Disch & Kane, 1996; Gunther et al., 2011; Hardin & Shain, 2006; Hardin et al., 2008; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009; Laucella et al., 2017; Master & Mitchell, 2017; Musto et al., 2017; North, 2016; Sargent & Toro, 2006; Schoch, 2013; Whiteside & Hardin, 2011) has demonstrated time and time again that the field remains a hostile arena for women sports journalists to navigate.

In 2001, an informal survey of 50 newspaper sports departments reported women in only 13% of employee positions, with these positions mainly consisting of lower-ranking roles such as entry-level reporters. That same year showed women comprising a measly 11% of employees in sports journalism departments across the country, with the Association for Women in Sports Media estimating the number of women working in sports journalism to be around 500 at the time (Hardin & Shain, 2005). As of 2014, 90.1% of editors, 90.2% of assistant editors, 87.6% of columnists, 87.4% of reporters, and 80.8% of copy editors and designers in the sports journalism industry were men (Musto et al., 2017). Years later, the sports journalism industry, compared to other areas of journalism, still displays some of the lowest rates of gender representation

(Claringbould et al., 2004; Lapchick et al., 2021). A 2021 report conducted by the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport found that only 16.7% of editors, 14.4% of reporters, 24.7% of copy editors, 17.8% of columnists, and 36.3% of upper management roles for Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE) sports journalism newspapers and websites were occupied by women (Lapchick et al., 2021). Interviews with women sports journalists describe a field in which women are rare in number and generally, if present at all, occupy lower positions on the sports desk, also reporting shorter career lengths than their counterparts who are men (Hardin & Shain, 2005). Harassment and discrimination are expected from sources, coworkers, and higher ups, creating an environment that is desegregated but not integrated when it comes to gender (Hardin & Shain, 2005).

Regarding the online public threats and harassment she receives every day, DiCaro states that those comments are “the kind of stuff that happens when you work in this industry. It’s wading through 50 feet of garbage every day to try to do your job” (Martin, 2021, para. 8). Women sports journalists such as Amy Trask, Sarah Thomas, Jen Walter, Kathryn Smith, and Katie Sowers, for example, have become familiar names in various positions of power around the NFL in recent years (Martin, 2021), yet the ignorance and sexism displayed by Carolina Panthers quarterback Cam Newton in an interview with a woman sports journalist when he stated it was “funny” to hear “a female talk about routes” (Armour, 2017) indicates an all-too-common perspective on women in the sports journalism industry. However, it is unclear just how prevalent discriminatory practices are in today’s sports journalism industry and in what ways these practices appear.

While research on the ever-changing, tumultuous relationship between gender and sports journalism is fairly extensive (Antunovic, 2019; Claringbould et al., 2004; Disch & Kane, 1996;

Gunther et al., 2011; Hardin & Shain, 2006; Hardin et al., 2008; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009; Laucella et al., 2017; Master & Mitchell, 2017; Musto et al., 2017; North, 2016; Sargent & Toro, 2006; Schoch, 2013; Whiteside & Hardin, 2011), it is in need of an update. Within the past year, women have risen to recognition in many high-profile positions with professional sports teams. Becky Hammon became the head coach of the WNBA's Las Vegas Aces, Kim Ng became the first woman general manager in the MLB for the Miami Marlins, and Jennifer King became the first black woman game-day coach in the NFL for the Washington Football Team (Davis, 2022). In sports journalism specifically, *ESPN* held its first all-women broadcast for a regular season MLB game in September 2021 (Pallotta, 2021) and its first all-women broadcast for an NBA game in February 2022 (Williams, 2022). It is possible these developments are indicative of a current sports journalism industry that is changing, normalizing and adapting to the presence of women sports journalists. Conversely, it is equally as possible that the discriminatory practices captured in decades of research on the relationship between gender and sports journalism persist, just in ways unknown and overshadowed by recent — though infrequent — instances of the advancement of women in the field.

This study explores these questions.

A qualitative approach consisting of 13 semi-structured interviews is used to investigate obstacles encountered by women sports journalists upon entering the field. The purpose of this research is to examine the challenges new women sports journalists face during their first few years in the sports journalism industry in a current, postfeminist context. For the purposes of this research, Joan Acker's theory of gendered organizations provides the foundation for analyzing gendered practices in sports journalism and serves as the framework for the coding of collected interview data. This research also considers how sexist behaviors in sports journalism persist and

operate amid the common public acceptance of postfeminism, a current feminist mindset that assigns individual responsibility for challenging discriminatory practices and belief in the absence of disparities, barriers, and inequality between genders (Antunovic, 2019).

## **Literature Review**

### **Acker's Theory of Gendered Organizations**

Joan Acker's theory of gendered organizations (Acker, 1990) was created as a challenge to the commonly held assumption that organizational structures are gender neutral. Observing an absence of literature about organizations and organizational theory as they relate to gender, Acker identified a need for a feminist theory connecting the two subjects. This need arose for five reasons: One, gender segregation of work is created through organizational practices; two, income and status inequality between genders is created through organizational practices; three, organizations invent and reproduce widely disseminated cultural images of gender; four, aspects of gender are products of organizational processes and pressures; and five, feminists seek to make large-scale organizations more democratic and supportive (Acker, 1990).

Acker's theory of gendered organizations identifies and describes a gendered organization as one in which "advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (Acker, 1990, p. 146). The theory states that the gendering of organizations occurs through five interacting processes: One, the construction of divisions along lines of gender; two, the construction of symbols and images that explain, express, reinforce, or oppose those divisions; three, the interactions between women and men that enact dominance and submission; four, the production of gendered components of individual identity;

and five, the implication of gender in the fundamental, ongoing processes of creating a social structure (Acker, 1990).

Numerous scholars investigating the relationship between gender and sports journalism have used Acker's theory of gendered organizations (Claringbould et al., 2004; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009; Whiteside & Hardin, 2011). A series of interviews conducted by Claringbould, Knoppers, and Elling (2004) exploring gender exclusion in the journalism industry found that women remain extremely outnumbered in the sports journalism field, specifically when compared to the overall journalism industry, indicating this imbalance may be due to the sports journalism field itself, rather than being representative of journalism industry demographics as a whole. Traditionally, sports journalists justified and challenged the existence of this lack of gender representation through the identified processes of the division of labor; the creation of images, symbols, and metaphors; interactions; and identity work, utilizing four of five total processes theorized by Acker (Claringbould et al., 2004). Examples of these processes in sports journalism include disproportionate numbers of women pigeonholed into low-ranking newsroom positions; reinforcement of the stereotype that women in sports are less knowledgeable than their counterparts who are men; men sports journalists speaking over or down to their colleagues who are women; and women sports journalists mimicking the behaviors of men sports journalists to receive more favorable assignments, respectively.

A series of interviews conducted by Hardin and Whiteside (2009) later used Acker's work to argue the sports journalism newsroom can be interpreted as an environment that values traditionally masculine qualities like toughness, aggression, and having a thick skin, and one that uses gender as a framework for determining hiring, positioning, and hierarchies. Crucial to understanding how women sports journalists are perceived in the gendered newsroom is an

understanding of tokenism, where women are seen as members of a category rather than professional individuals (Hardin & Whiteside, 2009), and of the glass ceiling, where women can only advance to a certain position in their profession regardless of professional skill because of their gender (Whiteside & Hardin, 2011).

### **Background on Gender and Sports Journalism**

Many women in sports journalism do not maintain a close relationship with feminism and feminist positions. In fact, many women sports journalists attempt to maintain femininity in their professional roles and tend to avoid associations with feminism (Hardin & Shain, 2006). Using the example of *Washington Post* sports columnist Sally Jenkins, Master and Mitchell (2017) suggest that many current women sports journalists align closely with the values of the third and fourth waves of feminism, which focus on issues relating to the general empowerment and inclusion of women such as body positivity, gender equality, and intersectionality. The complexities of the current sports journalism industry when it comes to issues of gender representation also indicate how women sports journalists do not all hold the same viewpoints or have the same professional experiences when it comes to obstacles and overall professional success, or the lack thereof. One constant, however, is the feminist lens through which women sports journalists are publicly observed.

Historically, women sports journalists have been underrepresented in all areas of the sports journalism industry and have frequently reported discrimination, harassment, inequalities, and isolation (Antunovic, 2019; Claringbould et al., 2004; Disch & Kane, 1996; Gunther et al., 2011; Hardin & Shain, 2006; Hardin et al., 2008; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009; Laucella et al., 2017; Musto et al., 2017; North, 2016; Sargent & Toro, 2006; Schoch, 2013; Whiteside & Hardin, 2011). Recently online spaces, specifically those on social media, have been seen as a



place where marginalized people can challenge dominating groups, but the various platforms also provide opportunity for further reinforcement of current power imbalances and exclusionary practices (Antunovic, 2019). Many women journalists report frequent gendered harassment in online spaces categorized by instances of misogynistic remarks, inappropriate requests, sexist stereotypes, and even threats of physical or sexual violence that disrupt routine audience engagement practices and reframe journalistic criticism as misogynistic attacks (Chen et al., 2020). This phenomenon creates a tension for women journalists who wish to engage with audiences on increasingly popular online spaces, but risk encountering unwelcome responses and gendered harassment whenever they choose to do so (Chen et al., 2020).

One of the reasons for a delayed social and institutional response in combating online harassment of women sports journalists, an all-too-common phenomenon faced by women in the industry, is the acceptance of a postfeminist media landscape in which women sports journalists are portrayed as autonomous individuals free from gender inequality who are now responsible for combating harassment on their own (Antunovic, 2019). In 2003, an analysis of public opinion data at the time conducted by Hall and Rodriguez failed to support the media-generated postfeminist claims of decreasing support for the women's movement due to increasing antifeminist sentiment, belief in the irrelevancy of the movement, and the adoption of a "no, but ..." version of feminism. However, the researchers added in their analysis that "the mere existence of a postfeminist perspective in public discourse dramatically alters the social landscape in which discussions about and actions to improve the status of women occur" (Hall & Rodriguez, 2003, p. 885), and that the continued emphasis of postfeminist sensibilities in the media "may create a future reality in which collective struggle is deemed unnecessary" (Hall & Rodriguez, 2003, p. 899). More recent research regarding the influence of postfeminism on the

sports journalism industry (Antunovic, 2019) indicates a confirmation of Hall and Rodriguez's prediction. Antunovic (2019) describes the current postfeminist suggestion of the absence of gender disparities and barriers, an assumption that hinders progress toward achieving gender equality within the sports journalism industry. Surface-level gender inclusion and celebrated gains made by women sports journalists — however uncommon they may be — embed postfeminist sensibilities in the sports journalism industry that create and reinforce the assumption that there is no gender adversity present in the field. Additionally, this suggests that any challenges encountered by women sports journalists must be combated individually and occur because of external factors separate from fundamental gender inequality within the sports journalism industry as a whole. The ongoing widespread public acceptance of this postfeminist ethos perpetuated by the current media landscape leads to the expectation that women, including women sports journalists, must “reinvent themselves in order to adapt to the contemporary sexist environment” (Antunovic, 2019, p. 432).

### **The Heterosexual Matrix**

When it comes to exploring the complex interactions between gender and sports journalism, scholars have investigated numerous facets of the relationship over the past 25 years. Many of the findings can be explained by one of the earlier phenomenon found to connect the two, the heterosexual matrix. Coined by Judith Butler (1990), the term applies to a situation in which women sports journalists operating in a man-dominated field, surrounded by a man-dominated environment, are seen as a threat to the traditional power dynamic, gender binary, and gender oppressions (Disch & Kane, 1996). The presence of the woman sports journalist is considered an intrusion on gender certainties, gender order, and binary sexual difference, and she must therefore be made to feel unwelcome in the industry in any way possible to restore what are

believed to be proper gender relations (Disch & Kane, 1996). The heterosexual matrix posits that the woman sports journalist, if she makes it into the industry, is granted the power to enter traditionally man-dominated spaces, critically assess what she sees, and report to the public both her observations and the responses of the sources she interviews. Athletes, executives, and other sources who are men will often act with hostility toward her, celebrate the exclusion of women in athletic spaces such as locker rooms and sporting events, and will engage in sexual harassment and intimidation tactics to restore the traditional gender hierarchy (Disch & Kane, 1996).

Over a decade after the term was coined, researchers began to apply the heterosexual matrix to Acker's theory of gendered organizations and the idea of a postfeminist society. A series of interviews with men and women sports journalists conducted by Claringbould, Knoppers, and Elling (2004) to explore gender exclusion in sports journalism is a prime example. These scholars found that women remain extremely outnumbered in sports journalism when compared against the overall journalism industry. Explanations for this include exclusion from professional networks, family responsibilities, and harassment as a result of the heterosexual matrix. This causes imbalances in coverage as well, though many sports journalists claim the opposite, with women being overlooked as interviewees and when talking about those affected by certain events (Claringbould et al., 2004). A position of idealized neutrality is assumed by most men sports journalists, indicative of a postfeminist era, in which it is believed that equal opportunity in the industry is present for women. In actuality, anyone who is not a man sports journalist is typically unable to occupy positions of power, is considered to be less knowledgeable, is subject to a macho culture that reinforces an expectation of conformity and is overall believed to be influenced by their own gender while conducting journalistic work (Claringbould et al., 2008).

### **Four Challenges Faced by Women Sports Journalists**

Hardin, a leading scholar exploring the relationship between gender and sports journalism, has described many of the obstacles women sports journalists face while working in the industry. One challenge is the woman sports journalist's fragmented personal identity, where the socialized woman sports journalist must figure out how to balance the role of the outsider, as a woman, and the role of the insider, as a journalist, in sports journalism (Hardin & Shain, 2006). Hardin and Shain argue that the "objectivity" valued in journalism is really masculine in nature, as understandings of the term align with traditionally masculine qualities like detachment and independence, along with many other journalistic values. Due to this, many women journalists struggle to maintain femininity, but avoid associations with feminism, while also meeting the standards of professionalism designed to favor men journalists. Newsrooms are often authoritative in nature so this, paired with the assumed incompatibility of femininity and journalism, encourages women to adopt common masculine characteristics — to a perceived "acceptable" extent — in their professional endeavors to succeed (Hardin & Shain, 2006).

A second challenge is that of the revolving door for women in sports journalism, a phenomenon in which women sports journalists remain in the field for only a short time before leaving for varying reasons (Hardin & Shain, 2008). While investigating the revolving door Hardin, Shain, and Shultz-Poniatowski (2008) interviewed women sports journalists about their self-perceptions. The interviews yielded three major themes. One, the interviewees believed that being a woman in sports journalism was not a barrier but an unfair advantage, allowing them to stand out from their colleagues. This oftentimes led to good relationships with counterparts who are men, more vocal career support from family and friends, and increased in-depth interviews from sources who were willing to open up more to a woman sports journalist. Two, the

interviewees accepted that the sports journalism field was man-dominated and that they were occupying the role of outsiders. This created an interesting sort of cognitive dissonance in which the interviewees believed they had an advantage in obtaining their jobs because they were women, but then felt their gender hindered them when performing their job in terms of being perceived as not knowledgeable about sports and tolerating the man-dominated environment. Then three, arguably the most significant from this study, the interviewees felt that attempting to maintain a work and family balance would eventually alter or end a career in sports journalism. The interviewees agreed that it was natural for the pursuit of starting a family to eventually end their careers in the sports journalism industry, with many feeling that the two lifestyles were simply not compatible or feasible at all (Hardin et al., 2008).

A third challenge is that of tokenism for women sports journalists in newsrooms. Women sports journalists occupy token status and maintain a revolving door in sports journalism in which as some women enter, many leave, and progress toward gender equality becomes stagnant (Hardin & Whiteside, 2009). Once again, Acker's theory of gendered organizations applies. The newsroom can be interpreted as an environment that values traditionally masculine qualities and uses gender as a framework for determining hiring, positioning, and hierarchies. Crucial to understanding how women sports journalists are perceived in the newsroom is an understanding of tokenism, where women are seen as members of a category rather than as professionals. Tokenism can cause individuals to exhibit decreased organizational attachment and increased anxiety, role ambiguity, and the belief that they are unfit for their profession, leading individuals to overachieve, turn increased visibility into a professional advantage, or look to socially assimilate into the non-token group (Hardin & Whiteside, 2009). Token women journalists often differ from their counterparts who are men in the way they blindly accept the ideal-worker norm,

meaning a journalist who is objective, indifferent, dispassionate, and always available (Hardin & Whiteside, 2009), as well as how they face incompatible demands when attempting to balance work and family life, justify “necessary sacrifices,” minimize their feminine gender identities, and strategically utilize their gender when necessary (Hardin & Whiteside, 2009).

A final challenge is that of the glass ceiling for women in sports journalism, including public relations. Whiteside and Hardin (2011) provide a prime case study for exploring this phenomenon. The sports world, especially sports journalism, values traits typically associated with masculinity, such as “physicality and unrestrained competition” (Whiteside & Hardin, 2011, p. 211), and automatically assumes authority by men. This causes disparities between genders in the sports industry for both women sports journalists and women sports information directors (SIDs) in sports public relations, though this disparity is so heavily engrained that many dismiss discrimination as routine and look for other explanations (Whiteside & Hardin, 2011). Much like in sports journalism, many women SIDs obtain entry-level roles based on praised feminine traits, yet these same traits get them barred from managerial positions. What makes sports public relations unique from the rest of the industry is that even though women make up a majority of this particular area of sports journalism, previous research analyzed by Whiteside and Hardin (2011) showed that the minoritized men still receive better pay, more favorable professional conditions, and increased leadership roles, a perfect example of a glass ceiling industry in which women can only advance to a certain position, regardless of professional skill, due to their gender. This glass ceiling is maintained in part by the idea of the gendered workplace, and women faced with the glass ceiling oftentimes cope through negotiated resignation, a series of strategies used by women to reduce the cognitive dissonance that comes with knowingly working in a profession with a glass ceiling (Whiteside & Hardin, 2011).

## **Explicit and Implicit Obstacles Encountered by Women Sports Journalists**

Research from the past decade only builds on the findings of earlier scholars, with many tending to investigate how women in sports journalism interact with sources (Schoch, 2013), the prevalence of both explicit and implicit forms of discrimination and harassment toward women sports journalists (Gunther et al., 2011; Musto et al., 2017; North, 2016; Sargent & Toro, 2006), and the intricacies of hiring practices for women in sports journalism (Laucella et al., 2017). While many studies examine the challenges of vertical and horizontal integration of women sports journalists, Schoch (2013) focuses on the way women sports journalists' gender affects their work in the field, specifically their interactions with sources who are men. Schoch (2013) found that sources who are men buy in to one of the main stereotypes surrounding women — that they are sexual objects, weak, motherly, or “one of the boys” — and the women sports journalists then voluntarily use these stereotypes to their advantage. Because women are seen as outsiders in the sports journalism industry, many sources who are men feel threatened by their professional presence and react to this tension through methods of harassment and discrimination (Schoch, 2013). Nevertheless, women sports journalists often report being a woman as an advantage when it comes to gaining access to sources and collecting higher quality information from sources. These women look to get away from the “groupie cliché” and have to find different ways to connect with athletes than their counterparts who are men, as relying on a fanatical or analytical obsession with sports knowledge is not a strategy typically employed by women in the sports world (Schoch, 2013). With the constant feeling that sources are questioning their competence and are intolerant of error, women sports journalists still choose not to adopt the strategies of their counterparts who are men and instead work to use femininity to their

advantage by turning these associated stereotypes into a productive way to gain source information (Schoch, 2013).

As mentioned, however, many individuals in the sports journalism industry, especially men, tend to react to the presence of women sports journalists by means of discrimination and harassment. Sexual harassment thrives in environments that support hegemonic masculinity, and the man-dominated newsroom that seeks to disempower and marginalize women is no exception (North, 2016). In observing women journalists across numerous areas of journalism, North (2016) found that experiencing sexual harassment in the newsroom can diminish women journalists' confidence and position them as unequal members of the professional environment. This harassment is especially problematic when combined with the other discriminatory practices women journalists face, such as a "macho" culture, a lack of schedule flexibility, a lack of promotion availability, and disproportionate assignments to less popular areas of coverage (North, 2016). Women in subordinate newsroom positions are more commonly the targets of sexual harassment, tend to not report sexual harassment because they find it "trivial" or "futile" to do so, understand that sexual harassment is about a power dynamic, and believe it is detrimental for their careers to do anything but tolerate sexual harassment (North, 2016). When looking at this through a postfeminist lens, the imagined "ideal female journalist" becomes one who is successful by being thick-skinned, able to tolerate the newsroom's masculine culture, and unbothered or unfazed by sexual harassment (North, 2016).

While sexual harassment is mostly explicit in nature, many women sports journalists also face covert forms of newsroom discrimination. Examples include using bland coverage of women athletes to indirectly render their accomplishments as unimpressive and uninteresting, coverage that is typically assigned to women sports journalists, effectively putting the onus of



success on the individual women athletes and reinforcing gender hierarchies within sport while avoiding charges of direct sexism (Musto et al., 2017). Coined “gender-bland sexism” by Musto, Cooky, and Messner (2017) following a longitudinal analysis of televised coverage of women’s sports, this form of coverage lacks the production values and techniques, descriptive language, and attentive compliments that are typical of men’s sports coverage. This now goes hand-in-hand with the lessened, but still present, practices of imbalanced amounts of coverage, more visually exciting coverage of men, and the sexualization of women in sports, all of which reflect how women in sports are still not treated synonymously nor symmetrically and apply not only to the coverage of women athletes, but to women sports journalists as well (Musto et al., 2017).

Many practices unconsciously reinforce gender boundaries within the sports journalism industry and obscure ongoing gender inequality to create a false impression of neutrality and equal opportunity in many of the man-dominated, man-controlled environments women are starting to make their way into. This includes the hiring practices for sports journalists (Laucella et al., 2017). Through the surveying of 128 sports editors about gender-related issues relating to hiring and coverage, Laucella, Hardin, Bien-Aime, and Antunovic (2017) found that the idea of associating sport and masculinity is mirrored in the composition of sports newsrooms, where women sports journalists are outnumbered, rarely promoted, assigned unpopular beats (a.k.a. women’s sports), faced with sexual harassment, and overall give up more than they get. One of the biggest factors contributing to gender discrimination against women sports journalists and in the coverage of women athletes is not the common excuse of a “lack of public interest,” but rather partly because of the overall lack of women higher ups in the sports journalism industry (Laucella et al., 2017). The majority of current men sports editors work as gatekeepers who tend to assign higher importance to hiring and coverage patterns that are reflective of their own

identities, shaping the sports industry to be less inclusive toward women or the coverage of women's sports and reinforcing historical gender disparities (Laucella et al., 2017). The glass ceiling, tokenism, the gendered workplace theory, and homologous reproduction — in which higher ups make hiring decisions that preserve their own image — are more than present in sports journalism, supported by findings in which men sports journalism higher ups assumed a low level of women readership and a limited interest in women's sports by the overall readership, yet generally estimated acceptable levels of coverage of women's sports within their newsrooms (Laucella et al., 2017). Many higher ups responded positively when asked about Title IX, but were then less consistent when asked if women's sports coverage should increase and were divided when asked about ethical obligations to hire women and to cover women's sports, though they consistently reported lacking women in supervisory positions (Laucella et al., 2017).

Another obstacle facing women sports journalists is the struggle to be perceived as credible. Early research conducted on the perceptions of credibility by gender in sports journalism considered variables such as attractiveness and assumed knowledge to investigate impressions about credibility (Sargent & Toro, 2006). What makes the sports journalism field, and sport in general, unique is that it is one of the few institutions where biological gender differences interact with social and cultural gender expectations, making sport one of the most influential perpetuators of the ideas of the superiority of men and the inferiority of women (Sargent & Toro, 2006). Sargent and Toro found that sports journalists who are considered to be more attractive are overall considered more credible than their less attractive counterparts. Because of this, assumed gender stereotypes in sports journalism explain why many women sports journalists are perceived to be less credible than their counterparts who are men and successful based on appearance rather than true merit, indicating how “even the most attractive

and most knowledgeable woman sportscaster can't overcome the stereotype of another pretty face who cannot talk sports. Her sex prevents her from being judged as credible as even the least attractive and least knowledgeable man sportscaster" (Sargent & Toro, 2006, abstract).

Later research on the perceptions of credibility between genders in sports journalism yielded fewer concrete results, indicating the potential for reduced gender biases in the industry (Gunther et al., 2011). Survey respondents displayed little-to-no evidence of active or latent sexism and prejudice toward women in sports journalism; however, qualitative interview responses from this same study contradicted the survey findings, citing examples of cynicism in seven interviewees who agreed to further study participation and personal testimonies from three individuals regarding instances of sexism while working in the sports journalism industry.

### **Research Question**

The purpose of this study is to examine the obstacles new women sports journalists encounter during their first few years of entering the sports journalism industry in a current, postfeminist context. Do practices in the sports journalism industry still indicate a gendered organization? The research question that guides this thesis is:

- RQ1: What are the challenges new women sports journalists face during their first few years in the sports journalism field?

### **Methods**

To investigate the challenges new women sports journalists face during their first few years of entering the sports journalism field, a qualitative interview approach is used.

This qualitative method uses a phenomenological research design in which participants describe their lived experiences relating to a phenomenon — being a new woman sports journalist — to the researcher, who then describes the experiences of all participants in a

culmination of the shared testimonies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Questions used to elicit responses and interview data from participants were limited and open ended so as to encourage participants to speak freely and in depth about their experiences. As phenomenology traditionally involves the use of three to ten participants, a goal of 12-15 interviewees was more than appropriate for this method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and this study reached conceptual saturation at 13 participants. This method is based in a constructivist worldview in which “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 7). This worldview relies heavily on the testimonies of participants, and questions are left general and broad so participants can construct meanings for their experiences through interactions with others and the historical and cultural norms present in participants’ lives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This research also incorporates a feminist approach to the selected qualitative method, as demonstrated by Hardin, Shain, and Shultz-Poniatowski (2008), in which the relationship between knowledge production and the personal values of the researcher was acknowledged during researcher reflection.

The semi-structured interview method is frequently utilized in qualitative research investigating the relationship between gender and sports journalism (Claringbould et al., 2004; Hardin & Shain, 2006; Hardin et al. 2008; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009; Schoch, 2013). This area of study, and this research in particular, focuses on using the testimonies of women sports journalists to summarize, explore, and associate meaning with the experiences of women in the sports journalism field. For example, Hardin and Shain (2006) conducted focus groups with 20 experienced women sports journalists to investigate the tensions many women in sports journalism face while balancing conflicting identities in a man-dominated field. Similarly, Hardin, Shain, and Shultz-Poniatowski (2008) utilized interviews with 10 women sports

journalists to discuss the opportunities and barriers these women experienced. Claringbould, Knoppers, and Elling (2004) used this method to speak with 15 experienced men and women sports journalists and editors about the construction of gender in the sports journalism field as these processes relate to Joan Acker's theory of gendered organizations (Acker, 1990). As this research investigates the challenges new women sports journalists face during their first few years of entering the current sports journalism field utilizing Joan Acker's theory of gendered organizations as well, a qualitative, phenomenological method of using a series of semi-structured interviews to capture the experiences of these women was the most appropriate method to explore this research topic.

### **Sample**

This approach consists of a series of 13 semi-structured interviews conducted with a racially diverse group of women, who, at the time of the interviews, have worked three years or less in sports journalism. The specification of three years or less is in place because women sports journalists working in entry-level positions are more likely to experience gender discrimination during their first few years in sports journalism. These women are also more likely to be aware of discriminatory practices, as continued experience in the field often leads some women to become accustomed to and unnoticing of gender discrimination. After obtaining IRB approval, these interviews were conducted over the phone at varying times and dates agreed upon by the participants and the researcher. These interviews were conducted between August and September 2022 and required the use of a notebook and Otter.ai recording and transcription software already possessed by the researcher. Interviewees participated based on their own interest in the research and willingness to be interviewed, rather than for compensation, and were

offered the deidentification of any mentioned personal information as well as anonymity through the random assignment of pseudonyms.

**Table 1**

*Interviewee Demographics*

Interviewee	<i>Gender Identity</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Time in Industry</i>
Lynn	Woman	African American	21	6 Months
Tessa	Woman	White	22	1 Year
Kristen	Woman	Asian American	23	10 Months
Shae	Woman	African American	24	2 Years
Sadie	Woman	White	24	2 Years
Reagan	Woman	White	22	4 Months
Mia	Woman	White	23	1.5 Years
Lydia	Woman	White	22	4 Months
Maddie	Woman	White	25	2 Years
Hannah	Woman	White	24	2.5 Years
Sophia	Woman	White	24	2 Years
Alex	Non-Binary	White/Middle Eastern	24	2 Years
Leah	Woman	African American	29	3 Years

During the application of this method, interviewees were selected using previous networking connections made through personal participation in the sports journalism field. In

addition to a criterion sampling strategy (years of experience, gender identity, sports journalism focus), this research also employed a snowball sampling strategy to pursue any recommended connections who wished to participate suggested by initial interviewees. Additionally, former connections from previous membership in the Association for Women in Sports Media were contacted to find potential interviewees. Two former connections participated as interviewees, and one of these two participants provided an additional contact for a third interviewee. No specific selections were made based on journalistic medium, and women with experience working in print, broadcast television, radio broadcast, and other areas of sports journalism were included. During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked a set of 10 predetermined, open-ended questions regarding their experiences during their first few years in the sports journalism field. Questions included topics such as encountered gender-based challenges and advantages perceived by participants. Interviewees were generally asked the same set of questions across all 13 interviews; however, specific follow-up questions based on interviewee answers were used to elaborate on and clarify responses as each interview progressed. There were no set time constraints for interview length; however, all interviews took between 18 to 48 minutes and came in at 27.17 minutes on average. Interviews were fully recorded and transcribed using a carefully reviewed, reliable transcription software, Otter.ai, and additional notes regarding interviewee comments of significance were taken by hand during the interview. All transcripts produced by the Otter.ai software were then reviewed while listening to the recorded interview audio, and any grammatical, spelling, or content errors generated by the software were corrected by the researcher to produce the final transcripts used for analysis.

Once all 13 interviews were completed and transcribed, all transcripts were once again read thoroughly with notes being taken to achieve a feel for the interview data as a whole. The

interview transcriptions then individually underwent extensive coding through the use of the researcher's own processes. Inductive coding was initially used to identify common themes, and subsequent evidence corroborating these themes, across all 13 interviews by using strategies such as listing topics, clustering similar topics, and organizing topics under larger themes. These larger themes included separating the professional experiences described by interviewees as negative from those described as positive, and the listing and clustering of more detailed topics occurred based on similarities among identified positive and negative interviewee responses. Broadly defined, negative experiences were those that challenged or obstructed the inclusion and professional performance of women in sports journalism, whereas positive experiences were those that supported or furthered the inclusion and professional performance of women in sports journalism. Examples of topics used included mentioned statistics on workplace gender representation, anecdotes regarding online interactions, and the admittance of internal emotions like anxiety and a lack of confidence. Relationships between topics were recorded and organized within the two larger themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Following this, the identified common themes and topics were recoded and assigned to one of five interacting processes described in Joan Acker's theory of gendered organizations: the construction of divisions along lines of gender; the construction of symbols and images that explain, express, reinforce, or oppose those divisions; the interactions between women and men that enact dominance and submission; the production of gendered components of individual identity; and the implication of gender in the fundamental, ongoing processes of creating a social structure (Acker, 1990). Any identified topics that contradicted these processes or were considered to be outliers were also recorded separately. If a theme did happen to fit more than one of Acker's processes, the theme was assigned to the process it best overall illustrated. The final, coded interview data and



research methods were then examined for their limitations, researcher reflexivity, validity, and reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) before further analysis and discussion was conducted.

Qualitative validity, the process of conducting accuracy checks of interview data by utilizing certain procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), was accomplished through the use of the following strategies: triangulating interview data by using an examination of evidence from all participant interviews to create a justification for created themes; acknowledging any researcher biases present; and including interview data that is discrepant or an outlier to any identified themes. Collected data was reviewed extensively as a whole across all 13 interviews to ensure created themes were justified in their creation, and any data that was considered an outlier was not ignored but was instead noted and used to further analysis and discussion. Also, careful introspection was used when participants relayed similar experiences to those encountered by the researcher to make certain that the researcher's own experiences did not distort the interpretation of the interviewees' when analyzed and relayed. Qualitative reliability, the process of ensuring researcher consistency and stability across approaches and procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), was accomplished through the use of the following strategies: checking that transcripts are free from obvious mistakes; ensuring coding remains the same across all 13 interview transcripts by coding multiple times; and utilizing rich examples from the interview data to justify and make clear coding decisions.

Overall, this qualitative, phenomenological research method consisting of a series of 13 semi-structured interviews successfully addressed the research focus on investigating the challenges new women sports journalists face during their first few years of entering the current sports journalism field. Collecting testimonials from women on their positive and negative experiences while working presented an overarching assessment of the current sports journalism

field and its acceptance of women sports journalists, especially when it comes to exploring the explicit and implicit gender-based obstacles women encounter. Additionally, Joan Acker's theory of gendered organizations was fully incorporated through the coding of interview data as previously specified, as well as during the analysis of said data.

### **Findings**

When analyzed, common themes found within the interview responses revealed multiple anecdotes and experiences that aligned with one or more of the five interacting processes described in Joan Acker's theory of gendered organizations: the construction of divisions along lines of gender; the construction of symbols and images that explain, express, reinforce, or oppose those divisions; the interactions between women and men that enact dominance and submission; the production of gendered components of individual identity; and the implication of gender in the fundamental, ongoing processes of creating a social structure (Acker, 1990). Many of the interviewees also reported positive experiences they encountered while working in the sports journalism industry that contradicted or did not conform to the processes of a gendered organization, which were also recorded.

#### **Construction of Divisions Along Lines of Gender**

The construction of divisions along lines of gender can apply to "divisions of labor, of allowed behaviors, of locations in physical space, [and] of power" (Acker, 1990, p.146), many of which appeared frequently among interviewee responses. Provided experiences often described instances of disproportionate assignment to less popular areas of sports coverage (a.k.a. women's and non-revenue sports); careful consideration of behaviors and hesitancy when building rapport with sources for fear of misinterpreted intentions; imbalanced gender representation among places of employment and coverage areas; and homologous reproduction within hiring practices

by men higher ups intentionally, or unintentionally, preserving their own image when selecting candidates for employment.

Interviewees addressed feelings of frustration, reluctance, and intimidation arising from the aforementioned experiences. When speaking on issues of divisions of labor, Tessa reported the following:

I definitely feel the brunt of it all, being the only woman. Most of my main assigned sports are the women's sports ... I'm given a lot of the leftovers in terms of sports assignments and day-to-day responsibilities that my male counterparts definitely are not getting. I'm overworked compared to my colleagues, and that's really hard in this industry because things just keep moving.

Additional interviewees mentioned frequent assignments to women's sports in lieu of men's sports, as well as an absence of opportunities to pursue interests in women's sports coverage due to a perceived lack of public interest. When speaking on issues of allowed behaviors, Sadie reported the following:

Our male colleagues can use resources to generate sources in a way that can be somewhat dangerous for women to do, because we can receive unsolicited flirtation ... without being explicit about setting a boundary, it is very hard to make sure you're conveying professionalism when you're reaching out to someone, especially on social media.

Additional interviewees mentioned a need to remain constantly cognizant of locker room etiquette around male sources, as well as a struggle to develop rapport and navigate professional relationships with sources while never "coming off the wrong way." When speaking on issues of locations in physical space, specifically as it pertains to overall industry representation, Lynn reported the following:

Sports journalism is overwhelmingly male and overwhelmingly white. I was at a media meeting this year ... 75% [of attendees] were white males, then there were two Black men, and I was the only Black woman. There are not too many women in the room ... and I feel like it's still a need, even though it's intimidating and it's hard.

Additional interviewees mentioned a range of gender representation statistics among places of employment and coverage areas, with composition estimations ranging from smaller staffs that maintained a majority of women employees to larger organizations with anywhere between 20% to 40% of women comprising their staff. Some participants disclosed they retained the role of the sole woman in their department.

### **Construction of Symbols and Images that Explain, Express, Reinforce, or Oppose Divisions**

The construction of symbols and images that explain, express, reinforce, or oppose the divisions along lines of gender mentioned above can come in a broad array of sources and forms, including language use, adopted ideologies, and popular culture (Acker, 1990). This also applies to social media, through which exchanges between women sports journalists and online audiences are rapidly increasing in relevance when it comes to assessing the experiences of women sports journalists amid a current, postfeminist media landscape. Provided anecdotes often chronicled subtleties in the use of specific language targeting or discussing the presence of women in the sports journalism industry; references to stereotypes and ideologies that typically surround women sports journalists; and numerous instances of concern, discomfort, and anxiety surrounding both previous and anticipated social media exchanges.

Interviewees relayed examples of experiences that primarily expressed or reinforced divisions along lines of gender, especially relating to social media. When speaking on issues of language use, Mia reported the following:

[A coach] comes up to me and goes ‘hello, young person,’ and then he turns to the male next to me and says ‘can’t say young lady.’ It was very strange, and then he did it again in a press conference. He goes ‘hey guys ... I mean, hey everyone.’ I appreciate that he was trying to refer to people how they want to be referred, but he did it in a way that felt a little bit like he was making a joke.

Additional interviewees mentioned the presence of a language barrier disguising uncomfortable and unsolicited flirtation from sources, as well as the reception of backhanded compliments like, “It turns out you really know what you’re talking about” and “You’re not just good for a woman, you are good.” A participant discussed an encounter with an individual whose ideology was that he “didn’t want to be that guy” when it came to allowing women participants in high school sports traditionally played by men, and multiple interviewees referenced the role of the token woman employee or adherence to the ideal-worker ideology within their journalistic practices. When speaking on issues of popular culture, including social media, Alex reported the following regarding a social media exchange they encountered:

I was defending someone [online], and I got attacked ... it was all of these disrespectful interactions. I got called a ‘faggot.’ I got called a ‘tranny.’ I got called an ‘it’ just because I was defending a notable WNBA player who was getting disrespected by a notable NBA player and random men on the internet.

While the online harassment encountered by this participant was the most extreme of all the social media exchanges reported, additional interviewees mentioned the sexualization of women sports journalists, the persistent questioning and subsequent “testing” of women sports journalists’ sports knowledge, and the direct criticism of work put out by women in the industry. Many participants stated that while their face-to-face interactions with sources and audiences

were generally positive in nature, a majority of the negative feedback and expressions of gender discrimination they received came from online avenues like email or social media.

### **Interactions Between Women and Men that Enact Dominance and Submission**

Although the interactions between women and between men can reveal much about gender relationships within sports journalism, it is the interactions between women and men — specifically those that enact dominance and submission — that have the most to offer in terms of exploring gender dynamics and challenges within the industry. Provided experiences often included everything from minor shifts in tone and word choice to blatant flirtation and disrespect, with many instances demonstrating the tendency of sources who are men to assign women sports journalists to one of the following stereotypes: that they are sexual objects, weak, motherly, or “one of the boys” (Schoch, 2013).

Across numerous unique scenarios, interviewees addressed a pattern of interactions with athletes, coaches, fans, colleagues, and higher ups who are men in which male dominance and female submission was established in one form or another. When speaking on issues within communication between women and men, Reagan reported the following:

At times, when you're working with older male colleagues in particular, or coaches, I find often their tone changes ... it's not always necessarily that they're trying to talk down to you, but they feel like they need to talk to you in a different way than they do to the men in the room.

Additional interviewees mentioned colleagues who are men adopting a dominating, “boys club” approach to speaking to women coworkers that can often appear harsh and isolating, as well as keeping women sports journalists from entering statistical, fanatical sports conversations. When speaking on issues of sexual objectification, Kristen reported the following:

There were definitely times where I was on the sidelines and men would come up to me and say, ‘You look the part, you have the look for sports.’ I don’t need to be commented on about my outfit or about how good I look because I’m a woman in sports. You wouldn’t go up to a man and say, ‘You’re handsome, you need to be in sports’ ... because I’m a woman, I got that multiple times just when filming highlights. I had coaches come up to me from high schools and say that ‘I had the look’ or that I was ‘beautiful.’ It was very uncomfortable.

Additional interviewees mentioned receiving unsolicited comments and scrutiny regarding their physical appearance in professional and online settings, as well as many instances of blatant flirtation primarily from young athletes both in person and through social media messaging channels. When speaking on issues of disrespectful exchanges, whether intentional or otherwise, Sophia reported the following:

It’s always fans or players who would underestimate me, or not believe that I know as much as I do ... fans would stop me and ask me if I knew what was going on or would try to explain something to me, and I have to be like, ‘Thank you, but I don’t need you to explain that to me.’

Additional interviewees mentioned colleagues, fans, and higher ups assuming that women sports journalists inherently possess only knowledge of women’s sports and sports traditionally played by women, as well as colleagues who are men failing to respect the authority of women sports journalists in higher up positions through the use of rude language, degrading behaviors, and overall dismissiveness.

### **Production of Gendered Components of Individual Identity**

The production of gendered components of individual identity “may include consciousness of the existence of the other three aspects of gender, such as, in organizations, choice of appropriate work, language use, clothing, and presentation of self as a gendered member of an organization” (Acker, 1990, p. 147). In other words, the process of making a conscious effort to recognize and adopt traditional characteristics of a gendered organization into an individual’s self-presentation and identity. This production can be intentional or done due to feelings of necessity as a requirement for success as a woman in the sports journalism industry. Provided anecdotes often relayed the development of habits and concerns regarding physical self-presentation and appearance, as well as the creation of internalized feelings of inferiority, self-doubt, perfectionism, introversion, and extroversion.

Interviewees discussed many common behavioral and attitudinal gendered components they’ve recognized within their individual identity production while working in sports journalism. When speaking on issues regarding the production of behavioral gendered components, Lydia reported the following:

We’re expected to look a certain way on air. I have to make time to put on makeup, to make sure I have my hair done, and to make sure I am dressed appropriately; whereas, a man in my role doesn’t have to spend any time doing that ... the pressure as a woman to look good in this role is really high, when it should only matter what you’re reporting about and what you’re saying, but unfortunately that’s just how it is for really every woman on TV.

Additional interviewees mentioned similar sentiments regarding the allocation of extra time and attention to physical self-presentation, as well as a concern for how an individual’s online presentation across social media platforms appears to sources and public audiences. When



speaking on issues regarding the production of attitudinal gendered components, Hannah reported the following:

You're trying to figure out what you're doing, and you're trying to do it well, and you're trying to do it fast. Then you have men covering the same sports as you, or men you're working with that aren't necessarily making it easy on you. I felt the pressure to be incredible right away ... I felt like if I was imperfect, then the men were going to make fun of me, or they were going to say something mean ... there's definitely a pressure to not only be good at your job, but to be better than them.

Additional interviewees mentioned feelings of doubt regarding their own professional skills and a belief that their work would be judged more closely and harshly than the work of their counterparts who are men, as well as imposter syndrome — feelings of inadequacy and incompetence that persist in spite of external proof of success. Consequential behaviors due to these attitudinal gendered components were also addressed, such as the reluctance to ask questions in a press conference for fear of “sounding stupid,” or thinking “10 times more” through decisions such as what to wear or what to tweet in order to reduce anticipated criticism.

### **Implication of Gender in the Fundamental, Ongoing Processes of Creating Social Structure**

The implication of gender in the fundamental, ongoing processes of creating a social structure essentially refers to the role that gender plays in the formation of the underlying processes, relationships, and assumptions that comprise the current work organization (Acker, 1990). Provided experiences covered the default assumption of the presence of men sports journalists in lieu of women in the industry, the practice of the diversity hire, and a lack of both gender and racial representation ingrained within sports journalism.

Although many of the anecdotes interviewees provided under this theme were applicable to others themes as well, specific examples allowed these experiences to stand out as ones that truly highlighted the fundamental influence of gender on ongoing processes in the sports journalism industry as a whole. When speaking on issues of the assumed presence of men sports journalists, Leah reported the following regarding a situation she encountered:

In the building where [they] were housing the players and staff, they locked the women's restroom because they were not anticipating any female staffers. That was not the last time ... everybody else is at work being able to do all the stuff that they're able to do, so it's like, 'Open this door.' It's clear that people haven't thought about it — about us — or anticipated that the high-ranking staff members might be women.

Additional interviewees mentioned instances in which a gender-neutral name or nickname led sources to assume they were men sports journalists before meeting in person, as well as being met with numerous responses of a general sense of surprise at the presence of a woman sports journalist. When speaking on the issue of the diversity hire — a term with a negative connotation that refers to an organizational practice of hiring candidates based off a need to meet diversity quotas rather than off of merit — Maddie reported the following:

Being a qualified woman applying to things, I think companies that want to be more gender diverse would see you as an advantage. Not that qualified men wouldn't be hired, but if you are a young woman who is applying for a sports-related job, the fact of the matter is it looks good for the company to hire you whether or not they actually believe in gender equality.

Additional interviewees mentioned rumors regarding their role as a potential diversity hire when operating as one of few or as the only woman in their department, as well as connecting this

hiring process to the role of the token woman sports journalist that many women in the sports journalism industry are pigeonholed into playing. When speaking on issues relating to the overall poor gender and racial representation in sports journalism, Shae reported the following:

I came into a beat where everybody has been covering this team for 15 plus years. I come in as a young, Black woman in a sport that's dominated predominantly by white men who are also way more experienced than me ... I've done a fairly good job about making those personal connections and getting to know people, but I think it's a slower process and it's not as easy to get people to open up. Nobody's going to call me to break news because they don't know me as well, and I am at a disadvantage in being able to get to know these people as well.

Additional interviewees mentioned similar frustrations regarding how a lack of anticipated gender representation negatively impacts their ability to conduct strong journalistic work, as well as how poor racial representation can contribute to both the internal conflicts and external difficulties faced within the experiences of the minority woman sports journalist.

### **Outside of the Gendered Organization**

Although participants spoke at great length on the challenges they have faced while working in the sports journalism industry, each and every interviewee also discussed the positive experiences and advantages encountered as a woman sports journalist. Many of the provided anecdotes were in direct contrast to identified themes indicative of the processes of a gendered organization and were therefore placed in a separate category for analysis.

In direct contrast to the construction of divisions along lines of gender, Maddie reported the following regarding a high-ranking female mentor at her place of employment:

She does a really good job of recognizing the importance of highlighting and really advocating for the young women in our department, and she does a good job of making them feel supported and heard and gives them opportunities ... We have strong female examples in our department. Perhaps the young women who really do a good job are noticed specifically by her and by our other [executives] maybe more so than if we had all men in charge.

Additional interviews mentioned opportunities in which they received popular sports coverage assignments and had positive experiences when building rapport with colleagues, higher ups, and sources, as well as a couple instances of working in places of employment with very high gender representation for women in sports journalism. In direct contrast to the construction of symbols and images that explain, express, reinforce, or oppose the divisions along lines of gender, Reagan reported the following:

I think having more of my personality out there gets people in my DMs wanting to talk about things other than football that I would never have conversations with. It gives me an in to talk to other people in the industry or connect with my coworkers ... social media has been a really big way to allow me to connect with a lot of people in a lot of different ways that I never would have before, and I think the route I have chosen of really trying to fully express who I am has opened the widest doors for me.

Additional interviewees mentioned numerous advantageous uses for social media, like utilizing online avenues to establish initial connections or professional rapport with sources and building an online presence to share work and interact with a large audience, as well as addressing multiple instances in which colleagues and sources conveyed changing ideologies regarding the acceptance of women in the sports journalism industry and sports as a whole. In direct contrast to

the interactions between women and men that enact dominance and submission, Lydia reported the following:

It's all positive at my [place of employment], so positive. Everyone is great, and it just feels like a healthy workplace. I do have a man who works underneath me, and he's also a little bit older, so I was nervous about that given I am so young in this higher position, but he's been overall very great, so that's not been an issue at all.

Additional interviewees mentioned examples in which they built strong relationships with athletes, coaches, fans, colleagues, and higher ups who are men, as well as scenarios in which they were able to shut down unsolicited flirtation and set a clear boundary while maintaining professionalism as a woman sports journalist. In direct contrast to the production of gendered components of individual identity, Shae reported the following:

Men love to talk about their wives and children, and I feel like women are more likely to ask about them. Maybe that's because we're more empathetic, maybe that's because we just actually care ... I think that partly comes with age, but it also does come with gender and the fact that I'm more connected in a lot of ways than maybe a lot of the older male reporters around are.

Additional interviewees mentioned utilizing traditionally feminine characteristics such as empathy, compassion, and outward physical appearance as a way to generate connections with sources — both men and women — choosing to adopt and view some particular gendered components of individual identity as a professional advantage. In direct contrast to the implication of gender in the fundamental, ongoing processes of creating a social structure, Lynn reported the following:

Most people see me, and they are all very excited to see that they have a woman covering sports in the area. That felt really good to hear ... I feel like they're happy to see that the people who are covering them are diverse. Most people respond really positively when they see a woman like me come into a game.

Additional interviewees mentioned similar instances in which their presence as a woman in sports journalism was not questioned or challenged, and they were treated with respect. Multiple participants discussed reframing the process of the diversity hire as a potential advantage for allowing women to get their foot in the door into sports journalism, as well as expressing hopefulness and a belief that gender and racial representation in the current sports journalism industry is currently increasing.

### **Summary**

Across a series of 13 semi-structured interviews conducted with a racially diverse group of women, who, at the time of the interviews, had worked three years or less in sports journalism, participants described both their negative and positive professional experiences to paint a picture of the current, postfeminist sports journalism industry.

Interviewee anecdotes were thematically assessed using the framework of the five interacting processes described in Joan Acker's theory of gendered organizations: the construction of divisions along lines of gender; the construction of symbols and images that explain, express, reinforce, or oppose those divisions; the interactions between women and men that enact dominance and submission; the production of gendered components of individual identity; and the implication of gender in the fundamental, ongoing processes of creating a social structure (Acker, 1990).

In relation to the first process, participants reported experiencing disproportionate and frequent assignment to less popular areas of sports coverage (a.k.a. women's and non-revenue sports), struggles when navigating professional relationships with sources who are men, poor workplace gender representation, and homologous reproduction in the hiring practices and behaviors of higher ups who are men. When discussing the second process, interviewees addressed the direct and indirect use of language to negatively target women sports journalists, the presence of stereotypes and ideologies that reinforce the exclusion of women in sports, and the "double-edged sword" of social media use as a woman sports journalist. In relation to the third process, participants mentioned subtle domination tactics such as tone shifts and word choice used by men when speaking to women, more straightforward domination tactics such as unsolicited flirtation and blunt disrespect, and the tendency of sources who are men to associate women sports journalists with the stereotypes of being sexual objects, weak, or uneducated when it comes to sports. When discussing the fourth process, interviewees admitted that they had created internalized habits and concerns regarding their physical self-presentation and appearance, as well as curated feelings of inferiority, self-doubt, perfectionism, introversion, and more due to their experiences as women sports journalists. In relation to the fifth process, participants relayed encountering the traditional assumption of the presence of men sports journalists in lieu of women in the industry, the diversity hire, and the fundamental absence of both gender and racial representation ingrained within sports journalism.

Interviewees also described a plethora of positive anecdotes that lent a glimpse into the ways some of the experiences of new women sports journalists contradict and oppose the processes of a gendered organization. Subjects chronicled instances of high-ranking women in sports journalism serving as workplace mentors, the utilization of social media as a tool to

establish professional connections, respectful and non-dominating interactions between men and women colleagues regardless of the superiority of either's role, the adoption of gendered components of individual identity as a beneficial skillset when conducting journalistic work, and the general understanding that many facets of the sports journalism industry were engaging in ongoing processes of acceptance when it comes to women sports journalists.

### **Discussion**

“I've been very lucky in a lot of the ways that I've experienced this industry so far.”

“I feel very lucky that I'm in the position I am.”

“I'm one of the lucky ones.”

Over half of the women sports journalists interviewed for this research described many of their personal experiences in the sports journalism industry as lucky, often adding the caveat “I know it's not like this for most people.” The recurring use of this type of language is consistent with postfeminist sensibilities demonstrated in the sports journalism industry and reinforces an internalized assumption among women in the field that professional challenges are to be expected, while positive experiences and success are the exception. In order to truly examine the obstacles new women sports journalists encounter during their first few years of entering the sports journalism industry in a current, postfeminist context, participants were asked to elaborate further on the challenges they faced during their time in the industry so far. The reported responses — as well as additional information on the interviewees' positive industry experiences — would indicate whether these challenges pointed to the persistence of sexist, gendered organization processes in today's sports journalism industry. While a simple confirmation of the existence of these gendered organization processes in the current, postfeminist sports journalism



industry would be correct, the thorough interview responses provided by participants convey a much more complex assessment of the field and the role women sports journalists hold within it.

Previous research on the relationship between gender and sports journalism maintained many similarities compared to the findings of this research. Master and Mitchell (2017) found that many of today's women sports journalists align closely with the values of the third and fourth waves of feminism — waves which focus on issues relating to the general empowerment and inclusion of women through avenues like body positivity, gender equality, and intersectionality — topics that were addressed by numerous interviewees. Hardin & Whiteside (2009) extensively researched tokenism for women in sports journalism, where individuals who inhabit the token women sports journalist role often exhibit increased anxiety, role ambiguity, and the belief that they are unfit for their profession, leading these women to overachieve, turn increased visibility into a professional advantage, or look to socially assimilate into the non-token group. Even when not specifying their token status, multiple interviewees in this research revealed feelings of anxiety and imposter syndrome, resulting in instances of perfectionism, overthinking, and utilizing their increased role visibility. Schoch (2013) found: firstly, that women sports journalists often have to search for different ways than their counterparts who are men to connect with athletes and other colleagues because relying on a fanatical or analytical obsession with sports knowledge is not commonly adopted by women in the industry; and secondly, that women sports journalists do not utilize the strategies of their counterparts who are men to gain source information and instead work to use femininity to their advantage by turning associated gendered stereotypes into a productive professional skill. Many participants in this research reported experiencing the same difficulty connecting with colleagues and utilizing similar strategies and femininity to establish rapport with both sources and colleagues who are

men. North (2016) found that many women sports journalists encounter explicit obstacles in professional environments like a “macho” culture, a lack of schedule flexibility, a lack of promotion availability, and disproportionate assignments to less popular areas of coverage, all of which were topics hit on by one or more of the current interviewees. Laucella et al. (2017) extensively researched homologous reproduction in sports journalism, and interviewees in this research recalled instances in which higher ups who are men would assign higher importance to hiring and coverage patterns reflective of their own identities, reinforcing historical gender boundaries by hiring and covering men and men’s sports more than women and women’s sports.

The findings of this research also revealed many differences compared to previous research on the relationship between gender and sports journalism. Chen et al. (2020) found that women journalists often encounter frequent gendered harassment in online spaces categorized by instances of misogynistic remarks, inappropriate requests, sexist stereotypes, and even threats of physical or sexual violence. While current interviewees did report instances of criticism and “hate” received through social media channels, participants also frequently discussed the utilization of online channels as an overall positive and beneficial tool for connecting and communicating with sources, colleagues, and audiences. A caveat to this positive social media use addressed by current interviewees, however, is that women sports journalists frequently have to adopt a professional tone and maintain clear boundaries when reaching out to sources online to avoid being perceived as flirtatious in the hyper-masculine sports environment. Hardin & Shain (2006) found that many women sports journalists struggle to maintain femininity, but avoid associations with feminism, while also meeting the standards of professionalism designed to favor men journalists, therefore oftentimes adopting traditionally masculine characteristics like detachment and independence. However, participants in this research instead often

mentioned embracing femininity within their roles and adopting traditionally feminine characteristics like empathy and compassion as advantageous journalistic skills. Hardin, Shain, and Shultz-Poniatowski (2008) extensively researched the revolving door for women in sports journalism, yet this topic did not appear in any interviews, potentially due to the targeted younger age range of participating interviewees. Whiteside & Hardin (2011) extensively researched the glass ceiling for women in sports journalism, however this topic was also not mentioned often by current participants. Instead, many either focused on the high-ranking female mentors and higher ups they had come in contact with or relayed gratitude for the positions they did have, possibly due to the targeted entry-level employment range of participating interviewees. Another potential reason for the expressions of gratitude conveyed often by participants in this research is the reinforcement of postfeminist sensibilities in the sports journalism industry. Women sports journalists have internalized the assumption that negative professional experiences are the norm; therefore, when met with positive professional experiences, these women feel inherently grateful and empowered by the thought of being “one of the lucky ones” free from expected obstacles. This phenomenon also connects to the gendered process of enacting dominance and submission between men and women in sports journalism. As men sports journalists do not occupy the role of outsiders in the field, they do not automatically assume the presence of professional challenges; consequently, these men are less likely than their counterparts who are women to express gratitude for their positions in the sports journalism industry or consider themselves to be lucky when they do not encounter obstacles. Gunther et al. (2011) found little-to-no evidence of active or latent sexism and prejudice toward women in sports journalism regarding survey respondents’ assessment of the credibility differences between men and women sports journalists. These interviewee testimonials,

however, challenged this and instead reflected the findings of Sargent & Toro (2006), who found that — as mentioned by participants — many women sports journalists struggle to be perceived as credible and oftentimes have their sports knowledge doubted or challenged.

On a broader level, these findings show that today's sports journalism industry remains a gendered organization in which the distinctions between women and men contribute to ongoing divisions and interactions between genders, as well as influencing the maintenance of traditional, fundamental social structures within the field. However, the challenges experienced by new women sports journalists chronicled in this research suggest firstly, that women in the industry today do still encounter explicit and implicit gender-based harassment, discrimination, and obstacles to their professional endeavors, but secondly, that these experienced challenges do not always persist in the same form as those seen by women in the past and are more indicative of obstacles specific to the current, postfeminist sports journalism field. The existence of professional barriers for women in sports journalism proven by the statements of participants in this research blatantly challenges the commonly-held postfeminist assumption that women are free from adversity in the industry. Yet, the language used by interviewees indicates a continuing reinforcement of these postfeminist sensibilities, demonstrating how many women sports journalists continue to associate individual responsibility with empowerment, success, and combating industry obstacles. In lieu of interpreting women sports journalists as a collective within the field, the inherent postfeminist ethos associated with sports journalism persists through individualism and the apparent ongoing assumption that the sports journalism industry is entirely hostile toward women in spite of positive experiences reported by interviewees that suggest otherwise. Additionally, many of the positive professional encounters described by new women sports journalists in this research point to the creation of new social structures within the

industry that imply growing acceptance of the presence and upward mobility of women in sports journalism, as well as the breaking down of previous traditional assumptions of male superiority and female inferiority within the field as a whole.

While this research is by no means a generalization of the experiences of all women working in the sports journalism industry, the responses and experiences described by this select number of interviewees at the very beginning of their careers contribute to updated examples relating to challenges women sports journalists have — and others might — face when pursuing a career in the field. These findings serve to inform the athletes, coaches, sources, colleagues, and higher ups who are men who engage and communicate with women sports journalists every day, as well as the general public and other women sports journalists, about the obstacles facing women in the industry and about the gender discrimination that continues to plague these women throughout their professional endeavors. In addressing ongoing sexist behaviors in the field, these findings also contradict the current postfeminist ethos surrounding women in sports journalism, in which the absence of disparities, barriers, and inequality between genders is assumed by both men and women in the field (Antunovic, 2019). By increasing the knowledge and awareness surrounding the gender-based struggles women sports journalists often encounter, it is hoped that these findings will lead to the reduction of harassment and other negative gendered processes in the current sports journalism industry, as well as contribute to the increasing acceptance of women in the field through the presentation of positive examples mentioned by these research participants.

Traditional limitations to this method include the collection of information outside of the natural field environment, information indirectly conveyed through the personal views of interviewees, and struggles with the varying levels of articulation and perceptiveness of

participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These limitations are noted, though it is assumed the research does not suffer greatly because of these potential obstacles. As the participants are journalists, they are familiar with conducting interviews and were not unfamiliar or uncomfortable with providing information in an interview environment. Nevertheless, the researcher took steps to ensure all interviewees were comfortable and consented to participation. Additionally, the conveyed personal views and varying levels of articulation and perceptiveness are qualities unique to each participant which enhances, rather than harms, the analysis. Another traditional limitation of interviewing methods is the presence of researcher biases and how these biases may influence the creation of interview questions, the interview responses given by participants, and the analysis of interview data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is where awareness of researcher reflexivity comes in, meaning the ability of the researcher to “explicitly identify reflexively their biases, values, and personal background, such as gender, history, culture, and socioeconomic status (SES) that shape their interpretations formed during a study” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 183). For the purposes of reflexivity, this researcher acknowledges she is a white woman with previous experiences working in the sports journalism field who experienced multiple personal challenges that were similar to those mentioned during interviews by participants. During the interview and coding processes, the researcher reflected on her own experiences and how these experiences may have influenced the development of themes, as well as how the researcher’s interpretation of the interview data might have been affected. Another limitation unique to this study regarding the specification that participating interviewees cannot have more than three years of professional experience is that the resulting sample has a young, narrow age range due to the fact that a majority of women who have worked three years or less in sports journalism are generally recent college graduates and women in their

early to mid 20s. Additionally, the brevity of the interviews utilized in this research is another limitation unique to this study, as longer interviews may have provided more information and more specific anecdotes regarding participants' experiences.

Other journalists and researchers looking at this research may utilize these findings to prepare themselves and others for, seek to avoid, and create professional change regarding the gendered practices discussed above, and they might also use the participants' experiences as a starting point for continued investigation in this particular area of study. Further exploration on the updated relationship between gender and sports journalism may potentially go further in depth to compare the similarities and differences in discriminatory practices between journalistic mediums (ex. print versus broadcast television versus radio broadcast). Researchers conducting additional pursuits in this area of study may look in to formulating solutions for identified sexist behaviors in newsrooms and sports environments, and they might also choose to explore the mentorship and camaraderie found in the extensive support networks for women sports journalists — such as the Association for Women in Sports Media — mentioned often by interviewees in this research. These findings also present a possibility for researchers to revisit Acker's theory of gendered organizations and either reassess the existing processes or develop new and/or additional ones to better convey the maintenance and creation of current gendered organizations. Future studies may also utilize the discriminatory practices catalogued in this research and in continued, updated studies on gender and sports journalism to survey larger numbers of women sports journalists and test the broader applicability of the identified gendered processes within the current sports journalism industry.

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