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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Patrick Crowe entitled "'I march to the beat of my own drum": A critical discourse analysis on mediated construction of Aaron Rodgers' COVID-19 vaccination disclosure." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Kinesiology and Sport Studies.

Adam Love, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Lars Dzikus, Erin Whiteside, Leia Cain

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

“I march to the beat of my own drum”: A critical discourse analysis on mediated constructions of Aaron Rodgers’ COVID-19 vaccination comments

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Patrick Crowe
May 2023

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to those who are trying to understand how power relations operate and the consequences for social actors. It is a difficult task to take on, but a necessary one to understand the contemporary human condition.

Acknowledgements

Over the course of my time at the University of Tennessee, there have been a tremendous number of people I would call my mentors that deserve recognition for their assistance with this dissertation, but also for helping me develop as a scholar. First and foremost, Dr. Adam Love has sifted through a massive amount of my writings. Without his guidance, this dissertation would not be anywhere close to its current form. His teachings have helped me understand sport media in nuanced ways I would not have understood from another academic. Additionally, I look forward to the future working relationship we have developed through other projects. Dr. Lars Dzikus should be mentioned next as his classes were bright moments that helped me learn how to incorporate joy in the classroom. His knowledge of sport history set me down a path to construct the second chapter of this dissertation I would not have tackled otherwise. Next, Dr. Leia Cain has helped me self-reflect on many facets of my role as an academic and what exactly that means. Furthermore, her insight into teaching methods, paradigms, and positionality shaped this dissertation greatly. Dr. Erin Whiteside played a massive part in shaping my understanding of critical discourse analysis. Through her classes and comments on my drafts, the third chapter of this dissertation would be in much worse shape. I thank my dissertation committee for their work throughout the course of this process.

To continue in the academic sphere, there have been a great number of mentors outside of my committee that have developed me into the scholar I am today. Though this may be troublesome in an acknowledgement section, I would like to list each individual

that mentored me through my time at UT. Drs. Lauren Beasley, Joseph Cooper, Emre Demirkaya, Ashley Gardner, Jeff Graham, Robin Hardin, Kyle Kusz, Laura Miller, Mitsunori Misawa, Jamee Pelcher, Vincent Peña, Amber Roessner, and Steven Waller have all played a role in shaping who I am today whether it was through class instruction, scholarly advice, or personal friendship. I thank them all for their support through the years.

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought suffering throughout society and disruption throughout the sports world. In the U.S., there have been politically polarized debates about the best course of action for handling the pandemic, including vaccinations and the appropriateness of other restrictive measures. Amidst the 2021 National Football League (NFL) season, in which the league imposed differing levels of restrictions based on a player's vaccination status, former MVP and Super Bowl champion Aaron Rodgers tested positive for COVID-19. After his positive test, Rodgers, who had previously claimed he was "immunized" from COVID-19, revealed that his immunization protocol consisted of "alternate" drugs (e.g., ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine) rather than an FDA-approved vaccine. In defense of his decision to "march to the beat of [his] own drum," Rodgers cast himself as a victim of the "woke mob" and "cancel culture" (McAfee, 2021a).

To understand how Aaron Rodgers, a representative of white masculinity, was constructed in mediated coverage, I used critical discourse analysis, examining 302 articles from the most-visited mainstream and sport media websites. The theoretical guides for the study included critical white studies (Akom, 2008; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Nayak, 2007) and gender performativity theories (Anderson, 2008; Butler, 1990).

Five prominent themes were identified: Dishonesty and Irresponsibility, White Orthodox Sensibilities, White Victimization, Scientific Evidence, and Protection of White Male Hegemony. My themes argue that Rodgers was criticized heavily by most media outlets for his alternative vaccination comments through performing his

masculinity in unapproved ways that did not match the norms of the “sport ethic” (Hughes & Coakley, 1991), components of “warrior” masculinity, and a communal version of masculinity. However, some discourses of orthodox masculine notions, such as heterosexuality, toughness, and confidence, were emphasized. Rodgers chose to position himself as a victim, which matches some common conservative ideological strategies in U.S. discourse (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Kusz, 2019). Such insight is useful to understand backlash politics that position white men as victims of social progress by marginalized groups. As the ways in which public figures use victimization rhetoric shifts, researchers should continue to focus on the ways in which power is (re)produced in mediated discourse.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	1
Vaccine Refusal	3
Sport COVID-19 Protocols	4
Sport Studies Background	8
Purpose and Gap in Literature	11
Importance of Event	12
Research Question	13
Paradigmatic Decision	13
Relevant Definitions	16
Organization of Study	22
Chapter Two: White Masculinities Literature Review	23
Theoretical Orientations	24
<i>Racial Theories</i>	25
<i>Gendered Theories</i>	31
On Race	34
Masculinities: Historical Perspectives	40
<i>Post-World War II and the 1950s</i>	41
<i>The 1960s and 1970s</i>	45
<i>The 1980s</i>	50
<i>The 1990s</i>	52
<i>The 2000s</i>	56
<i>Contemporary Sporting Masculinity</i>	57
Conclusion	66
Chapter Three: Methodology	69
Epistemology, Ontology, and Paradigms	70
Legacy of Critical Discourse Analysis	73
Critical Discourse Analysis: Methodological Concerns	78
Analyzing Data	86
<i>Coding Strategies</i>	88
Positionality	94
Ethicality	101
Personal Experiences Related to Study	102
Data Collection	106
Chapter Four: Strands of Discourse	110
Dishonesty and Irresponsibility	111
<i>Discussion</i>	115
Orthodox Masculine Sensibilities	119
<i>Discussion</i>	125
White Victimization	129
<i>Discussion</i>	133
Scientific Evidence	137
<i>Discussion</i>	140
Protection of White Male Hegemony	145

<i>Discussion</i>	148
Chapter Five: Evaluation Insights	153
Return to Positionality	162
(De)Limitations and Future Directions	165
Concluding Remarks.....	168
Reference List	171
Vita	215

List of Table

Table 1—Media articles per outlet	106
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Chapter One: Introduction

In addition to a tremendous amount of suffering, death, and overall societal disruption, the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19 or COVID) pandemic has fostered substantial political controversy in the United States. Political divisions have been accentuated through leadership discourse on how to handle the virus (Parmanand, 2022; Sommer & Rappel-Kroyzer, 2022) and perceptions of the types of interventions necessary to control the virus (Barberia et al., 2021). Government mandates and restrictions in response to COVID have been contentious with many Americans following the recommendations of government entities like the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Center for Disease Control (CDC) and others resorting to outright vaccine rejection or developing alternative plans to protect themselves from the virus (NIH, 2022). One such plan some people have instituted is creating an alternative course of action for “immunizing” themselves rather than receiving FDA-approved vaccines (McAfee, 2021a; NIH, 2022).

In the sports world, Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers became the center of controversy on November 5, 2021 when he tested positive for COVID. In August 2021, when asked by reporters if he was vaccinated, Rodgers responded “yeah, I’ve been immunized,” but did not elaborate on what he took to become “immunized.” The league Rodgers participates in, the National Football League (NFL), put protocols in place to fight the spread of COVID in the 2021-2022 season that revolved around government approved vaccinations. Rodgers later discussed his decision to choose ivermectin, monoclonal antibodies, a medley of vitamins, and hydroxychloroquine as an

“immunization” plan on the podcast *The Pat McAfee Show* (McAfee, 2021a). Rodgers himself named these drugs his “immunization” plan, despite research finding ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine to be ineffective treatments for COVID or immunization (Abd-El salam et al., 2021; FDA, 2020). Rodgers' endorsement of an alternative stance advocating for individual choice led podcast host Pat McAfee (2021a) to cite him as a “poster boy of conservatism.” Rodgers’ health disclosure can be seen as part of a larger discourse represented by white supremacist ideology that situate white men as victims of progressive social efforts (King, 2015; Savran, 1998). Accordingly, due to his status as a high performing athlete in one of the most important positions in sports, mainstream and sport media alike began covering the news of his story. In this study, I analyzed media texts surrounding news of Rodgers’ announcement in order to understand media discourse related to white sporting masculinity and COVID-19. The specific goal of the study is to examine how Rodgers’ identities as a white, sporting man are conceptualized in mediated texts following news of his vaccination status disclosure.

The goal of this chapter is to help the reader understand the purpose and rationale of my research study. Emphasis is placed on context of the topic, background on sport studies research related to the topic being analyzed, statement of the problem identified through a gap in sport studies literature, paradigmatic choices, and a list of key definitions. The chapter ends with an organizational paragraph discussing an outline for the subsequent chapters of the study.

Vaccine Refusal

In the United States, the government has recommended individuals to receive vaccination and booster shots created by the companies Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson and Johnson to lessen the spread and severity of COVID-19 (CDC, 2022b). These companies have undergone quantitative trials to prove the efficacy and safety of their vaccines for treating and preventing COVID. Following the trials, emergency approvals were given to the companies' vaccines to combat the spread of the virus. Despite high efficacy ratings (CDC, 2022a; WHO, 2022a; WHO, 2022b), there are one in six Americans who outright refuse to receive any form of a vaccination (Burnett, 2022) and even less who are fully vaccinated (Sparks et al., 2022) as of the end of 2022. There are a multitude of reasons for people's refusal to be vaccinated; most important for the current study are some Americans perceiving a lack of freedom from government-imposed vaccination mandates generally driven by individuals who identify with the Republican political party (Sparks et al., 2022) and those that may be allergic to ingredients in the vaccine(s). The latter concern may be unfounded by scientific standards as Greenhawt et al. (2021) found 7.91 cases in one million vaccination doses causes an allergic reaction with no reported cases of death. The researchers ultimately decided that the risk of contracting COVID was more worrisome than the allergic reaction individuals may experience. Despite the reluctance to inject a government approved vaccination, many Americans continued to be worried about the virus' capabilities and have sought alternative plans (Burnett, 2022; FDA, 2021; McAfee, 2021a; NIH, 2022).

Sport COVID-19 Protocols

The issue of COVID-19 immunization, vaccinations, and booster shots has extended to most walks of life, but most pertinent to this study is the sports world, or more specifically, the NFL. COVID-19 gained widespread concern in late 2019 and became a national emergency on March 13, 2020. Other leagues, like the National Basketball Association (NBA), the top tier basketball league in the United States, had to halt their season and eventually created a “bubble” in which all players and staff lived, worked, and operated in a single location to lessen the potential spread of COVID and continue their season (Vaudreuil et al., 2021). There were massive concerns related to COVID, and the NFL’s 2020 season proceeded according to CDC recommendations.

The NFL and NFL Players Association (NFLPA) instituted rules for their 2020 season in September 2020 (NFL & NFLPA, 2020a). The NFL developed the 2020 season’s protocols prior to a vaccine becoming available. Although the 2020 season is not the one under analysis, it is important to lay out the protocols that were in place prior to a vaccine becoming available to note the differences between seasons and understand part of the reason why Rodgers opposed the measures put in place. For the 2020 season, each club had to develop their own Infectious Disease Emergency Response (IDER) plan if the club experienced an outbreak that was subject to review from the NFL, NFLPA, and Infection Control for Sports (ICS). Individuals were tiered into different groups granting access to “Restricted Areas” for some and limits to those areas for others. Physical distancing of six feet was expected outside of on-field practice, specifically in indoor facilities, and plexiglass was advised to be installed if distancing measures could not be

achieved. Masks were expected to be worn at all times except by athletes during on-field practice. All in all, these mandates were created to limit transmission between individuals in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Testing and screening was paramount to the NFL/NFLPA protocols set forth in 2020. All individuals in Tiers 1 and 2 were required to do a daily self-check screening prior to coming to the facilities. These individuals were also required to receive a PCR (polymerase chain reaction) saliva-based test every day when entering club facilities. If an individual did test positive, after a 14-day quarantine period, they were exempt from following the daily screening protocols and tests for the next 90 days. After the 90-day period, the individual was to be tested once a week rather than daily. By December 15, 2020, the NFL and NFLPA instituted changes to the Screening and Testing (2020b), Treatment Response (2020c), Virus Testing Cadence (2020d), and Game Day (2020e) protocols. However, most of the above listed protocols remained the same.

Following the 2020 season, the NFL revised their protocols based on widespread COVID vaccine availability before the 2021 season. The protocols were last updated on November 9, 2021 (NFL & NFLPA, 2021). The number of people each club could give restricted access to facilities increased, however, club staff had to be fully vaccinated or granted a religious exemption from vaccination. The distancing requirements set in place the previous season were no longer applied to vaccinated personnel. Unvaccinated players and staff were required to continue to wear masks while using indoor facilities and when in six feet proximity of others outdoors except for athletes during on-field practice. The quarantine period following a positive test was now reduced to ten days; in

November, it was further reduced to seven days. Fully vaccinated players received a COVID test every seven days. Unvaccinated players continued to be tested every single day. In essence, most changes between the seasons' protocols were created to provide greater leniency for vaccinated personnel. Experts noted that the lessening of testing policies would lead to a higher degree of cases within the league (Maese, 2021). Statistics realized this to be true as in the middle of December 2021, around 4% of NFL athletes and staff tested positive for COVID, the highest at any given point (Lauletta, 2021).

For the offseason and 2022 season, the NFL and NFLPA agreed all joint COVID protocols be suspended (Gordon, 2022). Some athletes criticized the NFL for the lack of freedom of choice and the difference between vaccinated and unvaccinated personnel guidelines during the 2021 season (Weinfuss, 2021), including Aaron Rodgers. News quickly surfaced of Rodgers lack of FDA/CDC approved vaccination status once he tested positive for COVID in early November 2021. On the podcast, *The Pat McAfee Show*, Rodgers aired his grievances (McAfee, 2021a). At the time, Rodgers was a weekly contributor on Tuesdays (dubbed "Rodgers Tuesdays"), but McAfee gave space on his podcast for Rodgers to discuss his immunization decision on a Friday (McAfee, 2021a). Rodgers adamantly stated that he made the best choice for his body despite CDC recommendations (NFL.com, 2021), arguing that the NFL protocols took away freedoms from athletes and personnel that did not want to follow government-based vaccination recommendations (McAfee, 2021a). He stated that he was allergic to an ingredient in the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines, so his only option to take an FDA approved vaccine was the Johnson and Johnson alternative (McAfee, 2021a). He was cautious of taking the

Johnson and Johnson vaccine mostly because of “clotting” issues (Berg, 2021). On the podcast, he stated that he began his own “immunization plan” conducted with a holistic doctor and learned from podcast host Joe Rogan (McAfee, 2021a). He based his home remedy on using ivermectin, a drug commonly used to treat diseases resulting from roundworms and other parasites that has shown some promise in reducing hospital stay length but is insignificant in treating COVID overall (Abd-Elsalam, et al., 2021), hydroxychloroquine, an antimalarial drug that can cause heart rhythm issues (FDA, 2020), monoclonal antibodies, and vitamins. Since he and others, including former United States President Donald Trump, cited ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine as a potentially effective method for combating COVID (Bump, 2022), the FDA (2021; 2020) has released articles refuting the efficacy of this treatment. The following week, Rodgers returned to *The Pat McAfee Show* and apologized for potentially misleading the public when he stated he was “immunized” in August, but he stood by his other comments (McAfee, 2021b). Throughout November, Rodgers made references to his COVID status on *The Pat McAfee Show*, even poking fun at media covering his recovery (McAfee, 2021c; 2021d).

Given Aaron Rodgers’ status as a one-time Super Bowl champion and four-time MVP of the NFL as a quarterback, media members write about his exploits, positive or negative, at length. For this study, Rodgers is viewed as a representative of white masculinity within the sporting world. In the sports world where hegemonic displays of whiteness and masculinity are celebrated, Rodgers is a visible icon to represent these identities due to his high-status in the sports world. This study utilized critical discourse

analysis (CDA) in an effort to understand the relevance of Rodgers' identities in mediated construction of his vaccination comments. To better understand how Rodgers' identities play a part in discourse, a brief synopsis of significant research regarding his identities within the sporting world is provided below.

Sport Studies Background

In the sports world, the racial identity of whiteness and the gendered identity of masculinity have long been dominant, discussed through a multitude of sport-based research studies (Adams et al., 2010; Anderson, 2008; Anderson & Kian, 2011; Anderson & Raney, 2018; Buffington & Fraley, 2012; 2008; Carrington, 2010; Coogan, 2012; Cooky et al., 2021; Crowe, 2021; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Fink, 2016; Kennedy et al., 2021; Kian & Anderson, 2009; Kusz, 2001a; 2001b; Lambertz-Berndt et al., 2021; Leonard, 2017; Matthews, 2016; McDowell & Schaffner, 2011; Messner, 2009; 2002; 1992; Rugg, 2019; TIDES, 2022; 2021; Whannel, 2001; Woodward, 2004). White athletes have often been “stacked” in positions that receive higher pay and are less prone to injury (Woodward, 2004). Importantly, the quarterback position that Aaron Rodgers plays has long been thought of an “intellectual” position. Intellectual positions within sports are deemed to be “white” positions because of stereotypes attached to racialized bodies that situate Black people as intellectually inferior to white people (Carrington, 2010; Ferrucci & Tandoc, 2018; Kendi, 2016). This idea constructs white athletes to be generally thought of as hard-working, persevering, and gritty, whereas Black athletes have a “natural” athletic ability they can utilize without being knowledgeable of their

sport or position (Ferrucci & Tandoc, 2018; Lambertz-Berndt et al., 2021; Leonard, 2017).

For sport media, scholars have found media to give redemption stories for white athletes at higher rates than Black athletes following news of transgressions (Coogan, 2012; Crowe, 2021; Leonard, 2017). Although racial discrimination in commentary and broadcasting is not as explicit as years past, such as Don Imus' racist tirades in women's basketball (Cooky et al., 2010), there are still pernicious ways of discussing athletes that situate their race as mattering when reports are broadcasted (Buffington & Fraley, 2012; 2008; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Hughey & Goss, 2015; Rugg, 2019). The racialized tropes often associated with athletes are useful to conceptualize Rodgers' whiteness in sport media texts. Most specific to this study is identifying how the context of Rodgers' whiteness allows media content creators to construct discourse surrounding his comments about his rejection of FDA-approved vaccines and use of an alternative "immunization."

The second identity utilized within this research study examining Rodgers is his gender, or more specifically his masculine performance. Rodgers can be viewed as a representative of heterosexual, cisgender masculinity. Within the sports world, scholars have claimed it to be one of the last spheres dominated by masculinity to be seen as "normal" because of supposed differences between the assumed binary genders: men and women (Anderson, 2008; Fink, 2016; Matthews, 2016; Messner et al., 2000). Men are expected to play sports, women are seen as "invaders" in sports (Love & Dzikus, 2013). Matthews (2016) even claims the sport world to be a "tyranny of male preserve" that emphasizes orthodox masculine sensibilities. Additionally, sport research demonstrates

that men receive significantly more media coverage (Cooky et al., 2021) and higher pay (Zerunyan, 2017) than women. Athletes are argued to be role models (Mutter & Pawlowki, 2014) perpetuating gender ideology in media representations (Park, 2015).

Violent team sports, like football, have particularly pernicious gendered expectations placed on athletes. Coaches and parents expect boys to “be a man” through creating an invulnerable shield that focuses on making sacrifices for the sake of the team (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Messner, 2002). Commonplace sporting ideology related to sacrificing oneself for the team, playing through pain, and internalizing a win-at-all-cost mentality have been termed the “norms of the sport ethic,” and overconformity to these norms can be potentially detrimental to health, sporting performance, and relationships (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Generally, men athletes are rewarded through positive reinforcement once they perform their masculinity in “acceptable” ways. As a sporting star and role model (Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014) in one of the most watched, yet one of the most violent sports in the world, media construction of Aaron Rodgers’ masculinity is important to understand. Research notes mediated constructions can influence audience perceptions depending on how the event is framed (Entman, 1993). As a representative of sporting masculinity in one of the most sought after, critiqued, and praised positions in American sports, discourse surrounding Rodgers’ public health disclosure can deepen knowledge on sporting white masculine research.

Rodgers’ whiteness and masculinity will be viewed through an intersectional lens to determine how these identities help discursive construction from mainstream media and sport media. This brief introduction to valuable research within the sport studies field

illuminates how white masculinity is typically characterized and can be useful for an evaluation of a representative of white masculinity. The emphasis on discourse advises context on the normative practices within the field or discipline under analysis to be known to provide the most nuanced understanding possible for an analysis (Fairclough, 2010). More information pertaining to the intersection of his identities is established in Chapter Two.

Purpose and Gap in Literature

The purpose of this study is to uncover the ways in which Aaron Rodgers, a representative of white sporting masculinity, was discussed following news of his immunization status in mainstream media and sports media. More specifically, this study proposes to analyze the *discourse* surrounding media's construction of his vaccination comments. By being aware of the discourse of an event or phenomenon, researchers can understand how a representation of a(n) act/event/phenomenon might limit how audiences understand, interpret, or make sense of said event and determine the outcome of power (Fairclough, 2010; Foucault, 1970/1981). A critical discourse analysis is a valuable methodology for recognizing how discourse produces ideologies, representations, and sociocultural context (Fairclough, 2010). Rodgers' homeopathic immunization plan allows researchers to make sense of more nuanced contexts of United States COVID discourse. Additionally, an examination of Rodgers' disclosure can develop understandings of white, sporting masculine discourse related to body autonomy, orthodox masculinity, the sport ethic, and the intersection of politics and sports. Though there has been much discourse analysis undertaken in sport studies (i.e., Dowling, 2020;

Hindman & Walker, 2022; Sveinson et al., 2022, etc.), there has not been sport-based discursive research completed centered on COVID discourse as the main point of analysis.

Importance of Event

Aaron Rodgers is a prolific quarterback in the NFL who has had many stories written about his exploits at length. Misleading the media about his COVID vaccination status, along with disclosing his alternative “immunization” route, is an important event to further analyze for several reasons. The rhetoric of Rodgers’ white men victimization from NFL and NFLPA policies and mandates heightens attention toward some white men’s perceptions of controlling entities restricting freedoms. This analysis can provide understanding of discursive relations related to white men’s perspective of social discrimination. Whether consciously making this decision in his discussion of COVID immunization or not, Rodgers’ disclosure underpins political freedom rhetoric often associated with conservative ideology (Parmanand, 2022). Rodgers’ white man victimization rhetoric falls in line with other white men positioning themselves as victims due to progressive societal measures (King, 2015; Kusz, 2001a; Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998). Additionally, media is thought to influence and shape audiences’ thoughts on events (Entman, 1993; Fairclough, 2010), making media studies worthy of analysis. Understanding how media constructed discourse on Rodgers’ disclosure grants further understanding of white men victimization rhetoric and contemporary constructions of white masculinity through analyzing mediated depictions in sport media. Furthermore, analysis of discourse allows researchers to understand mediated strategies that developed

amidst the COVID era in a sporting context. This event allows further scholarly insight into the connection between politics and sport, mediated depictions of white sporting men, and ideological social representations composed by media outlets.

Research Question

With an overt concern of identity representation and mediated constructions, the interest of this paper is focused specifically on online news articles published on the most visited news sites. Of most interest to this study are the ideas consistently constructed based on Rodgers' vaccination comments. My research question can be stated as

What were the dominant mediated discourses related to Aaron Rodgers' white masculinity after he misled the public about his "vaccination" status?

Paradigmatic Decision

This research study will utilize a qualitative methodology and approach to research. Qualitative research focuses on the construction of subjective worlds determining different social outcomes for people (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Within qualitative research, there are paradigms that heed value for interpreting data. My research is closest to the critical paradigm with interpretivist and postmodernist slants specifically related to construction of knowledge.

Through a critical discourse analysis, researchers can interpret the social meanings that creators of texts construct based on the field or discipline in which the event or phenomenon under investigation is situated. Additionally, dominant ideologies with considerations of social, political, and historical contexts can be understood.

Discourse has polysemous meanings in academia. Two working definitions are,

A) in a pragmatic understanding, predominant among linguistic and micro-sociological discourse analysts, which considers discourse as a process or practice of contextualizing texts, language in use, the situated production of speech acts or a turn-taking practice; B) in a socio-historical understanding, preferred by macrosociological discourse theorists interested in power, for whom ‘discourse’ refers to an ensemble of verbal and non-verbal practices of larger social communities (Angermuller et al., 2014, p. 2).

A CDA allows nuanced interpretations of the discourse surrounding an event or phenomena that emphasizes the language used, who is in/excluded from texts, and context surrounding understanding of the event under examination (Fairclough, 2010). A focus on the language used within texts permits understanding specific linguistic choices developed through construction of an event or phenomenon. Understanding the context of the event or phenomenon under analysis is of foremost importance to connect discourse to larger socio-historical phenomena to best make sense of linguistic choices and ideological constructions. CDA has a preoccupation with how power is demonstrated, (re)produced, and recontextualized through social relations (Angermuller et al., 2014; Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Specifically, I use Angermuller et al.’ (2014) linguistic analysis definition (part A) alongside relating the linguistic choices to broader socio-historical contexts(part B) for the event under examination for a better understanding of Rodgers’ vaccination comments discourse. The usage of CDA is further described in Chapter Three. Importantly, CDA’s critical element

relates to critical paradigmatic work that is centered on finding ways groups are oppressed, marginalized, or privileged and how power is upheld through societal norms (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A CDA can unmask the commonsense beliefs of a society that may limit how one can understand, interpret, or make sense of a specific event or phenomenon due to the lack of alternative viewpoints (Foucault, 1978/1990). Within Rodgers' public health disclosure, CDA can identify how his representation of a white masculine body in sporting COVID discourse may uphold power and be interpreted within mainstream media's and sport media's construction of knowledge surrounding the event.

The postmodernist assumption of knowledge construction holds merit for the results and discussion section of this proposal. The interpretive turn of academic studies occurring in the mid to late 20th century gave way to postmodern critiques of scientific rationalizations of knowledge construction (Howe, 1998). Postmodernism states that all knowledge is socially and historically contingent—that knowledge is subjective and denies a universal “Truth” (Foucault, 1970/1981; 1978/1990). Postmodernism recognizes that all knowledge construction is contextually dependent (Grbich, 2016). Though this analysis proposes a “critical” orientation through a critical discourse methodology, postmodernism allows reflection for the researcher's role of knowledge creation. The contextual element of discourse analysis may present information as matter of fact, but I recognize how all knowledge is subjectively constructed through a researcher's understanding of phenomena (Stewart et al., 2019). In this sense, postmodernism and the interpretive concept of knowledge being subjectively constructed through people's

experiences allows me to recognize how my experiences, biases, and knowledge interpretation will contribute to the analysis and discussion of results.

In essence, a CDA will always be focused on power relations, making the methodology fit most neatly within a critical paradigm. Unmasking the ways in which power operates is crucial for understanding how white masculine prerogatives (Parmanand, 2022) continue to be constructed in sport and COVID vaccination discourse. Postmodernism allows one to recognize the constant construction of knowledge, demonstrating its fluidity (Lăzăroiu, 2019). Accordingly, analyzing discourse highlights the inclusion of selective information in discursive relations to understand subjective construction of knowledge (Foucault, 1970/1981).

Relevant Definitions

Assimilationism: The act of an incoming group or person that adopts the cultural values and beliefs of the dominant culture.

Brawn vs. brain: A sport-based racist stereotype that identifies Black athletes as athletic, strong, and animalistic and white athletes as intelligent, persevering, and scrappy (Carrington, 2010; Ferrucci & Tandoc, 2018).

Breadwinner: The individual in a family group that makes the most amount of money (Kimmel, 1996).

Colorblind ideology: Perceptions of race not mattering for advancement in society; the belief that America operates as a meritocratic society (Bonilla-Silva, 2022).

Conservative political ideology: A social and philosophical ideology that is espoused to traditional American values such as heterosexual male dominant families and anti-abortion rhetoric. Typically, Christian thought is part and parcel of this ideology along with an emphasis toward limited federal government oversight for state rights.

COVID-19: A virus that has at one time halted multiple nations from operations. Currently, we are still under a COVID “pandemic” according to federal guidelines, however, states have chosen to enact preventative measures in different capacities with differing results.

Crisis in masculinity: Perceived issues with societal gendered performances leading to conservative backlash politics.

Critical discourse analysis: A methodology of research that emphasizes the language (signs) used in construction of texts, who is in/excluded from construction of an event, and an emphasis toward understanding the grand socio-historical processes related to giving the event meaning within a specific moment in culture (Fairclough, 2010).

Critical paradigm: Ideas that unmask the beliefs and practices that limit human freedom, justice, and democracy. The goal of critical research is to “...critique and challenge, to transform, and to analyze power relations” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 59).

Critical white studies: Research identifying how whiteness creates oppressive conditions for marginalized communities (Nayak, 2007).

Discourse: Two working definitions are “A)... a pragmatic understanding, predominant among linguistic and micro-sociological discourse analysts, which considers discourse as a process or practice of contextualizing texts, language in use, the situated production of speech acts or a turn-taking practice; B) in a socio-historical understanding, preferred by macrosociological discourse theorists interested in power, for whom ‘discourse’ refers to an ensemble of verbal and non-verbal practices of larger social communities” (Angermuller et al., 2014, p. 2).

Gender: Performances that situate an individual as masculine, feminine, or non-binary that match societal associations of those performances (Butler, 1990).

Hard body: A man building a literal and metaphorical shield from foreign invaders and feminine characteristics represented by extreme musculature and guns. This type of masculinity was most popular during Reagan’s administration in the 1980s (Jeffords, 1994).

Hegemonic masculinity: The most preferred set of gendered performances for men in a given period that creates a masculine hierarchy that most men strive to achieve (Connell, 1995).

Homohysteria: Acting in hypermasculine fashion to avoid being labeled gay and ostracized by other men (Anderson, 2009).

Inclusive masculinity: A contemporary form of masculinity that is more open to typical feminine sensibilities such as same-sex bonding, non-aggression, and physical touch (Anderson, 2009).

Intersectionality: Critical identity research that analyzes along multiple axes of identities rather than a singular identity giving special attention toward marginalized identities (Rice et al., 2019).

Ivermectin: A drug commonly used to treat diseases caused from parasites such as roundworms that some individuals proposed as an alternative COVID-19 treatment.

Masculinity in sport: A hegemonic set of standards that boys/men are expected to perform which include dominance, internalizing a win-at-all-cost ideology, being invulnerable, bottling up their emotions, participating in “locker room talk” that objectifies women and subordinates gay men in team sports, and playing through any type of pain to be labeled as giving it your all for the team (Anderson, 2008; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Messner, 2002).

New man: A masculine trope that situates men who struggle to make sense of their masculinity with competing ideologies of orthodox masculine sensibilities and being more open to progressive movements shaping society (Malin, 2005).

New racism: Subtle, covert concepts, thoughts, and language that may not be explicit, but has deleterious effects on people of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2022).

Orthodox femininity: Traditional, older ways of performing womanly gendered acts that still affect perceptions of femininity. Examples include maintaining the domestic sphere, not having a paying job, caring for children, obsession with beauty, passivity, heterosexuality, nurturing, and malleable (Kimmel, 1996).

Orthodox masculinity: Preferred, traditional ways of performing manly gendered acts that still affect perceptions of masculinity. Examples include emotional invulnerability, acting tough, demonstrating confidence, domestic breadwinner status, rugged individualism, aggression, violence, homophobia, marginalizing of others, bodily damage, willingness to inflict pain to others, and risk-taking (Anderson, 2008; Giaccardi, et al., 2016).

Postmodernism: A questioning of grand narratives and universal truths stemming from modernist knowledge construction of scientific rationality (Foucault, 1978/1990; Grbich, 2016).

Progressive political ideology: An American based ideology that is espoused to social justice efforts such as advocating for inclusion of people of color in all forms of life and environmentalism. Progressivism can be viewed as the opposite of conservatism in most capacities.

Race: A social construct that fluctuates over time. Previously, religion, social status, and pedigree were used to determine race. Now, most racial categories are determined by phenotypic features, such as the color of one's skin (Omi & Winant, 2014).

Racetalk: Covert racialized language stereotyping individuals based on their race (Buffington & Fraley, 2008). This is an example of new racism.

Rugged individualism: A practice in social and economic relations that emphasizes liberty, independence, personal freedom, and free enterprise (Kimmel, 1996).

Wages of whiteness: Linguistic, social, and workplace relational strategies used by white working-class individuals to separate themselves from working-class people of color to avoid the alienation and exploitation felt from those in positions of power, allowing a hierarchy to be created with people of color at the bottom (Roediger, 1991).

Warrior ethos: A masculine ideology that situates men risking themselves for the greater good of their nation/family/team (Do & Samuels, 2021; Saint-Amour, 2018; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009)

Warspeak: Discourse related to military efforts, concerns, and movements that surface in common vernacular (Jansen, 2002).

White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants: The dominant group in the founding of America that is still disproportionately overrepresented in positions of power in American society (Davidson et al., 2005).

White victimization rhetoric: Persuasive arguments that situate white men as masochistic (receiving pleasure) from society viewing them as victims of progressive movements (Savran, 1998).

Whiteness: A fluid racial categorization that in contemporary times is generally defined by phenotypic features such as the color of one's skin that has dominated most worldly processes and actions for centuries (Omi & Winant, 2014).

Organization of Study

In Chapter One, I introduced the study's parameters and goals. The introduction focuses on the relevant context, background of sport studies literature related to the topic, purpose of the study and the research question, the theoretical orientation, and paradigmatic decisions related to the theories. All components concentrate on emphasizing the rationale and purpose for the study. The chapter ends with useful terms for the analysis. Chapter Two establishes the theoretical orientation guiding this study and a historical overview of white masculinities conceptualized beginning post-World War II in the United States with an overt focus on mediated depictions of contemporary white athletes. Chapter Three focuses on methodological, ontological, epistemological, and paradigmatic choices and procedures that inform my study, specifically highlighting the role and execution of a critical discourse analysis. Chapter Four highlights the findings from my critical discourse analysis of mainstream media and sport media depictions of Aaron Rodgers' resistance to CDC-approved vaccination focusing on construction of his white masculine identities. The chapter also discusses interpretations of the discursive analysis related to theoretical, ontological, and epistemological underpinnings of the study. Chapter Five provides a conclusion summarizing key arguments, (de)limitations in the analysis, recommendations for future work, and concluding remarks.

Chapter Two: White Masculinities Literature Review

Whiteness and masculinity have been conceptualized much differently depending on which part of history one begins their analysis. I view race not based on physical characteristics, but as a fluid social construct dependent on social relations at the time of analysis (Omi & Winant, 2014). Over time, being deemed “white” has been used to justify discriminatory practices toward others through religious persecution, slavery, and maintaining control in positions of power (Brown, 2004; Kendi, 2016). Since masculinity can be theorized to shift over time, I advocate for understanding masculinity through performative theories. One is not born with preconceived notions of gender, but through social interactions, one learns how to “perform” gender to situate themselves within specific social groups (Butler, 1990). The goal of this literature review is to first describe the theories related to this study, next to define how “white” has been defined historically, then move into a historicization of masculinities beginning after World War II with a specific interest in mediated depictions of white masculinity, ending with a review of contemporary masculine ideas within sport studies literature. To better understand discourse, a thorough examination of social context related to the event under analysis is pertinent to make sense of the dominant ways one may understand an event (Fairclough, 2010). This literature review explicates historical legacies for how a representative of a white, sporting masculine body has been theorized and describe ideas that are relevant for a discursive analysis on Aaron Rodgers’ COVID vaccination discourse.

Theoretical Orientation

As a representative of white masculinity, Aaron Rodgers' vaccination comments were analyzed using critical theories related to the intersection of two of his most salient identities—whiteness and masculinity. The idea of intersectional analysis was first explicitly stated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991; 1989). In her foundational writings, she established how law research that utilizes one axis of identity is shortsighted for other ways oppression may be experienced by those with multiple marginalized identities. Specific in her scholarship, Crenshaw demonstrates how the intersection of being a Black woman leads to different oppressions that traditional white feminist research did not recognize. Since Crenshaw's arguments, intersectional research has been utilized in a variety of ways looking at how multiple identities may impact a person's experience (Rice et al., 2019), even extending to quantitative studies dealing with identities (Bauer & Scheim, 2019). For this analysis, I am examining Rodgers' layers of privilege to determine how media members constructed discourse on his COVID vaccination comments. Intersectionality provides a starting point for identifying how different camps believe their identities are impacted in an increasingly diverse United States.

Recognizing how whiteness has been conceptualized is important for informing an analysis on Rodgers' discourse. I have chosen to not capitalize white throughout this analysis. There is much debate on if the racial categories white and Black should be capitalized or not (see a summary by Appiah, 2020). Touré (2011) argued that Black constitutes an ethnic group like Irish, Italian, etc. since slavery has disrupted familial roots. Whiteness is more so an overt racial category, whereas Blackness can be thought of

as a cultural, ethnic category in which each individual has shared experiences in the U.S. Although the seventh edition of the APA publication manual (2020) calls for capitalization for all racial categories, as a white scholar critiquing the domination of white representation, I cannot, in good faith, agree to capitalize white throughout this text. Hence, that is why you will see Black capitalized and white lower-cased throughout this study.

Theoretically speaking, whiteness can be viewed as a social construct, one that is fluid over time (Omi & Winant, 2014). In the contemporary United States, the easiest way for people to identify the race of an individual is based on phenotypic features of a person's body (i.e., observable traits such as eye color, etc.), the most apparent of which is the color of one's skin (Fouka et al., 2021). Some individuals who are now considered "white" have historically been racialized as non-white depending on their ethnic background and religious status (Brown, 2004). The process of becoming white has been an effective way for previous ethnic immigrants to receive privileges experienced by white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) and to continue subjugation of individuals who are easily identifiable as different from the dominant group like Indigenous, Brown, and Black populations (Brown, 2004). Rodgers' heritage as Irish and German (Powell, 2018) affords him the privileges of whiteness that were formerly experienced only by a select group (WASPs).

Racial Theories

Due to the emphasis on his race, critical white studies (CWS) can be a valuable tool for understanding the ways in which discourse about race impacts representations

constructed about a white athlete. Throughout U.S. history, individuals have elected to utilize strategies that situate them as “white” to receive benefits enjoyed by an elite few (Roediger, 1991). Previously, ethnicity was used to classify individuals (Roediger, 1991), but this has shifted to racial classifications due to assimilationist efforts that social groups, such as Italians, Germans, and Irish, have utilized to receive the benefits of being white (Brown, 2004). In this sense, whiteness in the United States can be thought of as constantly evolving, although many contemporary Americans generally view it as static (Omi & Winant, 2014). A more thorough elaboration on the process of becoming “white” is established in the next section.

CWS recognizes that it is not enough to make white people aware of the impact of their whiteness, but instead advocates for understanding how whiteness creates systems of oppression for differently raced individuals (Nayak, 2007). Whiteness can be thought of as “unmarked” (Robinson, 2000) and the “standard” by which people who do not identify as white are compared against (Nayak, 2007). Though recently, more work within CWS has allowed whiteness to become identified or increasingly become “marked” in research efforts (Marx, 2003) and this study can be thought of as part of the “marking” effort. Critical racial work can be conceptualized through different waves of research. The first wave is thought to be conceived from W.E.B. Du Bois. He advocated for understanding Black identity in a white dominated society through concepts like “double consciousness” and “twoness” that emphasized Black people manipulating social strategies to become partly accepted in white society (Du Bois, 1935/1965). These psychological strategies allowed Black citizens to receive minimal privileges in a world

ruled by white prerogatives. The second wave of racial studies focused on analyzing the invisibility of white privilege and how people of color's history was "blacked out" (Twine & Gallagher, 2008). This wave also focused on how immigrants assimilated and "became" white (Roediger, 1991). Akom (2008) identified a "third wave" of critical racial work with five ways in which contemporary racial studies has advanced understandings of whiteness impacting research and different societies,

(1) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of oppression; (2) challenging white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and other dominant ideologies; (3) a critical reflexivity that addresses how various formulations of whiteness are situated in relation to contemporary formulations of Black/people of color identity formation, politics, and knowledge construction; (4) innovative research methodologies including asset-based research approaches; and, finally, (5) a racial elasticity that identifies the ways in which white racial power and pigmentocracy are continually reconstituting themselves in the color-blind era and beyond. (p. 247)

Some scholars even advocate for understanding that we are in the fourth wave of critical racial research in certain fields, such as in leisure studies. Arai and Kivel (2009) understand the fourth wave as:

...including an analysis of the social construction and deconstruction of racial categories. The fourth wave places emphasis on re-examining race and racism, rather than just ethnicity and cultural differences. This wave contextualizes discussions of race and racism within theoretical frameworks which enable

broader discussion of social and structural inequalities, power, ideology and white hegemony (p. 464).

To understand how whiteness impacts discourse, it is not enough to “be white,” rather it is important to recognize how individuals are “thought to be white” (Nayak, 2007). The construction and (re)production of whiteness allows privilege and racialized hierarchies to go unchallenged in many societies (Akom, 2008; Nayak, 2007). Ideologies surrounding the impact of whiteness are important for critically analyzing discourse surrounding mediated depictions of a white athlete’s resistance to CDC recommendations on the COVID vaccination.

Additionally, the idea of race not being important within news coverage of events or phenomena stems from the notion of the colorblind society elaborated by Bonilla-Silva (2022). A colorblind society is the idea that the United States, and many Western societies, operate without race as an oppressive force. Rather, because of the success of a small number of people of color, some people believe there are not any structural racial barriers in place that limit social advancement. Colorblind societies resort to placing individualistic blame on people that cannot advance rather than observing the obstacles in place leading to disadvantages for differently racialized people. Colorblind ideology is a tenet of critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) that is pertinent to understand as Rodgers’ public health comments are analyzed. Akom (2008) argues that any critical study involving race should utilize the concepts of colorblind ideology and intersectionality.

Discourse about COVID vaccination has been highly political in the United States. One political ideology that has been vocal about anti-vaccination are conservatives, generally falling in the Republican party (Fridman et al., 2021). Even prior to the COVID pandemic, Baumgartner et al. (2018) found individuals who identify with conservative ideology to be significantly less willing to vaccinate against measles, pertussis, and influenza in a survey study compared to liberal participants. Additionally, their research found conservatism was a significant indicator for less governmental trust. Baum (2011) found that political ideology was a significant predictor for individuals receiving a swine flu (H1N1) vaccine in 2008 and 2009 with Republicans (especially conservatives) being less likely to receive a vaccine. These studies demonstrate that contemporary conservative ideology generally leads to an unwillingness to receive vaccinations for reasons based on lack of governmental trust and perceived health concerns. White conservatives generally believe their freedoms are limited while simultaneously working to uphold limitations on other races' freedoms (Ferguson, 2011). The PEW Research Center found that 81% of Republican registered voters are white in 2019 (Gramlich, 2020), disproportionate compared to the number of white identifying citizens in the United States (61.6% according to Jones et al., 2021 from the U.S. Census of 2020). Lasher et al. (2022) found that for college-aged students in New York City, consuming right-wing media generally leads to hesitancy toward taking the vaccine. These notions of whiteness are important to make sense of how media constructions of a white man matter when he discusses his resistance to CDC recommendations on vaccination and the restrictions imposed on his body related to his decision. Some ideas

stated by Rodgers correlate with conservative based news reports regarding vaccination status (Lasher et al., 2022) and can be viewed as part of the reclamation of white male dominance in social affairs (Kusz, 2019). Whether intentional or not, Rodgers' discourse of anti-freedom rhetoric related to COVID vaccinations is part of a larger discourse on conservative ideological rhetoric related to public health and freedom.

The last significant racial theory for this analysis is white victimization rhetoric. White victimization rhetoric states that as traditionally marginalized groups' issues in society become recognized, white men are the "true" victims of oppressed groups' ascendance (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Kusz, 2001; Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998). Rodgers situates himself as a victim of media representations and restrictive NFL policies despite enjoying the mass of privileges his white sporting body has afforded him. Savran (1998) takes victimization rhetoric a step further by stating that white men are masochistic. His ideology situates white men as feeling pleasure at their victimization—pleasure in the form of restating their identity as talking points to be serviced by legislative efforts that are largely created by individuals that look like them. Relatedly, McGhee (2021) claims that since the Civil Rights Era, poor and middle-class whites have been forced to choose either the party of the race or the party of their interests in political elections, to which the party of their race wins out because of the perception of "undeserving" people of color receiving government benefits. Racial initiatives are incorrectly seen as a "zero-sum gain" by many whites. McGhee's (2021) research argues that racialized policies effectively work for wealthy conservatives maintaining power rather than lower-class workers, no matter which race the individual is. This victimization rhetoric allows lower-

class white people to view themselves more in line with upper-class white people than the lower-class people of color they compete with for limited resources (Roediger, 1991).

Gendered Theories

Gender is also a main concern within this discursive analysis. Rodgers represents the pinnacle of masculine performance—he is highly praised as one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time (Gagnon, 2021), a position that is seen as the leader on the hypermasculine football field. He is heterosexual and has displayed his sexuality through acts covered in media stories (Buzinski, 2015; Chiari, 2014). At the time of this analysis, he played his home games in Green Bay, Wisconsin, one of the coldest, most inhospitable cities that host NFL games (Fedotin, 2015), furthering his masculine status as “tough.” These ideas related to Rodgers’ masculinity demonstrate how his gender is performed through different acts depicted by media articles. The idea of gender performativity is articulated by Butler (1990) in which she advocates for understanding gender through how one acts and presents themselves. Gender performativity has a long history in sport studies research, specifically through how children learn and enact gender from their parents (Messner, 2009; 2002; 1992), how men demonstrate heterosexuality through their sporting prowess (Anderson, 2008), and how athletes create a warrior masculinity that promotes sacrificing one’s own self for the greater good of the team (Anderson & Kian, 2011; Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Like race, gender can be viewed as fluid, changing over time to match the accepted conditions performed by men, and, at times, even women (Connell, 1995).

Rodgers can be argued to enact hegemonic masculinity in public gendered displays. Hegemonic masculinity was coined by Connell (1995) in which she states that in different fields and at all times, there is a dominant masculinity that is preferred and the desired goal for most men to achieve. Hegemony was first theorized by Antonio Gramsci (1971/1989) in which he identified ruling classes' ability to preserve dominance is achieved through social coercion (soft power) and does not rely simply on physical coercion (hard power). Societies operate by social coercion through speech acts, acceptance in public spheres, maintaining social ideology entrenched in powerful decision makers' philosophies, among other coercive social tactics that create a "commonsense" way of being. Applying this concept to gender, Connell (1995) recognized how people are not forced to perform gender in specific ways, instead one learns how to appropriately enact gender through mechanisms such as praise and positive reinforcement of accepted, normative behavior. Park (2015) argues that hegemonic masculinity is perpetuated through mediated depictions that often leads to denigrating feelings for men who cannot live up to those standards.

An issue with the term hegemonic masculinity is noted by King et al. (2021). They state that many scholars describe hegemonic masculinity as a catchall phrase for components of male dominance. The issue with this usage is that it does not fully capture the moving, fluid nature of masculine identity. Instead, it views dominant masculinity in a singular way that does not seem to vary much over time. Following this criticism, I advocate for studying *masculinities* rather than a single masculinity (Kimmel, 1996). As such, I will use and define the idea of "orthodox masculinity" as a general phrase for

ways of performing masculinity that follow traditional expectations of men resulting in a policing of boundaries to meet the status quo (Anderson, 2008). Ideas that relate to the notion of orthodox masculinity refer to emotional invulnerability, acting tough, demonstrating confidence, domestic breadwinner status, rugged individualism, aggression, violence, homophobia, marginalizing others, bodily damage, willingness to inflict pain to others, and risk-taking (Anderson, 2008; Giaccardi et al., 2016). Due to traditional notions of a binary understanding of gender that segregates the sports world, I am viewing femininity as the opposite of masculinity (Fink, 2016). Orthodox characteristics related to femininity include emotionality, passivity, nurturance, safety, care, and family loyalty. Both forms of orthodox gendered ideologies share the qualities of heterosexuality and a concern with status (Anderson, 2008). Aaron Rodgers has had his masculinity questioned by media members before to which he promoted hegemonically accepted versions of masculinity (Buzinski, 2015; Chiari, 2014).

Relationally, Parmanand (2022) found that former President Donald Trump utilized language of freedom as a hegemonic form of masculinity during the COVID pandemic that led to increased health scrutiny and eventual protests. A signifier of hegemonic Western masculinity can be men denying health needs and engaging in risky behaviors to affirm their status as the “stronger sex” (Parmanand, 2022). Trump’s assertion of freedom discourse and reluctance to trust the government opened opportunities for someone like Rodgers to approach the COVID vaccination process through his alternative plan. Examining the discourse surrounding Rodgers’ public health

disclosure identified ways of enacting gender that demonstrates performances related to dominant sporting ideologies and COVID discourse.

The theoretical orientations surrounding whiteness and masculinity are fruitful for explicating discourse surrounding Rodgers' identities in mediated constructions of his public health disclosure for his COVID immunization plan. All in all, the ideological theories about whiteness and masculinity will lay the groundwork for conceptualizing how two of Rodgers' most pronounced identities mattered in mediated discourse construction.

On Race

The following examination on race and whiteness will focus on the racialization process of North America, most specifically during and post colonization of the United States of America. To better understand why whiteness matters for this analysis, I advocate for analyzing the construction of whiteness historically leading to our contemporary moment. Evaluating the fluidity of whiteness through history can better explain how whiteness is conceptualized in contemporary times leading to analytical nuance for mediated discourse on Aaron Rodgers' vaccination disclosure.

The British, French, Spanish, and Dutch first settled in the "New World" to increase their wealth by exploiting resources and people, to broaden their influence on world affairs, and some to have religious freedom beginning in the early 17th century (Beneke & Grenda, 2011; Kendi, 2016). In what would become the United States of America, settlers demonstrated an othering process in which white, Anglo-Saxon

Protestants (WASPs) were seen as different and better than non-WASP groups (Davidson, 1994; Horsman, 1981). WASPs are/have been the hegemonic group in the colonial and contemporary United States (Davidson, 1994; Davidson et al., 2005). One of the first advances colonizers pushed for was Indigenous populations to adopt Protestantism as religious decree, which they attempted to accomplish through religious missions, savage genocide, boarding schools, restrictive identity requirements, and overall destruction of Indigenous culture (Beneke & Grenda, 2011; Pointer, 2011; Whitt & Clarke, 2017; Whitt & Clarke, 2019). Racialized, discriminatory actions and legislation such as slavery led to a racial hierarchy that placed Black, Brown, mixed raced, and Indigenous individuals as intellectually, socially, and morally inferior to white people (Kendi, 2016), as well as justifying genocide toward Indigenous cultures and populations (Pointer, 2011).

Notwithstanding pernicious justifications for slavery (Brown, 2004; Horsman, 1981; Whitford, 2009), new opportunities took shape for immigrants from across different lands. Millions of immigrants mostly from European countries began pouring into colonial North America (Brown, 2004). Those deemed “white” due to not just their skin color, but also their social, legal, and religious statuses, were on top of the social hierarchy (Kendi, 2016). Protestant, Anglo-Saxon identities experienced privileges in the “New World” (Davidson, 1994; Kendi, 2016). Citizenship was a primary concern, and the First American Congress of 1790 voted only those who were “white” could be naturalized as citizens (Ignatiev, 1995). Immigrants with other religious affiliations, such as Catholicism, found it difficult to transition into positions of power given prejudice

against their ethnic background (Brown, 2004; Ignatiev, 1995). New European immigrants that began arriving in the 1800s—Irish, German, and Italian to name a few groups— were originally placed in the slums and poor working conditions similar to Africans and African Americans (though not formerly enslaved like the latter groups) (Brown, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Kendi, 2016).

For WASPs in positions of power, it was easy to “Other” individuals that were culturally and physically different from them, but it became a matter of debate on how to classify European immigrants that share some similarities with the hegemonic group (Brown, 2004). As more immigrants from different countries and different ethnicities came to the United States, immigrant groups with phenotypic features similar to WASPs assimilated to WASP social standards to become accepted by those in power. Individuals who did not share phenotypic features (Black, Brown, and Native populations) continued to be casted in lower societal roles (Brown, 2004). Working-class immigrants who were ethnically outcasted from positions of power perhaps shared more in common with working-class people of color, but those in positions of power generally gave privileges to assimilating whites to keep groups from unifying (Roediger, 1991). Roediger (1991) identified the “wages of whiteness” as privileges for assimilating white workers to compensate for the alienation and exploitation they experienced within class relationships from those in positions of power. For a more focused example, Ignatiev (1995) notes that Irish Catholic immigrants’ assimilation into whiteness allowed them to compete for jobs outside a segregated market, live wherever they could afford, join a democratic process, and to spend their money without racialized restrictions that were enforced under British

(i.e., Protestant) rule in their homeland. Ignatiev (1995) demonstrates how Irish immigrants were thought of and treated similarly to Africans and African Americans before the arduous assimilation process for their people occurred. All in all, these privileges allowed assimilating immigrants more overall freedom in social pursuits.

When the Great Migration occurred through 1916-1970, the country's regional demographics shifted as millions of Black people migrated to northern cities to escape absolute racial discrimination in the Jim Crow south (Brown, 2004). United States social classification systems transitioned to adopt phenotypic features as an easier way to subjugate individuals than by their ethnic roots (Fouka et al., 2021). As time continued through the 1900s, diverse immigrant groups were homogenized into the dominant racial class (Fouka et al., 2021; Kendi, 2016). For most Americans, a "good immigrant" was one who assimilated into dominant WASP ideology (Brown, 2004). Though not experiencing the privileges experienced by white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants initially, many former immigrants who possess "white" phenotypic features in the 1900s now enjoy these privileges. As people's ethnic backgrounds began to fade due to assimilation to United States (WASP) standards, whiteness replaced ethnic struggles some European groups' ancestors faced (Brown, 2004; Kunst et al., 2018). Examples of white privilege includes, but is not limited to, access to housing where one wants to live, media widely representing white people, doing well in social situations without being called a "credit" for the white race, when asked to talk to someone in charge, that person shares the same race, and lack of fear related to acceptance in public places like transportation (McIntosh, 1990). The effects of assimilationism can still be felt today as researchers find that when

participants are asked which immigrant groups look white, they believe that those who engage in American cultural values look more phenotypically white than others who do not practice American values (Kunst et al., 2018). For example, if individuals believe in a meritocratic individualist society, white U.S. citizens believe those individuals actually look more “white” than those with different cultural practices (Kunst et al., 2018).

Nowadays, some scholars think of whiteness as “unmarked” (Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998), meaning that whiteness is the standard upon which every other racial categorization is compared against. Examples include white culture being dominant (Alexander, 2010), ethnicities apart from white are labeled “people of color” or “non-white” (Bonilla-Silva, 2004), and white people do not ask other passing white people their ethnicities but do ask racially ambiguous people their ethnicity (Tatum, 2017). This can be further highlighted through a sports example. Smith and Beal’s (2007) study on MTV’s show “Cribs” found Black athletes discussed race being important to their identity whereas white athletes did not discuss race at all, rendering whiteness invisible in the show.

Although African Americans and Black Americans have been legally demarcated in strict ways, Blackness has been historically fluid as well. Even though the current study is focused on whiteness, it’s important to note how white prerogatives have dictated differently raced individuals’ lives through detrimental legislation and social attitudes, especially as it relates to mediated representation of differently raced athletes. One historical example includes the “one-drop rule” which states that if someone has even one drop of Black, African ancestry in their blood, they are legally deemed Black without

claims to any other race (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Middleton, 2016). Each state created their own rule for rights based on race, but the one-drop rule was staunchly legalized in most southern, slave-holding states such as South Carolina and Mississippi (Kendi, 2016). While this rule is no longer legally enforced, multiracial individuals may still experience their non-white racial identity “dominating” other identities (Iverson et al., 2022). Even in sports, biracial athletes struggle to be represented in polysemous ways; instead their visually prevalent racial category, typically their non-white race, dominates representation (Deeb & Love, 2018).

For people of color, acceptance into the white dominated sphere was difficult. One of the most salient ways acceptance into white society was accomplished was becoming athletic national heroes demonstrated by the acceptance of athletes like Jesse Owens (1913-1980) and Joe Louis (1914-1981) who both disproved the myth of German Aryan supremacy through their sporting feats (McCrae, 2003). Despite their great accomplishments for the United States, McCrae (2003) posits that the athletes were “betrayed” by their country due to lack of support and unjust legal sanctions following their achievements. Even though the U.S. praised their achievements, Owens’ and Louis’ race disallowed full legal and social acceptance (McCrae, 2003).

I offer these brief historical insights on how whiteness (and to a lesser extent, Blackness) has been classified to discuss how racial categories have been fluid. This literature review demonstrates that whiteness is conceptual, so I view the term white as a racializing component that has given certain ethnic and religious groups more advantages in society compared to others (Omi & Winant, 2014). Scholars today find that white

racism and supremacy continues to impact American judicial and political systems (Alexander, 2010; Feagin & Elias, 2012) and, most specific to this study, the sports world (Buffington & Fraley, 2012; 2008; Crowe, 2021; Ferber, 2007; Leonard, 2017; Eastman & Billings, 2001). Displaying historical context for how I view the term white is important for understanding how journalists describe Aaron Rodgers' racial identity in mediated coverage. Conceptualizing how assimilation impacted the term "white" allows comprehension toward recognizing the privileges Rodgers, a descendant of German and Irish ancestry (Powell, 2018), has had throughout his life. The next section will move in a more chronological fashion that discusses how masculinity (specifically white masculinity) has been conceptualized in different time periods with a focus on mediated depictions. The timeline will help establish historical roots that provide context for an examination of discourse surrounding white masculine representative Aaron Rodgers' disclosure of taking non-sanctioned drugs for his COVID immunization plan.

Masculinities: Historical Perspectives

At any given time, there is resistance occurring, so the dominance of a hegemonic way of performing gender is never complete or static. Instead, it is a constant struggle, hence theorists claim to study *masculinities* rather than a singular masculinity (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1996). There are always residual (older), emergent (upcoming), and dominant (hegemonic) ways of performing masculinity in any given time (Williams, 1977). To help think through these connections in the sporting world, Whannel (2001) claims that part of the ideological work done in constructing athletes is to provide a normalization of orthodox hegemonic masculinity and a marginalization of alternative

forms; thus men athletes are almost always evaluated through a hegemonic lens. As I move through this analysis, I will mention different periods of hegemonic (or the most dominant, see King et al., 2021) forms of masculinity in an era, contextualize why this (almost always white) masculine performance was the most preferred at the time, offer a few popular alternative masculinities in each era, and end with conceptions directly related to sporting masculinity. The mediated masculine evaluation will identify important context for understanding how and why Aaron Rodgers' vaccination disclosure discourse was constructed in specific ways.

To better understand how masculinity has been conceptualized from post-World War II to 1980, one important piece to note is that mainstream cultural studies theorizations of masculinity did not begin until the late 1980s (Whannel, 2001). Most research completed on masculine representations pre-1980 is done retrospectively. Additionally, this review will be focused on how men were represented and portrayed in media and men's perceptions in an ever-shifting society. While masculinity may impact people's lived realities in many ways, I focus on how the media represented masculine depictions in this review.

Post-World War II and the 1950s

The chronology will begin with conceptualizing historical masculinity in post-World War II United States. There are a few important reasons for that distinction, the first being at the end of World War II, the U.S., as well as most of the Western world, experienced a period of economic growth that was markedly different from war and pre-war times. Over 16 million U.S. men (and 350,000 women) left to join the war efforts

against the Axis Powers following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, marking one of the most significant periods of male absence in United States history (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021). The sheer amount of death and destruction has not been matched since the war's end in 1945. The historical moment led to important changes for how mediated messages of masculinity have been constructed that still hold relevance in contemporary society.

In the 1950s, there was a boom of new forms of technology and media, such as television, becoming popular. The United States was (and still is) a leader in media content creation, which contributed to an American dominance of an increasingly globalized media. In other words, this meant a form of Americanization around the world (De Iulio & Vinti, 2009; Meeuf, 2011). In fact, television was so popular, university athletic departments were concerned about declining attendance at games (NORC, 1957). This was eventually offset with a growing economy leading to increased attendance in the late 1950s (NORC, 1957). Despite the perceived threat of less attendance, television proliferation bolstered U.S. sports to new heights in their home country with sporting stars earning much more than their predecessors (Whannel, 2001). With an increase in sponsorship, commercialization, and popularity, this is the era in which sport became a domestic event that people could witness and love without leaving their home, allowing sport stardom incommensurable growth (Whannel, 2009; 2001). While radio allowed sports to become a domestic event in earlier decades, the visual element of television was a game changer for audience immersion (Whannel, 2001). Television dominated media, especially as the 1950s turned into the 1960s, but other forms of media were also

important for constructing white masculinity, especially white sporting masculinity, such as literature, magazines, newspapers, advertising, cinema reels, cigarette sports cards, and radio (Whannel, 2001).

The return of U.S. soldiers from World War II a few years prior contributed to massive growth in many industries. These forces coalesced into a novel era that affected “modernist” society. From the late 1800s until around the 1950s, the American Industrial Revolution occurred which led to an increase in globalized products, products being developed at rapid speeds, and transport that made travel much more efficient than before (Hirschman & Mogford, 2009). Modernism asserts “strength” through the economic basis of capitalism constantly moving forward and progressing with attachment to a “warrior” ethos version of masculinity that was created and justified through Eurocentric, scientific rationalizations (Saint-Amour, 2018). The warrior ethos was conceptualized through a hypercompetitive drive in a capitalistic market; a “warrior” will sacrifice oneself for the greater good of their organization/business. The warrior masculinity can be directly related to contemporary sport theories as Hughes and Coakley (1991) discuss the “sport ethic” as a set of norms that athletes must perform to reach acceptance in sports. An athlete must make extreme personal sacrifices (create a warrior ethos) to help the team achieve victory. Athletic perceptions were directly influenced by masculine prerogatives stemming from shifting social relations due to industrial economic forces. The new form of economic relations created by a modernist society led to some anxieties for men as their individualistic work that once occurred pre-war was replaced by a reliance on social relations and increasing rates of technology (Lechner, 2014; Williams, 2013). Anxieties

of masculinity lead to “crisis” moments for perceptions of masculinity as men looked to “remasculinize” themselves through different avenues such as sports.

The heterosexual family image was continuously constructed in this era, depicted as a white family with the father working, also known as the breadwinner, and the mother maintaining the domestic sphere, caring for children and the home (Kimmel, 1996).

These orthodox gendered ideas were portrayed prominently through media representations. For example, television commercials featuring women were almost always bound by traditional sensibilities of domesticity in the 1950s (Allan & Coltrane, 1996).

The Cold War, which was a non-violent scientific, economic, and ideological race between the USA and the USSR, began post-World War II and lasted until around the 1990s. Although most depictions of men were along the lines of orthodox masculinity, such as demonstrating confidence and acting tough, there are analyses that found underlying anxieties about war efforts from a lack of confidence in United States initiatives in some media, such as pulp magazines (Osgersby, 2017). Additionally, homosexuality became linked to communism, a perceived Cold War threat that led to increased anti-gay policies which further defined a masculine person as heterosexual (Williams, 2013). The feminized cult of domesticity led to other anxieties as children were being raised almost solely by women causing a perceived effeminization of boys (Buchbinder, 2013; Lechner, 2014). Although this was not the first time a cult of domesticity was critiqued (Dunaway, 1997), men returning from a destructive war shifted perceptions of domestic gender relations. The increase in youth sports in this era was a

direct response toward Cold War anxieties, specifically that U.S. boys were less physically fit than Europeans (Gildea, 2016). Perceived masculine “crises,” such as the 1950s effeminization rhetoric, differ per era depending on social conditions but *always* exist as society shifts (Kimmel, 1996). During this era, the dominant masculinity was a breadwinner family model with men out working and women at home tending to their children (Kimmel, 1996). The lack of social mobility for women and the unequal status of people who identified as something other than white were important factors that led to several social movements that occurred in the proceeding era.

The 1960s and 1970s

The 1960s and 1970s saw progressive movements in the United States. The Civil Rights Era was a time in which people of color (mostly Black people but also other racially marginalized populations) and other minoritized groups (e.g. women, LGBTQI+ people) protested their unequal status in society and demanded more legislation be put in place to for social rights (Andrews & Gaby, 2015; Kendi, 2016; Nagel, et al., 2015). For example, specifically related to sports, Title IX was enacted in 1972, which disallowed discrimination in educational facilities that received federal financial aid based on sex. For sports, this meant high schools and universities now had to provide equal opportunities for men, women, girls, and boys in school systems (Thelin, 2000). Title IX and many other laws mark a significant shift toward a more inclusive society for traditionally marginalized groups in the U.S. A dominant controversy occurring at the time was the Vietnam War. Many younger Americans were distraught at the prospect of dying for their country in a war that many, like the former boxing heavyweight title-

holder Muhammad Ali, claimed America had no business being a part of (Gorsevski & Butterworth, 2011).

These movements also marked a significant shift in how gender roles were conceptualized and promoted. Although a new war was taking shape through American intervention in Southeast Asia, this war did not have clearly defined lines of evil such as Nazism in World War II Germany (Tierney, 2018). The new era helped the military reproduce perceptions of masculinity, even for Black Americans who experienced segregation under Jim Crow Laws (Kendi, 2016). It is important to note the differences between Black and white constructions of masculinity, also termed the Black/white binary (Oseguera et al., 2018), due to the ongoing comparisons and construction of Black masculinity through white prerogatives, especially in U.S. sport literature. The racialized correlation is demonstrated through the military constructing recruiting strategies that identified the “good” Black soldier as one who was upwardly mobile, did not view race as obstructive to their social mobility, and was professional in their militaristic duties (Favara, 2018). Or, in other words, was colorblind (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). The U.S. government employed strategies to speak toward orthodox white masculine perceptions of professionalism, status, and breadwinning ideology to attempt to ease wary anti-war Black Americans, like Muhammad Ali (Favara, 2018). The construction of a “good” Black soldier is nothing new, just recreated to match the social context of the time. Former heavyweight champion Joe Louis was also depicted as the “good” Black soldier during WWII when he put his boxing career on hold to serve in the Army (Deardorff,

1995). The Vietnam War perpetuated a variety of mediated representations in this period.

Scholars looking back in this era have argued mediated representations of masculinity demonstrated how orthodox masculine sensibilities were dominant. White et al.'s (2013) study found cigarette advertisements were targeted differently toward white and Black men in the 1960s. For example, white targeted ads from Marlboro always had a cowboy quality that emphasized rugged individualism and a “backlash” reaction to the Civil Rights Era. Black targeted ads from Kool, a U.S. brand of menthol cigarettes, represented a “cool” Black masculinity that was argued to be used for redefining racial subordination in a prideful manner. Another example is a comparative study in which Whannel (2001) analyzed media depictions of white English footballer (soccer player) George Best and Black American boxer Muhammad Ali. Whannel found that Best's career is defined through lack of discipline; he partied and performed his gender in orthodox ways as a womanizer and risk taker. Ali's career is largely defined through a racial lens but also hints at performing his masculinity in orthodox ways by being a womanizer and political risk-taker. Despite being conceptualized through their races, both athletes shared orthodox masculine sensibilities that largely defined their mediated depictions. Furthermore, Whannel (2001) proposed that media images of sports in this era were dedicated specifically to male achievement: “men act, women appear.” Andersen (2014) found the Hollywood beach party genre in film in the early 1960s worked to reaffirm orthodox hegemonic white sensibilities following the anxieties of the 1950s. Lastly, while examining comedies from the 1970s and 1980s, Diffrient (2019) found that

men were the most emotional when touching another man, specifically through the hypermasculine act of arm wrestling. Arm wrestling was long used for a moment of masculine self-reflection in this genre no matter the race of the character (although comedies were white dominated). These studies exemplify the complexity of theorizing a dominant form of masculinity in any given era. Multiple masculinities exist and can become a point of analysis at any given time.

To add more complexity toward conceptualizing masculinity, this era spawned the beginning constructions of what scholars label the “new man” (Beynon, 2002; Crowe, 2019; Kusz, 2001a; Malin, 2005; Whannel, 2001). The new man is one who is somewhat more in touch with their “feminine side,” who thinks about other groups apart from his dominant white, male identity, takes care of his health and appearance, and recognizes how hypermasculine policies may have discriminatory effects. This type of masculinity was epitomized by the hippie movement in the era. The new man of the 1960s and 1970s led to a perceived “crisis in masculinity” (Beynon, 2002; Kusz, 2001a; Robinson, 2000). Those who identified a crisis in masculinity occurring were typically tied up in orthodox sensibilities for how men and women should act (Crowe, 2019; Kusz, 2001a; Kusz, 2001b). The new man masculinity is a relevant concept throughout different periods of time.

At different moments, political advocates and “masculinists” (McSharry, 2017) have found there to be “crisis” moments for masculinity that stem from men not acting in an orthodox masculine way, or better stated, these upcoming men did not act as their fathers before them (Crowe, 2019). According to Gallagher (1997), white individuals in

their study have never had their race questioned like the progressive movements did in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, he found that the white men in their study only notice their race when they are the racial minority in a group (which was an uncommon occurrence for most from the 1970s to the 1990s). These crisis moments led to a series of political and social backlashes that helped shape mediated depictions of masculinity that Kusz (2001a) labeled “white backlash politics.”

Due to questioning the fluctuating values of Americanism, the nature of war intervention, and the progressive movements that led white men to perceive themselves as losing status and power in society (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Savran, 1998), many people in positions of power determined young boys were becoming effeminized, another symptom leading to white backlash politics (Kimmel, 1996; Kusz, 2001a). Men in positions of power, such as politicians and media owners, claimed effeminization occurred due to women raising boys within their cult of domesticity (the household) which was an effect of perceived gender roles following World War II (Beynon, 2002). White backlash politics were in part an attempt to remasculinize the “effeminate” boys of society and a response to the perceived victim status white men felt they were experiencing (Kusz, 2001a; Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998). These issues were felt so strongly that when girls were forced to be included in Little League Baseball in the early 1970s, the organization created a league specifically for girl’s participation in 1974: Little League Softball (Love & Dzikus, 2013).

The 1980s

The reclamation of orthodox masculinity has been most strongly theorized through the political and mediated depictions of men that occurred during former President Ronald Reagan's administration from 1981-1989 (Jeffords, 1994). Significantly, Reagan's administration was one of the first to openly allude to the U.S. being colorblind, meaning that someone's race does not impact the opportunities they receive in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). Colorblind rhetoric was part of the white backlash politics to the progressive movements and anxieties surrounding the perceived loss of white male privileges. This colorblind rhetoric came to the front of public imagination because of the political rights that were enacted for minority groups; the belief being since these policies were put in place, the U.S. was now a meritocratic society, ignoring additional barriers in place for different social groups due to covertly racist policies (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; McGhee, 2021). Reagan's economic policy that allowed more wealth amassment for the upper class, which is disproportionately white (Komlos, 2019; May, 1993; Modigliani, 1988), and his "war on drugs" (Hinton, 2016) that legalized discriminatory policies are two distinct examples of colorblind policies instituted that superfluously affected working class people and people of color.

Furthermore, to help demonstrate Reagan's "strength," in this era, we began seeing mediated depictions of Reagan with a "hard body" (Jeffords, 1994). According to Jeffords (1994) and Whannel (2001), the hard body is the favored form of masculinity throughout the 1980s. These images, sometimes fantasy portrayals such as Reagan having a six pack throughout his seventies in print and television advertisements

(Jeffords, 1994), represent the hegemonic (Connell, 1995) form of masculinity at the time. Representations of Reagan were not the only provider of mediated interpretations of hard body ideology. Actors Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger are two of the most salient hard body representatives of this era. To further define hard body ideology, one must possess a literal hard body, one that is emphasized by extreme musculature, but also one must possess a metaphorical hard body in the sense that the person/character embodies stereotypical masculine traits such as lack of emotional availability (Jeffords, 1994). Through an analysis of Schwarzenegger's acting roles, Messner (2008) found that emotional displays were okay for the actor to perform, but only when they were to protect children (i.e., the film *Kindergarten Cop* released in 1990, the year after Reagan's administration). Other than that, Schwarzenegger's mediated depictions displayed an individualistic hard body and guns as a source of masculinization. It is important to note that all three of the most representative versions of hard body ideology are white men, but their ethnic roots—Reagan, Irish Catholic (but a practicing Protestant); Stallone, Italian and Jewish (but a practicing Catholic); and Schwarzenegger, Austrian Catholic—would have been less likely to classify them as “white” in an earlier U.S. era.

This hard body hegemonic form of masculinity is seen as a direct response to the progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Kusz, 2001a; Kusz, 2001b). The effects of this ideology were felt so strongly that even a satirical book (*Real Men don't eat Quiche*) critiquing ideas of food being either feminine or masculine was perceived as representing orthodox masculine discourse and even spawned a series due to its success (Contois, 2021). Allan and Coltrane (1996) found that mediated depictions of men had

not changed thematically from the 1950s to the 1980s, both still emphasized orthodox masculine sensibilities. The hard body is by far the most theorized hegemonic form of masculinity in any era in this review, as Jeffords' (1994) arguments are greatly utilized by the masculinity research community (Beynon, 2002; Crowe, 2019; Kimmel, 1996; Kusz, 2001a; Malin, 2005; Messner, 2008).

The 1990s

By 1990, Waters' (1990) argues that white people perceive ethnicity as "optional" meaning they can choose to identify with their ethnic groups or simply as "American." For white people, there is no cost to the individual in choosing either identity. Gallagher (1997) found that his white men interviewees had "A lack of ethnic identity... [that] has created a void that is being filled by an identity centered on race" (p. 7). Ethnicity to European heritage is seemingly not a concern to most white U.S. citizens anymore due to assimilationist American efforts. Previous concerns surrounding immigrating ethnic groups like Italians, Germans, and Irish are diminished because of the immigration of non-white groups that lacked easily identifiable characteristics with white Americans. Consequently, Americans can resort to whiteness as a social category for identification. A study such as Gallagher's (1997) is important to note as those deemed "white" view themselves as fully American, demonstrating that ethnic concerns have largely been replaced by racial concerns. Assimilationist efforts have now come full circle for most individuals with European ancestry that possess phenotypical and cultural features of "whiteness."

Turning attention toward media representations, (white) conservative pundits identified the lack of male role models to be a cause for a perceived masculine crisis (Whannel, 2001). Sporting stars, especially those in high contact sports, were the few adequate role models for orthodox masculinists (Whannel, 2001). Contrary to orthodox masculine sensibilities and athletic representations, the 1990s are theorized to be dominated by the reemergence of the “new man” masculine portrayal (Beynon, 2002; Malin, 2005). As a reminder, the new man is one that is concerned with social groups other than his dominant, white, heterosexual, male group, who is in touch with his emotions, and struggles with negotiating older generations’ masculinity (Beynon, 2002; Buchbinder, 2013; Crowe, 2019; Malin, 2005). Although on the surface the new man may seem to represent progression and being in touch with a diversifying society, the new man is still tied up with orthodox sensibilities about what it means to be a “man” in American society and struggles with finding a middle-ground between new and old sensibilities (Crowe, 2019; Malin, 2005).

Malin (2005) identified Bill Clinton as the most salient representation of the new man because of his presidential image and due to his campaign of progress for all social groups. For example, Clinton outwardly championed progressive policies the Democratic party is known for, such as affirmative action (Hinton, 2016). Although on the surface he maintained a progressive demeanor and is cited by famed writer Toni Morrison (1998) as the first “Black” president (i.e., he was able to transcend racial lines like no president before him), he also signed into policy the “Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act” in 1994, which disproportionately jailed people of color (Hinton, 2016). While

advocating for progressive sensibilities, legacies of orthodox masculine prerogatives of law and order and white control were paramount throughout his presidency, representing the difficulty the “new man” of the era faced (Malin, 2005).

Through years of sport-based studies, Anderson (2011) marked the 1990s as a time in which the “homophobic zeitgeist” of sports began to greatly decline. Previously, sports were seen as a space where orthodox masculinity, especially heterosexual masculinity, were expected. Anderson (2011) noted that sporting men were becoming much more open to alternative masculinities from the hegemonic such as demonstrating same-sex tactility and being more open about their emotions. Mediated examples of the new man in the 1990s include Ross Gellar from *Friends*, Corey Matthews and Shawn Hunter from *Boy Meets World* and, in the sports world, can be seen through famed metrosexual sport star David Beckham (Whannel, 2001). Along with the new man of the 1990s, other forms of masculinities began appearing in popular media representations.

In response to shifting cultural aspects, some men latched upon orthodox gendered sensibilities to fight the shift (Malin, 2005; Whannel, 2001). This is best exemplified through the masculine movement emphasized in Robert Bly’s (1991) book *Iron John: A book about men*. This book established a mythopoetic men’s movement against a perceived feminizing society that called for men to escape from the confines of their homes to wilderness, an increase in male bonding, and Native American-type rituals to connect men with their inner “warrior.” This book along with other men’s movement campaigns in the 1990s have been heavily criticized in academia (Beynon, 2002; Buchbinder, 2013; Connell, 1995; Jeffords, 1994; Kimmel, 1996; Malin, 2005; Savran,

1998), but the movement displays how men enacted orthodox sensibilities as a reaction to shifting cultural conditions as they occurred. Due to several masculine representations, white men felt confused and victimized by competing ideologies (Kusz, 2001a).

A major component of the perceived masculine crisis is that white men felt as if they were losing power and status in a society they created. Those men who claimed status victimization were still hung up on older concepts of white masculinity and made it imperative to reconstruct orthodox masculine sensibilities. Kusz (2002), Robinson (2000), and Savran (1998) claimed that white men perceive their victim status in masochistic terms, meaning that white men receive pleasure from viewing themselves as victims. Given the growing importance placed on non-dominant identities in societies, white men used victimization rhetoric to recenter conversations on white prerogatives rather than marginalized communities' issues. The fight for the institution of increasingly equal policies is perceived by many white people as people of color using victimization rhetoric rather than taking American values such as individualism, meritocracy, and bootstrapism to heart (Leonard, 2017; Savran, 1998). Not demonstrating traditional American values has been found to be problematic for immigrant groups' (usually people of color) gaining acceptance in their new homeland (Kunst et al., 2018). These white men demonstrate that, although they do not want to directly discuss identity politics, and many perceive identity politics as detrimental to U.S. values, their discourse is laced with how the intersectional identities of white masculinity is "losing favor" in society.

The 2000s

The 2000s continued to be represented by new man ideology, which emphasizes struggling with the anxieties expected of a masculine gender performance and contending with being more open, expressive, and thoughtful toward traditionally marginalized social groups. For a further understanding of the new man in the early 2000s, Crowe (2019) analyzed fictional tennis star Richie Tenenbaum from the film *The Royal Tenenbaums* released in 2001. The author found that on the surface, Richie expressed tendencies that were more expressive and open, but when analyzed, orthodox sensibilities about “how to be a man” learned from his traditional father held Richie back from fully expressing his emotional desires.

After the establishment of Connell’s (1995) hegemonic masculinity theory, there has been a multitude of new ideas surrounding how masculinity can be conceptualized. For example, one study by Holt and Thompson (2004) constructed the “man-of-action hero” through the combination of the breadwinner and rugged individualist model of masculinity. In a capitalistic spin, the authors stated that through consumption, men attempt to remasculinize themselves by way of individualistic purchasing habits. Berdahl et al. (2018) created a Masculine Cultural Contests model to display how the contemporary workplace is centered on the performance of orthodox masculine sensibilities. Most of their analysis comes from the business world, a hypermasculine space dedicated to a competitive drive with men who perform orthodox masculinity generally receiving more rewards than those who do not. Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) looked at how “manhood” acts are learned by children from adults performing gender in

their lives—these acts include emotional invulnerability, aggression, sexual desire for girls/women, and the warrior ideology, which is bound up in sacrificing oneself for the greater good of the nation/team/family. In a 2010 study, Pompper interviewed men about media perceptions and found them to be mostly confused, anxious, and frustrated because of the inability to keep up with mediated depictions of masculinity. The diverse men (in age and race) in their study pointed toward masculinity being more ideological than physical, slightly discordant with parts of the hard body ideology that dominated the 1980s. Interview studies such as Pompper's (2010) can help researchers make sense of why men feel as if their masculinity is constantly undergoing "crisis" moments. Of most importance to this literature review is the plethora of contemporary research completed surrounding gendered understandings of the sports world.

Contemporary Sporting Masculinity

Contemporary sport studies has a tendency to understand orthodox masculinity as normative in sporting performances, which are often perpetuated through mediated depictions. In a theoretical sense, Messner (2009) understands gender sport culture dissemination through soft essentialism reinforcing orthodox sensibilities of gender performance. Essentialist ideology establishes "commonsense" ways of performing gender in which the line between masculinity and femininity is clearly defined based on biological determinism. Soft essentialism works similarly, but orthodox gendered sensibilities are learned through covert, subtle ways rather than through explicit direction. I argue these sensibilities can become commonsense or naturalized codes (Hall, 1973/2019) through mediated depictions. In sports, gender segregation is seen as

“commonsense” because of the “natural” differences between the assumed gender binary (men and women) (Anderson, 2008; Fink, 2016; Messner et al., 2000).

In Western society, sports, especially violent sports, teach boys that to “be a man” and perform their masculinity in acceptable manners, they must be dominant, internalize a win-at-all-cost ideology, be invulnerable, bottle up their emotions, participate in “locker room talk” that objectifies women and subordinates gay men in team sports, and play through any type of pain to be labeled as “giving it your all” for the team (Anderson, 2008; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Messner, 2002). These expectations are taught in sports, and youth athletes become conditioned through rewards based on conformity to masculine standards (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Messner, 2002). Duncan and Messner (1998) noted that sport is one of the last preserves for men to assert their dominance in a society that challenges male hegemony. These sporting ideas seem to hold relevance for young adults past childhood as Giaccardi et al. (2016) found that college-age men who consume sports at high levels are more likely to associate with orthodox sensibilities of masculine performance.

To assist in conceptualizing these masculine expectations, Anderson (2011) stated that one must understand homophobia. Homophobia is the idea that, due to expectations of heterosexuality, patriarchal dominance, and homophobia in sport culture, one must be fearful of being labeled as gay. In turn, an athlete performs their masculinity in salient ways to avoid tarnishing a heterosexual man’s reputation. This idea resonates with discourse about Aaron Rodgers, as he has discussed his heterosexuality when media questioned his sexual orientation (Buzinski, 2015). On another note, Anderson (2009)

brought forth the idea of inclusive masculinity becoming more prevalent in American sports. Inclusive masculinity is theorized through more tactility and increased emotional bonding between same-sex peers, less aggression, and adoption of feminine mannerisms and clothing styles. Closer to our contemporary moment, Robinson et al. (2017) theorized that men now share more homosocial bonding than previous generations. The authors posited that boys, gay or straight, are more open with their emotions, they now don't mind touching one another, and act in a much less aggressive way than previous sport research has found. This is an interesting finding, as other contemporary research points toward traditional sensibilities of masculine performance still mattering in athletes' lives (Kroshus et al., 2017; Deaner & Smith, 2012; Giaccardi et al., 2016).

The athlete under study in this study, Aaron Rodgers, is a white, successful quarterback in the NFL. He is a four-time MVP of the NFL, a former Super Bowl champion, and a Super Bowl MVP. Hegemonic masculinity continues to be the most prevalent theory in discussing conceptions of performance for men in sports, especially high contact sports like football (Anderson & Kian, 2011; Kennedy et al., 2021; Pringle, 2005). Adams et al. (2010) described masculine establishing discourse in contact sports by athletes sacrificing themselves for the greater good of the game, denying weakness, and utilizing homophobia and femphobia to avoid feminine labels. This "toxic" language of homophobia and femphobia is used to reinforce orthodox masculine ideology in sports. It is not enough for one to adhere to masculine discourse, rather one must openly advocate for the hegemonic masculine establishment to become fully accepted in sporting spheres. Even U.S. football media content creators need to emphasize hypermasculine

attributes when writing about sports or risk losing status in the sports world (Anderson & Kian, 2011). McDowell and Schaffner (2011) found that media erasure of women participating in high contact sports (e.g., boxing, American football, ice hockey, lacrosse, and rugby) serves to protect beliefs that these sports are “natural” for the male domain. Erasure of women also continues to center male hegemony within sports. Furthermore, Kennedy et al. (2021) found that former high school athletes believed football to be a defining feature in learning what it means to “be a man” which were tied up in orthodox masculine sensibilities. Fans believe in football’s ability to establish masculinity as well. Social media sites, such as Twitter, can be a prominent place to promote cultural ideologies emphasized by fans’ defense of former NFL running back Adrian Peterson’s punishment for abusing his child (Foote et al., 2017). Many fans thought Peterson’s punishment from the state and NFL were an overreaction to an effeminizing society. The masculine reach can be felt so strongly that even *The Food Network*, a station dedicated to the kitchen, a traditionally feminine sphere, created tailgate inspired hypermasculine cooking spectacles heavily involving meat to distance itself from the feminine cooking world and attract masculine viewers (Veri & Liberti, 2013).

Although high-contact sport masculinity can be viewed differently than low contact sport masculinity due to an overt emphasis on hypermasculine sensibilities one needs to perform (e.g., aggression and risk-taking) to meet expectations, there is research that points toward media praising alternative masculinities. Through a media analysis of Green Bay Packers wide receiver Donald Driver telling quarterback Aaron Rodgers to not come back in the game following a head injury in 2011, Anderson and Kian (2012)

found that media members praised Driver for fighting against the norms of the sport ethic that involve sacrificing one's body. Superstar NFL quarterback Tom Brady's then wife, Giselle Bündchen, discussed the concussion issues her former husband experiences on public televisions, which was also met with praise by media commentators (Siegel, 2019). The NFL has hidden concussion and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) for years to protect the reputation of the league and continue its dominance as a major sporting entity in the world (Kroshus et al., 2016; Siegel, 2019). As the concern around CTE grows, perhaps the ideas surrounding the warrior ethos and sport ethic related directly to head injuries in football will continue to dissipate. These media studies demonstrate that hegemonic warrior discourse might be losing favor in sport injury coverage.

The literature listed above demonstrates how orthodox masculinity is portrayed through sports, but the main feature that is missing for my analysis is how race plays into the picture. Media representations of whiteness in sports are often used for purposes of comparison between Black athletes termed the Black/white binary (Oseguera et al., 2018). Despite TIDES (2022) demonstrating that the NFL is made up of ~70% of athletes identifying as Black, those in head coaching (84.4%) and ownership positions (96.9%) in the NFL are disproportionately white. In sport media, 77.1% of journalists and 80.1% of editors are white (TIDES, 2021). There is a lack of minority representation in decision-making capacities in the NFL and sport media.

Perhaps the most relevant concept for how Black and white athletes have been discussed in a sports context is the brawn versus brain stereotype (Buffington & Fraley,

2008; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Hughey & Goss, 2015; Lambertz-Berndt et al., 2021). This ideology harkens back to a eugenics belief that white individuals are intelligent, persevering, and gritty (Carrington, 2010; Ferrucci & Tandoc, 2018). The brain versus brawn concept has been utilized when discussing perceptions of how differently raced quarterbacks can perform on the field. White quarterbacks are accepted due to assumed intelligence and Black quarterback intelligence is questioned at every turn (Lambert-Berndt et al., 2021). Woodward (2004) posited that because of persistent stereotypes attached to race, certain positions are “racially stacked.” In football, the racial stacking can be seen through the white dominance in the quarterback position, Black dominance in skill positions, white dominance in special teams’ specialists like kickers and punters, and Black dominance in the secondary. However, in the 2021-2022 NFL season, nine of 32 teams started a Black quarterback which is more than any previous year, perhaps signaling a shift in perceptions of the requirement for the position (Gamble, 2021). Indeed, even as far back as 2002, Hawkins noted a shift in the evaluation of positions by race in Southeastern Conference (SEC) member schools from 1966-1999. Black quarterbacks were becoming more prevalent, which he related to perceived requirements of the position changing. The quarterback discrepancy is important to recognize as the main athlete in this study, Aaron Rodgers, plays that position, and all the historical associations discussed can be attached to his racialized gender performance.

Commentators may enact “racetalk” through subtle, covert racist ideas (Buffington & Fraley, 2011). Explicit racism now rarely occurs in sports broadcasting and commentating, as racist ideas in American society generally operate in hidden ways

through language, policies, and stereotypes that have a detrimental impact on people of color. Bonilla-Silva (2022) labeled this form of racism as “new racism,” an idea first proposed by Collins (2004). Research that exemplifies this argument in the sports world can be found in Leonard’s (2017) book in which he exposes how white athletes receive redemption from sports media following news of transgressions at a much higher rate than Black athletes. This idea is further cemented in Christensen and colleague’s (2016) and research on former NFL player Ray Rice’s (Black) redemption saga and Crowe’s (2021) comparative study of Ray Rice’s and Josh Brown’s (white) covered redemption following news of their domestic abuse transgressions. Similarly, Coogan (2012) compared the redemption narratives of former NFL quarterbacks Ben Roethlisberger (white) and Michael Vick (Black). He found Roethlisberger’s transgressions were not remembered anywhere near the same extent as Vick’s transgressions were by media. Furthermore, while researching how society reacts to perceptions of Black physicality on the sporting field, Rugg (2019) found former NFL linebacker James Harrison was constantly constructed through the Black overphysical stereotype in media. Additionally, Black athletes are often portrayed through the Black criminal stereotype. This idea proposes that when research participants are faced with determining who committed crimes, they believe Black individuals commit higher rates of crime leading to misperceptions in the sports world (Anderson & Raney, 2018). Dickerson (2015) highlighted how meme creation (i.e., fan-made images of an event or issue) of Black athletes in the National Hockey League (NHL) have blatant racial tones, while NBA memes are centered on team loyalty and injuries. Racially speaking, the NHL had 26

Black athletes in total compared to 80% of the NBA identifying as Black in the 2014 season (Dickerson, 2015). Relatedly, hockey celebrates physicality and fighting, whereas physicality in basketball is criticized to a larger extent, stressing perceptions of race potentially mattering in fans' perceptions of physicality.

Given this overview of white and, to a lesser extent, Black masculinity sport studies scholarship, it should become apparent that orthodox sensibilities of how to enact white masculinity are generally preferred and promoted in dominant discourse on men athletes (and even women athletes to an extent [Berg et al., 2014]). Sports acts as a “preserve of male tyranny” (Matthews, 2016), but the preservation is constructed through separate ways depending on an athlete's race. Given some claims that sporting action has been associated with heroic pantheons (Whannel, 2001), it seems apt to analyze mainstream media and sport media discourse surrounding a sporting star's controversial health disclosure.

Sport is a place where political culture can be constructed or manifested (Butterworth, 2014; 2012; Foote, Butterworth, & Sanderson, 2017). Since the era-defining terrorist attack known as 9/11, U.S. sports have become a platform for belligerent displays of patriotism and nationalism in an attempt to “unify” America (Butterworth, 2010; King, 2008). American militarism has a long association with sports, including the national anthem being played before every game, jet fighters flying over the field pre-game, military members throwing out the first pitch in baseball or participating in the coin toss during football, camouflaged colored sporting apparel, among other patriotic-laden associations. Since the inception of organized sports in the late 1800s to

early 1900s, sports have been viewed as a place where the government can keep men in shape, learn how to work on a team, and be prepared for any war effort that might commence (Boykoff, 2016). Militaristic masculine ideology and football masculinity can be viewed in a similar manner to one another. Both ideologies emphasize a “warrior” discourse in which the athlete/military member sacrifices their self for the greater good of the team/nation (Anderson & Kian, 2012; Do & Samuels, 2021; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009), football has expressions related to war discourse labeled “warspeak” that works to valorize football as a “man-building” activity exemplified by calling a quarterback a field general or dropping a “bomb” to a wide receiver (Jansen, 2002; McCluskey, 2019), and aggression, heterosexuality, and a devaluing of orthodoxically feminine traits such as emotional vulnerability seem to be part and parcel of both spheres (Messner, 2002; Schaefer et al., 2021). Though not a main concern of this study, it is important to note that football’s connection to militarism helps situate how masculinity can be perceived within the sport. The displays of militarism positions the preferred football masculinity to be nationalistic and patriotic, emphasized by reactions to Colin Kaepernick’s recent controversial national anthem protest about Black suffering (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020). On another note, white college football coaches have been found to be key conservative voices when weighing in on cultural and social issues (McGregor, 2022). The connection to militarism, political ideology, and sports is important to make, as Aaron Rodgers has been labeled a “poster boy” for conservative ideology (McAfee, 2021a), which is generally espoused to the promotion of war efforts. Rodgers (2019) has also written about his appreciation for military service members.

Conclusion

Aaron Rodgers has been labeled a “conservative poster boy” by podcast host Pat McAfee due to his anti-FDA vaccination discourse and claims about individual freedom that correlate with conservative prerogatives (McAfee, 2021a; Parmanand, 2022). On the other side of the political spectrum, the 2020s also saw a mass movement of social unrest as Americans, mostly Black, demonstrated their frustration from police brutality and inequitable policies. The American climate feels very divided right now, with conservative Americans advocating for “making America great again” and the liberal “othered” group advocating for continuing progressive policies to remove barriers in place for marginalized group’s social mobility. The political climate is important to note, as COVID vaccines have and will continue to be a highly politicized aspect of U.S. society in the foreseeable future that correlates strongly with masculine discourse in the contemporary moment. As I argue in the literature review, understanding political context in a given time is important to make sense of how mediated depictions of masculinity are constructed. The historical evaluation of masculinity provides roots for contemporary dominant versions of masculine representations.

Conceptualizing the dominant masculinity in any given time is a tough task to take on in fractured media landscapes. There are multiple masculinities always at work, and the ideologies surrounding what determines the most salient masculinities are constantly in flux. One common thread throughout the historical evaluation is that masculinity is almost always thought to be undergoing a form of crisis. During the 1950s, media played a major role in perceptions of masculine acts due to the rise of the

television, globalization efforts, and a continuation of capitalistic entrepreneurship or “manifesting your destiny.” The breadwinning model with a family man supporting his stay-at-home wife that was attached to orthodox sensibilities of masculinity was the most preferred image here, yet there were anxieties around the emerging Cold War and the loss of an individualistic sense of pride because of the industrialized workplace.

The 1960s were a time of immense progressive movements in which women and people of color strongly advocated for more political rights. The new man ideology began to form during this era, which demonstrated some men as more understanding and caring about different social groups’ prerogatives than in previous eras that can be seen politically through the enactment of policies such as Title IX. The 1970s were a time of conflict, as many U.S. citizens were distraught at Vietnam war efforts, contending with new rights of marginalized groups, and some pundits posed a “masculine crisis” due to an effeminized domestic sphere. The new man concept was formed, and that ideology led to the intense, conservative hard body ideology of the 1980s. The hard body was one who created a literal and figurative hard body to shield off foreign invaders and bottle emotions. This can be viewed as a form of white backlash politics.

The 1990s can be viewed as the strongest moment of the new man ideology, as this type of imagery became immensely popular in media. However, the new man is tied up in orthodox sensibilities that their father performed, so while on the surface the new man may seem progressive, deep down orthodox tendencies are still apparent. The 2000s were a time of continued new man ideology with an exploration of a multitude of theories of masculinity by scholars in communication, sociology, and sport studies. Especially

within the sporting world, how gender is socially constructed becomes a major point of analysis.

Sport has an expectation for masculine performance, typically tied up in orthodox ideologies. Differently raced athletes are conceived in a varied manner within media constructions of masculine performance harkening back to antiquated stereotypical ideas. Football and other high contact sports demonstrate a hegemonic masculinity that is espoused to orthodox sensibilities; however, there are arguments in sport studies literature that orthodox masculinity may be becoming less important. In a political sense, the current era is being defined with the rise of white, neoconservative, nationalist discourse in the U.S. versus a more progressive tendency for liberal, inclusionary efforts, so understanding how a white, sporting man involved in all the discourses listed above is important to make sense of the intersection between sports, politics, race, and gender.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This research study utilized a qualitative methodology and approach to knowledge construction. Research involves inquiring into or investigating something in a systematic manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Quantitative research aims for a cause-and-effect relationship to explain how phenomena operate in the natural and social worlds (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research, meanwhile, is interested in understanding “how people construct social worlds and what meanings they attribute to experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). Miles et al. (2016) understand qualitative data as a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions of social processes. To better understand qualitative research, Brennen (2017) describes it as interdisciplinary, interpretive, political, and theoretical in nature using language to understand concepts. For Lindlof and Taylor (2019), they identify qualitative research as studying human symbolic action in various contexts of its performance. Performance in this regard refers to qualities of skill, expressiveness, and immediacy that allows one to view something as more than mere “messages” or a vehicle of information (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 4). Grbich (2016) identifies a key qualitative research knowledge tenet as exploring little-known behaviors, attitudes, and values. Quantitative academics may posit that research should avoid politicization, but others such as Brennen (2017) state that qualitative research is political in nature. To understand how discourse is constructed, a qualitative approach centered on the social processes occurring in a specific historical moment is vital.

Epistemology, Ontology, and Paradigms

Within qualitative research, there are different paradigms to generate and understand knowledge in diverse ways. Aliyu et al. (2015) state that paradigms differ in their assumptions about what is real, the relationship between who knows and what is known, how the knower goes about discovering knowledge, and how paradigms shape, constrain, and enable all aspects of educational inquiry. In short, paradigms can be viewed as a set of basic beliefs that deal with principles and assumptions of life (Aliyu et al., 2015). Ontology can be defined as how one views the nature of reality, and epistemology relates to how one understands knowledge creation/construction (Glesne, 2016). This research study operates within the critical paradigm with interpretive and postmodern slants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019).

A “critical” researcher is one who views valuable research as ideas that unmask the beliefs and practices that limit human freedom, justice, and democracy. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state the goal of critical research is to “...critique and challenge, to transform, and to analyze power relations” (p. 59), specifically for marginalized communities (Glesne, 2016; Grbich, 2016). Wodak and Meyer (2016) define the value of critical theory with an emphasis toward producing subjects that are enlightened and can become reflective of social apparatuses and their role within them. Critical sport studies and communication research identifies Rodgers’ white masculine identities as the most dominant in the sporting world (Carrington, 2010; Ferrucci & Tandoc, 2018; Fink, 2016; Matthews, 2016; Messner, 2009; 2000; TIDES, 2022; 2021). The dominance of Rodgers’ identities can be investigated through critical readings of mediated depictions that can

display how power relations are constructed. Critical discourse analysis allows insights into how discourse surrounding an event or phenomenon may (re)produce hegemonic discursive relations.

Interpretivism is the notion that the world cannot exist independently of our thoughts, mind, or social interactions. There is not a “fixed” reality so to speak, but rather the world is socially constructed through subjective experiences (Glesne, 2016).

Relatively recently, qualitative research has taken a language/discourse turn to understand phenomena led by scholars like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (Stewart et al., 2019). A key factor to consider within this paradigm is its emphasis on signs. Through understanding culturally important signs, one can interpret phenomena in relevant ways to make sense and understand meaning (Grbich, 2016). In de Saussure’s dyadic approach to signs (1972/2000), he recognizes two parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier relates to the physical part of the sign, whether that be the written word or an artistic form. The signified is the concept that is conjured in someone’s mind once the signifier is spoken, seen, or identified. For example, the red on a traffic light is a cultural signifier to signify “stop” to a driver. The color red (signifier) conveys a driver to stop (signified). Interpreting cultural signs is vital for making sense of discourse in any given context. Grbich (2016) identifies limitations of researchers’ understandings of interpretation by “... the frames derived from their [participants’] life experiences, subjectivity (the researcher’s own views and how they have been constructed); and intersubjectivity (reconstruction of views by interacting with others through language and written texts)” (p. 7). Knowledge is constantly constructed through individual life

experiences. Developing an interpretivist approach to research forces the researcher to understand perspectives apart from their own, make sense of culturally relevant signs, and recognize how everyone composes a version of their own reality.

Postmodernism is another paradigm in which my perceptions of reality and knowledge construction are formulated. Postmodernists have suggested that there are multiple truths in society. Some argue that there is not a universal “Truth” that quantitatively based research seeks to find through cause-and-effect relationships (Foucault, 1970/1981; 1978/1995). Many postmodernists are skeptical of grand narratives such as Marxism, believe truth to be multifaceted, and view all knowledge as socially and contextually dependent (Grbich, 2016). In other words, knowledge creation is contingent and historical (Lăzăroiu, 2019). The acknowledgement of multiple subjectivities constructing knowledge without the search for a universal “Truth” is important for recognizing why any strand of discourse is worthy of analysis (Fairclough, 2010; Foucault, 1970/1981). However, some scholars posit that postmodernism/poststructuralism work in a “post-qualitative” sense, beyond the confines of normative qualitative work where the paradigms of constructionism, interpretivism, and critical theory find their home (Stewart et al., 2019). Postmodernism offers promising critiques of knowledge construction, specifically through a focus on language and discourse (Foucault, 1984). Hall (2013) recognizes that the semiotic approach from de Saussure and the discursive approach from Foucault are two separate approaches that make up different theoretical insights for an interpretivist understanding of phenomena.

In this study, I utilized parts of both theoretical insights through understanding culturally relevant signs and how they are connected to discursive practices in mediated texts.

With the components of ontological and epistemological decisions related to the study identified, critical discourse analysis is a valuable methodology for analyzing discourse surrounding Aaron Rodgers' statements about COVID vaccination. Given the outright dominance of white men in the sports world and society in general, critical theory and postmodernism look to critique power relations while developing more nuanced method(ologie)s for research. My preference toward an onto-epistemological assumption of constantly questioning the nature of reality while recognizing there are multiple truths in society based on cultural experiences and contexts adequately relates to goals of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010). CDA can execute an analysis centered on the language used, individuals in/excluded from media texts, and contextual understanding of historically contingent phenomena (Fairclough, 2010; Lăzăroui, 2019; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Specifically, I use CDA to identify consistent themes through mediated depictions of Aaron Rodgers' statements and actions related to COVID.

Legacy of Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis stems from the theoretical traditions of British Cultural Studies (BCS) and theorists' understandings of how social relations operate through discourse. This section will be composed of a review on how British Cultural Studies as a field conceptualized discourse with an emphasis on media studies interpretations, look at how Michel Foucault, one of the main theoreticians that emphasized the analysis of discourse, understood discourse, and finish with insights from Physical Cultural Studies

(PCS), a discursive sport studies theory. Before establishing the role of BCS in discursive studies, I should discuss how I conceptualize “discourse.” The discursive examination takes cues from two different camps: the linguistic camp which considers the usage of signs and the production and context of speech acts, and the macro-sociological camp which situates discourse in a broader socio-historical context of phenomena (Angermuller et al., 2014). Throughout this analysis, a structuralist approach to discourse is enacted by analyzing language and speech acts that are in/excluded in mediated texts while also instituting a socio-historical understanding of how language affects social practices (Philo, 2007). This analysis is more interested in how discourse constructs power relations, but an emphasis on language chosen by media creators is valuable for dissecting meaning related to larger societal context (Fairclough, 2010). This approach to a discursive analysis will become fully fleshed out by the end of this chapter. For now, I will turn attention toward BCS’ role in emphasizing discourse and media as worthy areas of study.

Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart, and Raymond Williams are most associated with the rise of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the 1960s (Hall, 1980). The Centre is known for first advocating for a BCS approach to research. British Cultural Studies has an overt focus on the social conditions that were quickly shaping a new Britain, such as mass communication via innovative technology. Globalization led to the Americanization of products, the influx of new immigrants that racially de-homogenized white Britain, modern mass consumption, and the mixture of traditional and new sensibilities for the general public (Hall, 1989). In post-World War II

Britain, these rapidly changing conditions set the stage for academics to shift from a preoccupation with high, upper-class culture, toward studying the everyday meanings people give to their everyday lives (Hall, 1980). The academic shift led to a plethora of research within the British Cultural school that emphasized how media may shape and impact the way people make sense of their worlds. This school has had an evident impact on many aspects of inquiry, especially sport studies and sport history's turn toward gender and racial identity research (Bandy, 2016).

Stuart Hall emphasizes these shifts to media studies in his foundational 1973 piece entitled *Encoding and Decoding*. Hall argued that the linear process of sender-message-receiver in communication studies attempting to analyze how messages from the media are taken up by the audience is too simple for understanding audiences' interpretations. Hall's theory of audience interpretation of media texts posits that the sender (i.e., media outlet) encodes a preferred interpretation of the meaning of their text, but because of the social relations and conditions the receiver (i.e., audience) may experience in their lives, the decoding of that message by audience members may differ. Due to experiencing life in diverse ways, the audience may interpret information differently than the content creator's preferred understanding. Hall's understanding of media effects laid foundational groundwork for the discursive approach to media analysis.

Hall discusses "naturalized codes" that are relevant for understanding how discourse operates on a societal level. Naturalized codes are universal, taken-for-granted concepts (Hall, 1973). These naturalized codes are so embedded in the social fabric of society, that most people do not analyze or think at length about how these codes,

concepts, and ideas may impact the way they understand and make sense of events or phenomena. Naturalized codes are specific to the culture in which the codes/ideologies operate (Tracy, 2010). Due to living in a society, one is already situated within the normative discourses that construct knowledge. Other theorists, such as Michel Foucault, directly expound on dimensions of discourse.

Foucault uses historical realism to show how discourse operates to contingently produce knowledge and meaning (1978/1990). Discourse produces knowledge to define a specific way of understanding information, or shapes “commonsense” ideologies, that influences perceptions. Furthermore, discourse is perpetuated by citizens who accept “normalized” ideas surrounding events and phenomena (Foucault, 1978/1995). As discourse “fixes” texts, it disallows alternative ways for that event to be discussed or interpreted. Through a reiterative discursive process, the ways one can think, know, understand, interpret, and make sense of events are homogenized. Though not the first to do so, Foucault’s continual authorship (1977) of discourse helped establish discursive studies as a valuable field for academic analysis, specifically related to the operation of power (1978/1995).

Turning to interpretations of discourse within the sports world, Andrews (2008) advocates for understanding sporting culture through Physical Cultural Studies (PCS). Andrews (2008) urges an establishment of PCS that acknowledges the body as significant in relation to all workings of the social world,

PCS is dedicated to the contextually based understanding of the corporeal practices, discourses, and subjectivities through which active bodies become

organized, represented, and experienced in relation to the operations of social power. PCS thus identifies the role played by physical culture in reproducing, and sometimes challenging, particular class, ethnic, gender, ability, generational, national, racial, and/or sexual norms and differences (p. 54).

Foucault and Andrews both view the body as a site for power relations to be critically analyzed. Understanding PCS work allows a researcher to recognize how the body is always socially constructed through discourses and practices, directly related to an analysis of Aaron Rodgers' perception of bodily control.

As demonstrated above, discourse is thought to influence and shape an audiences' abilities to interpret specific events and phenomena in normalized ways resulting in specific power arrangements. According to Entman (1993), stemming from ideas beginning with Goffman (1974), media framing has a unique ability to influence perceptions of events through selective description of events, making some parts of information more salient than others, and incorporating particular morals. For media studies, framing is an important concept to consider for conceptualizing the importance of discursive relations to power (Entman, 1993). If information is only framed in specific ways throughout mediated depictions, then it becomes hard, if not impossible, for audiences to interpret an event or phenomenon in a non-preferred way due to a lack of alternative information, especially if those individuals have always lived in a culture bound by similar ideologies. Media framing theory is important to consider as mediated discourse can only be constructed through media outlets' selectively describing phenomena. Next, a definition of critical discourse analysis as a methodology will be

offered, including information that is pertinent for understanding how this methodology is used in my analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis: Methodological Concerns

The first important aspect to recognize is understanding CDA as a *methodology* rather than just a method (Fairclough, 2010). “Method” usually refers to applying specific insights of a technique or theory onto data sets. In contrast, transdisciplinary CDA is concerned with the theoretical construction of the object, event, or phenomenon under analysis. Wodak and Meyer (2016) identify seven key dimensions for shifting fields that incorporate discursive analysis into their studies:

- An interest in the properties of ‘naturally occurring’ language use by real language users.
- A focus on larger units than isolated words and sentences and, hence, new basic units of analysis: texts, discourses, conversations, speech acts, or communicative events.
- The extension of linguistics beyond sentence grammar towards a study of action and interaction.
- The extension of non-verbal (semiotic, multimodal, visual) aspects of interaction and communication: gestures, images, film, the internet, and multimedia.
- A focus on dynamic (socio)-cognitive or interactional moves and strategies.

- The study of the functions of (social, cultural, situational, and cognitive) contexts of language use.
- An analysis of a vast number of phenomena of text grammar and language use: coherence, anaphora, topics, macrostructures, speech acts, interactions, turn-taking, signs, politeness, argumentation, rhetoric, mental models, and many other aspects of text and discourse (p.2).

In doing so, Wodak and Meyer (2016) argue that the development of CDA is beyond critical linguistics, which is the field most associated with CDA. Discourse analysis incorporates multiple communicative styles, social contexts, and can even extend to the non-verbal, a far cry from the overt focus on language used by critical linguistics.

Reynolds (2019) states that “...CDA should be understood as a descriptive and argumentative process adherent to an underlying critical-theoretical lens—one which takes into account the historical and institutional processes that allow for discourse about a subject to develop” (p. 50). While my analysis is most interested in written media texts, Rodgers’ vaccination comments occurred on a podcast, exemplifying the potential importance of discourse analysts examining more than written word.

Gill (2000) states that there are over 57 different forms of CDA. For this analysis, my work most closely aligns with critical linguistic analysis, one of the earliest forms of CDA (Fairclough, 2010), because I am analyzing written media articles that cover a specific event in mainstream and sports media through the language, people, and events in/excluded. While the media texts stem from an oral podcast episode on *The Pat McAfee Show* (McAfee, 2021a), critical linguistics is the best approach for understanding

depictions of Rodgers' white masculine identity in media articles. The focus on written media is purposeful, as I seek to understand mediated depictions in news articles instead of all potential mediated depictions. The overt focus on macrosociological contexts (Philo, 2007) related to construction of Rodgers' comments does position the analysis beyond a basic critical linguistic approach. Andrews (2008) notes that any study involving physical cultural forms should be articulated by the complex social, political, technological, and economic relationships that comprise the social context.

Fairclough (2010) and Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2010) lay out the three basic properties for CDA: it is relational, it is dialectical, and it is transdisciplinary. CDA is relational because it does not focus on entities or individuals, but rather on social relations or even relations to relations depending on the point of entry for the researcher. CDA is dialectical because the social relations under analysis in discourse are not separate from one another. Discourse may internalize the object of relation under study which is dialectical in nature. CDA is transdisciplinary because the research that takes place in CDA e/affects the field in which the analysis occurs (including CDA as a field itself). CDA is in dialogue, so to speak, with other disciplines and theories to build and develop upon one another (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). In other words, the focus of CDA is on discourse, but it is always on discourse in relation to social elements that define the social phenomenon. However, critical discourse analysts must keep in mind that "discourses must be treated as discontinuous practices, which cross each other, are sometimes juxtaposed with each other, but can just as well exclude or be unaware of each

other” (Foucault, 1970/1981, p. 67). One should not assume separate discourses work within or through one another.

As mentioned, discourse has a specific interest in language used to construct knowledge. Language is a social practice, one that is a mode of action with a dialectical relationship with other social facets that is always historically and socially situated (Fairclough, 2010). People engage with one another through semiotic practices of language (Chouliaraki, 2005), making language an immensely important social aspect to analyze. Language works within and through power, as power can be stated through language, but it may also work to alter or challenge dominant power relations (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Language works as a social *structure* that is mediated by social *practices* and social *agents* which help explain how/why social *events* occur. Fairclough (2010) identifies order of discourse at the mediated step between social structure (language) and social event (texts). For the sake of further understanding, a definition of the phrase “order of discourse” is necessary to establish. In Foucault’s (1970/1981) words,

In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.” (p. 52).

More access to control of social representations heightens the importance of analyzing the powerful role of discourse in creating, maintaining, and (re)producing knowledge about an event or phenomenon (van Dijk, 1993). Through power relations and shifting social conditions, specific discourse is favored at certain points in time depending on

order of discoursal elements —discourse, genre, and style (Fairclough, 2010). “Genres” refers to certain ways of acting (in this case, communicating) that are preferred in specific areas over others, and “style” refers to ways of being (identifying) that correlate to the area of the event under question/analysis. Immersion into the field, discipline, and context under analysis is crucial for understanding the preferred genre and style related to discourse (Fairclough, 2010). For Foucault (1970/1981), understanding and analyzing the limits of discourse through ideas such as the author, commentary, and normative talk within the discipline is an important consideration.

There are different interpretations regarding the purpose of CDA. I follow Fairclough (2010) and van Dijk (1993) who specify that the focus of a discursive study should be on the role of discourse in the (re)production of dominance. More pointedly, the interest is in how power relations may reproduce privilege for white masculine representatives. Andrews (2008) advocates for understanding physical culture through identifying how identities are reproduced or challenged which illuminates societal inequality and inequity. According to Fairclough (2010), lexicalizations (i.e., ways of describing an event or phenomenon) become “naturalized” once the ideological-discursive formation achieves dominance in comparison to other discourses surrounding the event. Discourse analysts identify whose interests are served through examinations of discursive relations (Fairclough, 2010). The outcome of power related to the mediated construction of white masculinity is a key feature within this study.

The critique element in *critical* discourse analysis means this type of methodology has a preoccupation with analyzing the processes that could be improved to

help individuals, communities, or societies as a whole (Fairclough, 2010). Fairclough summarizes his approach to the critical in CDA:

By ‘critical’ discourse analysis I mean discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events, and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes; to investigate how such practices, events, and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony (p. 93).

Moreover, Fairclough (2005) defines what interests are to be critically examined in CDA work: discourse emergence, its hegemonic (re)production, recontextualization of a discourse, and operationalization of discourse. To simplify Fairclough’s (2005) words, CDA is interested in how a specific discourse arises, how specific discourses become most dominant through understanding socio-historical context, how a discourse is reused after its emergence to maintain dominance, and how discourse operates to shape understandings of an event or phenomenon. All in all, discursive studies elucidate how relations of power are constructed based on epistemological understanding of an event (Foucault, 1970/1981).

Critiques are valuable to understand commonsense or taken-for-granted assumptions within cultural spaces. Commonsense ideas have become normalized

through social interactions and discursal relations (Foucault, 1978/1995). Relating the perpetuation of commonsense ideologies in mediated texts, Silverstone (1996) states,

[The media] filters and frames everyday realities through their singular and multiple representations, producing touchstones, references, for the conduct of everyday life, for the production and maintenance of commonsense. And it is here, in what passes for commonsense, that we have to ground the study of media (p. 6).

Commonsense ideology is an extension of the naturalized codes Hall (1973) discussed, which are taken-for-granted ideas in specific cultures. These conceptual codes can be constructed, utilized, and even changed over time, through discourse. The greater the degree of domination for a particular representation of a social relation, the greater the degree of naturalization of its associated practices and ideas. Thus, through a cultural and linguistic analysis of discourse, the transformation of complex institutional processes can be understood (Davis, 2011). For example, in sports, athlete discipline is expected when a coach leads a practice or a game, creating what Foucault (1977/1995) would call a “docile body;” a body that is subjected, used, transformed, and improved into a body that has utility for the coach and the team. Athletes often push themselves beyond their limits and risk detrimental health effects for the sake of their team and sport (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). In sports, the commonsense ways of understanding athlete and coach relations point toward a coach in a position of power, determining the correct way of conduct that an athlete must follow to receive favorable status (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Gearity et al., forthcoming; Mills & Denison, 2014).

Althusser (1974/2014) argues that through interpellation, citizens of a society are always already hailed to normative societal processes. One may be hailed without knowing it, and Fairclough (2010) even argues that discursive dominance is so strong in certain areas (especially in the political spheres), that individuals may advocate for policies that negatively affect their livelihood. To make connections to the importance of media, how media frames ideas (Entman, 1993) leads to an ideological-discursive formation. By focusing on the language used, specific people mentioned, understanding the context of the situation, and making sense of why these ideas, concepts, and people were included, CDA allows a critical look into how framing of information is part of the creation of a dominant discourse. This methodology gives insights into the outcome of discourse, which is useful for determining contingent aspects of knowledge construction that shapes audience interpretation and determines power relations.

My analysis will work with the specifics of CDA by understanding how power may operate through discourse and knowledge construction. Rodgers' sporting white masculinity and the theories surrounding his identities will be the main theoretical point of analysis as CDA is employed through mediated texts. As Rodgers is a representative of white masculinity, CDA will be utilized to demonstrate how ideas surrounding white masculinity are relevant in the national and sport media discourse surrounding Rodgers' disclosure of taking ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine rather than an FDA approved COVID vaccination during the 2021-2022 NFL season.

Analyzing Data

An ongoing criticism of CDA is that there are not many guidelines for how to analyze data (Reynolds, 2019). While critics view this as a detriment to the methodology (Philo, 2007), others view CDA as a theoretical perspective that can draw upon multiple methodologies to analyze data (van Dijk, 1998). With this criticism in mind, there seems to be some conflict between two dominant strands of CDA research: van Dijk's versus Fairclough and Wodak's ideals of CDA (Reynolds, 2019). For this study, I will follow Fairclough (2010) and Wodak and Meyer's (2016) ideals of CDA as a methodology that works within critical linguistic legacies. This perspective is chosen over van Dijk's theoretical model (1998) because the collected data is mainstream media and sport media online articles.

Though van Dijk's theoretical model is not the preferred means of analysis, there are still foundational ideas from his work that can be applied to establish discursive understanding. One such model is the ideological square he proposed in 1998. The ideological square focuses on the media creation of the "Othering" process. van Dijk's model emphasizes the "Other" as someone/thing that does not match the values of the text author. The ideological square is composed of four areas that researchers can use to acknowledge an author's intent to

1. Emphasise our good properties/actions,
2. Emphasise their bad properties/actions,
3. Mitigate our bad properties/actions,

4. Mitigate their good properties/actions (p. 33).

This form of discursive analysis can be valuable for emphasizing how racism, sexism, or other “isms” may be constructed in mediated depictions but lacks room for more nuanced approaches of analysis (Reynolds, 2019). Given the controversy surrounding COVID-19 protocols in recent years, van Dijk’s (1998) good/bad or us/them dichotomous approach can serve as a valuable starting point.

For this proposal, I will follow Fairclough’s (2010) identification of four pertinent steps for a CDA:

1. Focus upon a social wrong, in its semiotic aspect
2. Identify the obstacles to addressing the social wrong
3. Consider whether the social order ‘needs’ the social wrong
4. Identify possible ways past the obstacles (pp. 235-239).

With these four steps in mind, one can identify how discourse surrounding an event can be examined with a linguistic orientation emphasizing critical components that advocate for a more “just” (van Dijk, 1993) society.

One criticism in Fairclough’s interpretation of CDA is the lack of emphasis toward socio-historical perspectives within critical linguistic based research (Philo, 2007). Philo (2007) advocates that only focusing on the language within texts lacks a necessary focus on context related to linguistic choices needed to establish the discourse on any event. To overcome this critique of critical linguistic work, the previous chapter in

this study (i.e., Chapter Two) highlights normative discussions of white masculinity in media broadly and sport media more succinctly. Furthermore, white victimization rhetoric and conservative ideology associated with Rodger's disclosure will be an important consideration to attach Rodgers' immunization plan to larger societal discourse related to the intersection of sports and politics. Through emphasizing COVID and white sporting masculinity literature, this analysis moves beyond a boilerplate critical linguistics discourse analysis.

Coding Strategies

To establish how discourse on an event or phenomenon is constructed, coding can be a valuable tool (Miles et al., 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Miles et al. (2016) define codes as "labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study" (p. 64). In this study, the data was derived directly from mainstream news and sport media online articles. Primarily, codes are used to retrieve and categorize similar data units so a researcher can find, pull out, and cluster segments. In other words, "Coding is thus a data condensation task that enables you to retrieve the most meaningful material, assemble units of data that go together, and further condense the bulk into readily analyzable units" (Miles et al., 2016, p. 64). For the second step of coding, Lindlof and Taylor (2019) describe coding condensation, or categorization, as "...the process of sorting units of data with respect to properties or features they have in common" (p. 315). Codes and categories are vital to the analysis process.

A major goal of coding is to identify recurring patterns to create themes for constructing higher level analytic meaning (Saldaña, 2016). Typically, researchers employ analysis in an inductive or deductive fashion. Inductive refers to creating codes as you move through the data, while deductive coding means creating codes before analysis based on literature and context known beforehand (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). My approach to coding moves between inductive and deductive approaches. I coded based on information I see as most fitting to an analysis related to construction of Rodgers' white masculinity, but I believe I cannot exclude the extensive literature I have researched on white masculinity prior to coding. In turn, the coding approach began in an inductive manner, but prior knowledge from sport literature on white masculinity also guided the coding process. Coding should be completed over several readings of the texts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). In this study, each document was read at least three times.

In this study, first order and second order coding were employed to generate the most consistent and transparent themes through a critical discourse analysis. First order coding refers to codes initially assigned to data units that relate to overarching ideas within the data (Miles et al., 2016). Saldaña (2016) identifies over 25 strategies for first order coding. Not every strategy needs to be used, but strategies can be mixed and matched based upon the research question(s) and the type of information one wants to generate for their study. First order coding processes are usually termed "open coding" wherein the unrestricted phase of coding begins by developing ideas based on its coherent meaning (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) advocate for

being as expansive as a researcher wants when beginning coding to help identify any part of the text that might be useful.

The first order coding method developed through open coding has been labeled “concept coding” by Saldaña (2016) and Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2016). Concept coding recognizes meso- and macro-level processes: “A concept is a word or phrase that symbolically represents a suggested meaning broader than a single item or action—a ‘bigger picture’ beyond the tangible and apparent” (Miles et al., 2016, p. 66). CDA recognizes how power is constructed through different spheres, specifically media constructions of knowledge in this study, and concept coding allows the “bigger picture” of discourse to become conceptualized through language and voices chosen in texts. Lindlof and Taylor (2019) would refer to this type of coding as “high-inference” coding (p. 317) in contrast to low-inference coding that addresses only fundamental ideas rather than grander concepts. Conceptual processes consist of smaller observable actions that build toward broader meanings (Miles et al., 2016). To perform concept coding, a researcher needs to be well informed about their subject. For example, the code “medical doctors” was used whenever a researcher or practicing doctor was referenced in the study. Medical doctors being included in the texts were part of a larger sociocultural context of critiquing vaccine misinformation. Medical experts were included to criticize Rodgers’ anti-vaccine stance, demonstrating a high inference code connecting to the sociocultural context of valuable sources for vaccination information.

While concept coding is an appropriate method, other first order coding methods were utilized to either work toward concept coding or provide a more thorough analysis

of the chosen language. In vivo coding can be useful when a phrase stands out from the texts' own writing (Miles et al., 2016). In vivo coding is creating a code using language directly from the texts' writing (Saldaña, 2016). An example of in vivo coding in this data set was every time "immunized" was mentioned. This phrase was used to call out Aaron Rodgers for not fully describing his vaccination status in August 2021. Low inference codes were utilized for ease of correlation between ideas (i.e., racial and gender-based codes like white, Black, man, woman, etc.) (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). These types of codes can make the identities of those included in different texts easier to categorize. For example, whenever Green Bay Packers Head Coach Matt LaFleur was mentioned, the code "White HC" was used to categorize the number of times media outlets felt it was necessary to include his thoughts.

The second order coding method "is a way of grouping those summaries [codes] into a smaller number of *categories, themes, or concepts*" (Miles et al., 2016, p. 79). Second order coding condenses the first order codes into more patterned understandings of data that highlights the most important parts related to a research question. From each data entry, a constant comparative process was utilized to develop patterns, themes, and categories that are consistent through all texts (Fram, 2013; Mullet, 2018). This process can be useful in generating the most pertinent and consistent categories and themes possible in an analysis related to the research question(s). Similarly, Miles et al. (2016) label this step as pattern coding, which has four important functions for analysis:

1. It condenses large amounts of data/codes into a smaller number of analytic units (e.g., categories, themes, concept(s)).

2. It gets the researcher into analysis during data collection, so that later fieldwork can be more focused.
3. It helps the researcher elaborate a cognitive network—an evolving, more integrated schema for understanding local incidents and interactions.
4. For multiple-case studies, it lays the groundwork for cross-case analysis by surfacing common themes and directional processes (p. 79).

Typically, pattern codes come in the form of categories or themes, causes or explanations, relationships among people, or concepts or theoretical constructs (Miles et al., 2016). Former codes or categories may become subcategories once comparisons are completed showing that some categories/codes are more apparent and important than others (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The second order of coding and the constant comparative process (Fram, 2013; Mullet, 2018) commenced multiple times to identify the most prominent discursive themes surrounding my research question. For example, when making sense of the negative ideas stated by media members toward Rodgers' vaccination stance, a larger category named "Media Criticism" was developed. Through constant comparison of codes and themes, I recognized that all criticism from media outlets argued Rodgers lacked honesty and perceived him as being irresponsible for the unsafe health habits he advocated. The constant comparison eventually led to the most prominent theme named "Dishonesty/Irresponsibility."

Coding mechanisms can become cumbersome if there is a plethora of codes that relate to one another. For a way to differentiate which codes and categories make the

most sense grouped together, theoretical memos can be constructed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Theoretical memos allow a researcher to situate relationships of codes and categories through writing extended notes about the social actors included, the influence of a researcher's own identity, and sense-making interpretation of the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). I argue that all research is bound by personal experiences due to my postmodernist assumption of knowledge creation (Foucault, 1970/1981), so subjectivity can never be fully extracted from knowledge creation. During the research process, theoretical memos (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019) allowed my subjectivities related to knowledge construction to be established. Throughout the research process, I reflected on how my subjectivities work in accordance with knowledge creation shaping interpretation of the data. Transparency is a key component in recognizing how data was analyzed by including full length quotes from media articles to demonstrate thick description (Brennen, 2017) of coding and categorizing mechanisms.

Through developing transparency of subjectivity, the notion of all knowledge being contingent on the researcher as the instrument of analysis (Grbich, 2016) was established. Acknowledging the limits and subjectivities of the research goal displays how discourse surrounding a representative of white sporting masculinity was constructed to evidence power outcomes related to COVID-19 protocols. A specific focus on critiquing the social wrong within a U.S.-based culturally bound event, employment of coding mechanisms, and reflective theoretical memos were the basis for utilizing CDA as a methodology for this study.

Positionality

Ethicality, reflexivity, subjectivity, bias, criticism, theoretical lenses, ontological and epistemological assumptions, researcher experiences, and participant experiences (in this case, journalists'/commentators' identities) all play a role in how a researcher composes their research (Cain et al., 2019; Grbich, 2016; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Given the critical component of the analysis, any critique of a societal event presupposes an ethical society is obtainable and situates any culturally based event as worthy of analysis (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak & Meyer, 2016; van Dijk, 1993). My positionality as a white, cisgender, sport-loving man will be useful to theorize and conceptualize how Rodgers' white masculinity fits into the grand scheme of mediated depictions of white men, especially given the abundance of anti-government vaccination discourse that continues to be ongoing in U.S. society (Hughes et al., 2021).

Though I may have determinedly progressive intentions, majority of my identities match Aaron Rodgers' identities and may help me understand his sensibilities but may also work to skew my analysis toward commonsense understandings of his mediated representations. A tactic that I find useful in critiquing commonsense understandings of phenomena is diving into postmodern literature, specifically Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault and critical discourse analysis scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, and Tuen van Dijk. Knowledge is dependent on who is privileged enough to determine which ideas maintain prominence in societies, and these ideas are perpetuated by regular citizens (sub)consciously through accepting commonsense discursive notions (Foucault, 1977/1995).

In reconciling how my identities relate to this study, Aaron Rodgers is seen throughout this analysis as a representative of white masculinity. Many of my identities match Rodgers' and many of them are the most privileged in U.S. society. White individuals are still represented at especially high rates in positions of power (Kurt, 2022) and the United States (along with most of the world) still operates as a patriarchal society with men dominating most public spheres (Kurt & Potters, 2021). Concurrently, the sports world is dominated by white masculine prerogatives (Adams et al., 2010; Anderson, 2008; Anderson & Kian, 2011; Anderson & Raney, 2018; Buffington & Fraley, 2012; 2008; Carrington, 2010; Coogan, 2012; Crowe, 2021; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Fink, 2016; Kennedy, et al., 2021; Kian & Anderson, 2009; Kusz, 2001; Lambertz-Berndt et al., 2021; Leonard, 2017; Matthews, 2016; Messner, 2009; 2002; 1992; Rugg, 2019; TIDES, 2022; 2021; Whannel, 2001; Woodward, 2004). The sports world is seen by some scholars as the last beacon in which men are completely dominant and sex segregation is seen as just due to "overt" differences between the assumed gender binaries (Fink, 2016; Matthews, 2016). Many scholars claim that high contact sports such as football push even harder for orthodox gender sensibilities to match an orthodox masculine performance (Anderson, 2008; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Messner, 2002).

Racialized assumptions matter in the sports world. BIPOC individuals are seen as inferior in an intellectual sense, shaping how hiring staff make decisions on who is the best fit for an organization (Carrington, 2010; Lambertz-Berndt et al., 2021). The NFL has taken action toward this phenomenon by instituting the liberalist Rooney Rule, which forces teams to interview a "minority" (through race or gender) for some coaching

positions (NFL.com, 2022). It is my belief that all Black, Indigenous, people of color, women, trans, and non-binary individuals should have more opportunities to move into management and organization personnel positions.

With this literature and supremacy in mind, it is important to note how I diverge from dominant assumptions in the sports world. I have a strong belief that the NFL, and society more generally, needs to do a better job representing and promoting people of all races and genders in a more equitable (rather than equal) fashion. To further conceptualize how my race matters in this analysis, I cannot assume how people of color feel about their mediated depictions without first asking them. However, as a member of the race and gender that Aaron Rodgers represents, I have an insider status (Brennen, 2017) that may work to my advantage in understanding how he and the media perceive his whiteness when creating representations of his comments on COVID vaccination. Journalists and content creators are also disproportionately white men in sport media (TIDES, 2021) meaning most operate within a similar cultural system as Rodgers and myself. Diving deeply into critical whiteness studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997) can help me understand how whiteness has serious implications that have impacted society in consequential ways.

In recognizing how my biases play a part in knowledge constructed during the analysis process, I should also divulge my feelings toward COVID and Rodgers' decision to use an alternative medical route for "immunization." I feel strongly that when the government chose to "shutdown" the U.S., they did so with good intentions. I do not feel like controlling entities were attempting to limit our freedoms, rather they were

instituting policies they felt were for the best interests of the nation (and league). With constant critiques of big federal government oversights, this seemed like a moment for conservative ideology to express concerns of governmental control. As it relates to Aaron Rodgers, he claims he “marches to the beat of his own drum” (McAfee, 2021a).

However, his perpetuation of alternative vaccination routes is seemingly dangerous.

Though his body is strong enough to take ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine without disclosed negative consequences, there are many Americans who could suffer serious side effects from these drugs (FDA, 2021; 2020) —side effects that government entities like the FDA (2021) argue could be worse than developing side effects from COVID. I do have my reservations about FDA approved vaccines specifically related to the emergency approvals given to three companies and my own health issues that have arisen post-vaccination. However, with research demonstrating how deaths and hospitalizations have subsided due to vaccination efforts (Galvani, 2021), Rodgers’ and other white men’s freedom rhetoric has potentially deleterious effects on public health. Recognizing my positionality regarding the situation under analysis should allow reflection into biases that may impact knowledge construction in the analysis.

To combat the potential detriment of researching identities in media in which I am closely associated with, I developed skills to be self-reflexive from noted qualitative research scholars. A major part of self-reflexive practices is that they can develop more nuanced analytic insights. Grbich (2016) notes self-reflexivity as a

...heightened awareness of self in the knowledge creation process, a clarification of how one’s own beliefs are socially constructed (self-revelation), and how such

frames/values as age, gender, ethnicity, religion, social class, education etc. are impacting interaction, data collection, and interpretation in the research setting.” (p. 113).

Furthermore, Grbich (2016) and Tracy (2010) list reflexivity as a main evaluative criterion for quality qualitative work. Systematic thinking about one’s own perceptions and experiences has been argued to be a valid source of insight (Segal, 1990). A quality researcher can use self-reflexive practices to shape research and even help spot commonsense ideologies that may persist within their analysis and own perceptions. Self-reflexive practices can also allow a researcher to recognize any subjectivities that can shape analyses in a way that may lead outside researchers to question the validity and truthfulness of their research.

Some qualitative research views “bracketing” as a viable form of information analysis (Miles et al., 2016). Bracketing is the idea that a researcher should “bracket out” their preconceived notions to not seriously affect data interpretation (Miles, et al., 2016). As a critical interpretivist, I do not believe any researcher can fully bracket out their life experiences. Rather, a better way of stating how I wish to acknowledge my subjectivities within research would be “soft” bracketing. “Soft bracketing” will be identifying my preconceived notions that may affect my perceptions throughout this analysis and recognizing how my preconceived notions and biases play a part in my research. I want to be as transparent as possible throughout my analysis; this seems a more permissible way to utilize a critical approach that recognizes how experiences constantly shape reality and perceptions of knowledge construction.

In this spirit, below I explain a few moments in data analysis and writing of information that utilized self-reflexive practices. The example involved using theoretical memos that helped me recognize my perceptions related to Rodgers' white masculinity while coding. For instance, when coding the concept of media inclusion of Rodgers' ideas of vaccines taking away freedom of choice and, more specifically, bodily autonomy, I found that I was relating his statements to the phrase "my body, my choice" that is part of feminist discourse that focuses on women's bodily rights (Patterson, 2020). Through theoretical/analytical memos, I worked through understanding the context of why media included this statement. I concluded that I wanted to read more into the statement than what was written because of my critical biases of white men's perception of freedom than what was stated by journalists and articles. I have previously read that vaccine opponents co-opted the phrase from its original meaning (Bluth, 2022), so I was looking for ways in which media outlets emphasized Rodgers' views of personal autonomy rather than focusing on how media produced discourse. As it turned out, only two outlets made the connection between Rodgers' use of feminist discourse for his white masculine prerogatives. Therefore, I "soft bracketed" the potential connection to media outlets' construction of Rodgers' bodily autonomy statements and the "my body, my choice" slogan.

Another example of reflexive practices involved using a self-reflexive journal throughout the examination process. Orange (2016) states that a reflexive journal helps researchers identify biases that may seriously impact their data interpretation and results. For this process, I wrote in a self-reflective journal through the idea creation, data

collection, and the beginning of data interpretation phases. I stopped utilizing the journal when the second round of coding began due to time constraints for the project. While constructing the journal, I was able to understand more about my personal perspectives on the subject being analyzed, such as my feelings toward advocating for marginalized groups, recognizing how my privilege as a white researcher allows me to conduct research on this subject, and to write in depth about feelings I had related to journalists' construction of Rodgers' comments. Through journal writing I was able to recognize how some of the codes were more focused on Rodgers' statement rather than media outlets' construction of Rodgers' statements due to the feelings I had on his vaccination information dissemination and the privileged platform he has allowing him to speak on public health issues. In this way, the journal was meaningful in the construction of the research question, data collection, and the first round of coding phases in this study.

To sum up, self-reflexive practices helped me identify different notions, biases, subjectivities, and processes that helped me determine how I analyzed data through a white masculine sporting lens. My subjectivities view society as a place that should advocate and fight for marginalized groups even if white men (who I identify as) perceive themselves as losing social privilege. All in all, self-reflexivity as a strategy is paramount to account for subjectivities that may detrimentally impact a qualitative study.

Ethicality

One major aspect of quality qualitative research recognized by Cain et al. (2019), Grbich (2016), and Tracy (2010) relates to the ethicality of a study. Cain's subjectivity statement argues that all research has power and stratification elements, so reflexivity and ethics cannot be separated (Cain et al., 2019). Ethical commitments can go beyond Institutional Review Board (IRB) decisions to recognize how a researcher situates composition of research from question generation, to data collection, to analysis. Although IRB is not involved, the ideas of respect for individuals, beneficence in maximizing benefits without applying harm, and justice in sharing benefits and burdens equitably (Grbich, 2016) will be considered as I am completing an analysis on discourse of Aaron Rodgers' COVID vaccination comments. One must remember to be fair and accurate with knowledge dissemination in their findings. I champion a cause and advocate (Grbich, 2016) for critiquing white masculinity that perpetuate and situate white men as the most dominant within the sports world. Moreover, I believe power dynamics to be central to understanding how discourse is created, dispersed, and maintained (Foucault, 1970/1981).

Ethically speaking, a concern that is highlighted in sport media is contractual rights. There are many potential conflicts of interest within this world (Schultz & Arke, 2016). One such example is ESPN/ABC/Disney's recent contract with the NFL which is estimated to cost the network around \$2.7 billion per season beginning in 2023, giving them the rights to cable's most watched television program, *Monday Night Football*, and to air two future Super Bowls (Iyer, 2021). Additionally, CBS, Fox, Amazon, NBC, and

AT&T/DirecTv were all part of establishing new contracts with the most profitable sports league in 2021. Given that ESPN/ABC/Disney, Fox, CBS, and NBC are also producers of media articles on sports, it becomes questionable if these media outlets would be critical of an NFL superstar such as Aaron Rodgers. These outlets financially benefit from successful NFL seasons. To further consider Rodgers' role, he gave a critique of the NFL based on his claims of restrictions placed on athletes who did not abide by NFL vaccination protocols, so Chapter Four will emphasize discussing the potential conflict of interest. While not directly related to positionality, there is reason to expect that media outlets who benefit from contract rights would hesitate to discuss the NFL in a negative light.

Personal Experiences Related to the Study

An insider status based on experience that I can relate to my chosen topic for this study is being a former football player, albeit never reaching the level of professional sports that Aaron Rodgers has. I made it to the collegiate level and only played for one year before realizing how much capitalism and fandom can ruin the experience of the game I loved as a child. In high school and college, I played on racially diverse teams that included people from all levels of society. I grew up as a military brat, and my high school was about 15 miles from an Army post, so there was a considerable number of athletes that had military affiliation. Unknowingly at the time, sports and the military have a long-studied connection (Boykoff, 2016; Butterworth, 2014; 2012; 2010; King, 2008). I moved frequently and, thankfully, people from different backgrounds challenged my white, military presumptions I learned as a child. I never questioned the nationalistic

and patriotic discourse that preaches conservative values in sports until I entered my master's degree. Notably, Rodgers has written about his appreciation for military members (Rodgers, 2019).

I grew up idolizing sports stars and consumed sports media, especially ESPN's *SportsCenter* (a highlight-based show displaying a multitude of sports, but mostly North American-based sports) in excess. As Hall (2013) states, representation connects meaning and language to culture. Sports were a culture that I dedicated my life to and the representations I consumed gave meaning to my (at that time) favorite culture. Sport stars were praised for their athletic prowess and represented figures to model myself after. Success in national level sports has been found to slightly increase amateur sport participation, and significantly increase dedication in athletes already participating in the successful sport (Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014). Football is widely seen as the most dominant sport in United States culture due to the increasing revenue generation, the distinctly United States-based growth and dominance of the game, and the proliferation of the game in all age levels (MacCambridge, 2004). Other countries continue to not be able to compete with the U.S. due to the lack of development worldwide. The distinctly American nature of the game mixed with my patriotic background fostered an appreciation for football unlike any other sport. As some media personnel state that football has replaced baseball as "America's Game" (MacCambridge, 2004), my dedication to my sporting ability increased as football grew.

As I grew older, I was told and realized that my abilities were not adequate to advance to the professional world or even top tier National Collegiate Athletic

Association (NCAA) Division I football, but there was a possibility of affordable college that I pounced on. I moved to an extremely rural, National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) institution that completely changed my understanding of the game. I realized that, even at the level of NAIA, football is a business and there is no love for athletes who do not meet expectations. Conformity is the rule of the game (Hughes & Coakley, 1991), and if you do not meet your coaches' wishes, they will find another athlete to represent the "X" on the gameplan. In fact, the turnover was so high at the institution I attended that when we appeared for our one-on-one end of the season evaluation, the first question my position coach asked was "Do you plan on staying next year?" Without academic knowledge of the conditions the sport world views as commonsense, my upbringing was filled with coaches who expected an athlete to risk themselves for the game, and I played my part well during those years. Overconformity to risking oneself for the game, one of the four norms of the sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991), led to a great deal of depression and questioning if I truly loved football anymore. The experience at the NAIA institution allowed me to see the business side of football. The love of the game dissipated quickly, and performance on the field along with following coaches' every whim were the only concerning features for decision-makers. The thought of benching an academically failing athlete was not a consideration for my coaches. The business of football was much more important than academics.

My experiences in football have allowed me to be much more critical of the game. I experienced the joys of the sport from gathering your friends for a backyard game to the tragedies of working a 40-hour work schedule without compensation.

Although the study is focused specifically on the professional game, which I have not experienced as an athlete, I have consumed professional sport media frequently since childhood. The status of Aaron Rodgers, an MVP caliber quarterback that many state as one of the greatest of all time (Gagnon, 2021), allows him to be one of the most discussed athletes in the NFL. Media consumption was an adequate way for me to deal with the loneliness I experienced as an only child constantly moving because of my family's military affiliation. Wherever I went, knowledge of sports was a straightforward way to fit into the new region. In my childhood, sport consumption centered on *SportsCenter*, an ESPN produced highlight show, and *Sports Illustrated*, the most dominant sport magazine company at the time (MacCambridge, 2018). Since before I was born in 1994, ESPN has maintained a 24/7 channel in which sports were the only topic of discussion (Vogan, 2015). Nowadays, sport media has a plethora of different media forms, such as podcasts or fandom talk shows. Sporting news is so diverse that media can be viewed as “fractured” in the sense that mainstream sport channels now offer multiple telecasts of the same event for different types of sport fans (Buehler, 2020). I am a sports lover and former fanatic, but my experiences in the game and learning about the sports world have shaped my critical edge toward perceptions of mediated representations of sports.

I do believe athletes are praised at higher rates and should be held to higher standards than common citizens because of role model effects on children (Mutter & Pawlowski, 2014)—effects that I personally experienced throughout my upbringing. I believe my passion to make the sports world a better, more equitable space developed through my experiences seeing how differently raced and gendered athletes are treated.

This passion of social justice allows a critical edge in sport research. My love of sports along with my more important love of social justice for all peoples is a beneficial connection for recognizing the unjust ways white, heterosexual men are continuously praised in sports media and how commonsense ideologies related to those identities may continue to dominate that sphere. In the sports world, white athletes are often praised for their intelligence, grit, hard work, and perseverance (Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Carrington, 2010; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Leonard, 2017; Woodward, 2004). I, too, experienced this praise throughout my life, believing that the praise was not based on my race or gender. Now, I can reflexively see how race and gender seriously impacted my sporting life and others around me. Reading literature related to race and gender along with gaining knowledge of reflective techniques for how these identities impacted my playing career and media consumption patterns serve a critical edge toward developing a nuanced critique of mediated commonsense ideologies proliferated through a white masculine representative in football.

Data Collection

Data were collected in the form of online mainstream news articles and sport media news articles about Rodgers' COVID diagnosis and subsequent comments about vaccination. The focus is on U.S. based news so news sites based in different countries were excluded. Online news sites were selected based on the greatest number of monthly unique visitors. A preference toward most visited sites allows the most consumed discourse to be analyzed. The top ten most visited mainstream news sites by unique monthly visitors as of July 2022 are nytimes.com, cnn.com, foxnews.com, msn.com,

news.google.com, nypost.com, finance.yahoo.com, washingtonpost.com, news.yahoo.com, and cnbc.com (Majid, 2022). To expand the pool of potential articles and focus on the specific culture of the sports world, the top ten sites in unique monthly visitors for sport-based sites were also included. Excluded from the top ten list are sites dedicated to a specific sport that is not football (such as MLB.com) and sites not based in the U.S. The top sports sites included in the study were espn.com, sports.yahoo.com, nfl.com, bleacherreport.com, si.com, foxsports.com, cbssports.com, nbc sports.com, sportsrants.com, and deadspin.com according to ebizMBA's Global Traffic Rank (2022). nytimes.com and washingtonpost.com were hidden behind paywalls and excluded from the data set except when included for free in wire service in other outlets. news.google.com and msn.com do not produce their own content and were excluded. finance.yahoo.com and cnbc.com did not have articles related to Rodgers' vaccination comments and were excluded. Some of the sites overlap regarding the outlet that services the webpage. Based on these factors, articles were collected from a total of 14 outlets: bleacherreport.com, cbssports.com, cnn.com, deadspin.com, espn.com, foxnews.com, foxsports.com, nbc.com, nbc sports.com, newyorkpost.com, nfl.com, si.com (*Sports Illustrated*), sportsrant.com, and yahoosports.com.

On November 3, 2021, Rodgers was ruled out for his Week 9 matchup versus the Kansas City Chiefs after being placed on the COVID-19 list. On November 5, he went on *The Pat McAfee Show* to discuss his immunization status and revealed he had not received an FDA approved vaccine despite telling media he was "immunized" in late August 2021 (McAfee, 2021a; Rivera, 2021). On November 23 Rodgers jokingly stated

he had “COVID toe” when in reality he fractured his toe on *The Pat McAfee Show* (2021c). A week later on November 30, he returned to *The Pat McAfee Show* and stated that media have taken the COVID toe “joke” too far when they wrote feature articles articulating COVID toe symptoms (McAfee, 2021d). Due to the comment timeline for Rodgers, this study utilized the dates November 3, 2021 until December 1, 2021 as the time frame for article collection. A period of 24 hours after his last COVID toe reference is included for articles that may be a day late after the last podcast episode aired. Additionally, the podcast episodes Rodgers participated on *The Pat McAfee Show* during this time period were used as reference points for correlating online articles’ information to ideas he discussed on the podcast.

Utilizing the LexisNexis online database, each website’s own search entry (when available), and Google news searches, the term “Aaron Rodgers” and a combination of COVID phrases (e.g., COVID, COVID-19, coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, etc.) were selected to find articles within the November 3 to December 1, 2021 timeframe. All articles with mention of his name and significant discussion of his vaccine decision were included. Significant discussion was quantified as more than two paragraphs directly referencing Rodgers’ vaccine stance. The search yielded 379 articles, which were reduced to 302 after filtering for significant discussion. A total of 135 articles were from mainstream news sources and 167 articles were from sport media sources.

Table 1—Media articles per outlet

Outlet	Number of articles (articles before filtering)
Bleacher Report	8 (11)
CBS Sports	12 (16)
CNN	15 (18)
Deadspin	10 (11)
ESPN	9 (16)
Fox News	28 (35)
Fox Sports	92 (106)
NBC	16 (16)
NBC Sports	17 (24)
New York Post	44 (50)
NFL	6 (8)
Sports Illustrated	32 (39)
Sports Rants	2 (4)
Yahoo! Sports	20 (25)
Total: 14	302 (379)

Chapter Four: Strands of Discourse

Using critical discourse analysis, I analyzed media texts to examine how mainstream and sports media journalists constructed Aaron Rodgers' COVID-19 vaccine comments after testing positive for the virus in November 2021. Although this study analyzed language used, I look to provide dense context as is important in a critical discourse analysis (Philo, 2007). Rodgers' comments are connected to broader sociocultural understandings of media representations related to white masculinity, COVID vaccine debates, white male freedom, white victimization rhetoric, sport ethic expectations, and the politicization of vaccines and NFL policies. Consistent ideas that provided insights for understanding how a representative of white sporting masculinity has been constructed in media articles are identified. The following section will discuss prominent discourses that exist in media coverage of Rodgers' comments, provide examples in text that illustrate the discourse, and connect the discourse to white masculine sporting sociocultural contexts. In this analysis, I discuss five prominent themes:

1. Dishonesty and Irresponsibility
2. Orthodox Masculine Sensibilities
3. White Victimization
4. Scientific Evidence
5. Protection of White Male Hegemony

Dishonesty and Irresponsibility

Discourses of dishonesty and irresponsibility were the most consistent ideas throughout the analyzed texts. When asked by a reporter if he had received the COVID-19 vaccine in August 2021, Rodgers responded, “Yeah, I’m immunized.” Many outlets pointed out that his reply implied he was immunized through FDA-approved vaccinations. After testing positive for COVID-19 in November 2021, Rodgers revealed that he took an alternative medical cocktail that he claimed “immunized” him from COVID. Learning the true nature of his vaccination status following his positive COVID test on November 3rd led many media outlets to criticize Rodgers’ honesty. In the words of Bill Huber of *Packers Central*’s (2021b), Rodgers was “skewered for his views on the vaccine.” Comments questioning his semantic choice of “immunization” or critiquing his reply to media criticism on the first McAfee interview (2021a) occurred 201 times in 302 articles. Additionally, Rodgers’ use of “immunized” to describe his vaccination status was mentioned in just over half of the articles (n = 156). Rodgers’ linguistic choice during the first interview, followed by his subsequent disclosure that he had not received an FDA-approved vaccine draws attention toward perceptions of lying being an extremely important aspect for media outlets to include. Additionally, many outlets stressed how Rodgers was irresponsible for his choice to forego a vaccine, jeopardizing the health of those he may encounter.

The media criticized Rodgers’ misleading comments about his vaccination status in several ways. One of the prolific strands was calling Rodgers an outright liar for previously withholding the truth. In a *USA Today* opinion piece, Nancy Armour (2021)

labeled Rodgers' "research" as "nothing more than snake oil and smokescreen" after he tested positive for COVID. Then, Armour argued,

How is lying – let's call what Rodgers did for what it is – about being vaccinated against a disease that has killed more than 5 million people worldwide, almost 750,000 in the United States alone, representing the team the right way? How is exposing friends and teammates to COVID, as he might have done over the weekend, showing care for the well-being of those around him?

This quote demonstrates that media members questioned individual vaccination decisions through the lens of a public health crisis. Emphasizing the COVID death tally (the number is well into the millions at the time of writing), advocates for understanding Rodgers as irresponsible for ignoring social public health expectations to lessen the spread of the disease. COVID is a disease that spreads through viral transmission from one party to another, hence the emphasis on Rodgers' responsibility as a public figure to fight transmission rates.

Another example of critical discourse constructed by journalists found in multiple articles emphasized his "misleading" rhetoric. Rodgers even stated in his second McAfee interview (2021b) that he "apologizes" for potentially misleading reporters about his vaccination status when he was first asked about it in August. Writer Julie DiCaro (2021) from *Deadspin*, the outlet that was by far the most critical of Rodgers' vaccination stance, stated,

A lot of people in media have used words like "misled" or "misinformed" to describe what Rodgers did when telling the country he was "immunized" against

COVID. But we're all adults here, so we can be honest. Rodgers lied. In the sense he was asked, "immunized" meant "vaccinated," and Rodgers knew it.

And of course, the Packers knew it. They knew Rodgers' vaccination status. They knew he had applied to the league to be considered vaccinated and had been denied. They knew Rodgers lied about being vaccinated every time he stepped to a podium, unmasked, in a room full of reporters.

While most criticism was put solely on Rodgers' semantic choice, DiCaro points out that the Green Bay Packers were complicit in hiding his truth. Furthermore, this quote constructs Rodgers as a danger to public health for being unmasked in a room full of reporters potentially infecting bystanders by not following protocols. The quote exhibits mediated discourse of dishonesty that implicitly argues for Rodgers being irresponsible toward others through his alternative immunization protocol decision. DiCaro, and other writers, highlight how Rodgers gives them a person to direct their blame at for social actors not following COVID protocols since they feel like they "know him" due to his high status in sport.

Media members also constructed a discourse of dishonesty by presenting and citing well-known personalities to criticize Rodgers. These critics included the likes of sports personality Stephen A. Smith, athlete-activist Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, former coach Tony Dungy, radio host Howard Stern, movie star Mark Hamill and, the most noted throughout the texts, sports personality and former NFL quarterback Terry Bradshaw (25 times mentioned). *Yahoo! Sports* writer Jason Owens (2021) noted that Rodgers

“contradicted his preseason proclamation” about being immunized. He then included a quote from Terry Bradshaw to discuss how Rodgers misled the public,

It would have been nice if he’d just come to the Naval Academy and learned how to be honest. Learned not to lie. Because that’s what you did, Aaron. You lied to everyone... We are a divided nation politically. We are a divided nation on the COVID-19 whether or not to take the vaccine. And unfortunately, we've got players that pretty much think only about themselves. And I'm extremely disappointed in the actions of Aaron Rodgers.

In this statement, Bradshaw first emphasizes a pro-military anecdote of honesty, then critiques Rodgers for “lying” to the public about his vaccination status. Inclusion of Bradshaw’s quote constructs Rodgers as dishonest and irresponsible by contrasting the socially approved notion of military honesty and hope for unity despite national political division. Owens (2021) then followed up with Howie Long, another sport personality and former NFL athlete, who claims that a decision is not simply “personal” when you have social responsibility for those around you,

It ceases to be a personal decision when you take part in being part of a football team in a building with coaches, players, trainers, equipment managers," Long said. "And you run the risk of taking something home to your wife, your children, your grandchildren.”

Another line of discourse within this theme relates to Rodgers’ responsibility to follow NFL’s protocols as a person in a leadership position. Football personality Tony

Dungy is noted as saying that missing games displays a lack of leadership (Weisholtz, 2021). In Dungy's view, it is Rodgers' responsibility to abide by NFL protocols to be on the field as often as possible for his team; a true leader does whatever they can to participate in their sport when it is in season. The media constructs policies to be followed without questioning their implications so Rodgers can be a team player and participate week in and week out. Media members argued that Rodgers is a dishonest, irresponsible liar and utilized high status individuals, such as Bradshaw and Dungy, to create a sense of authenticity for their construction. Although such high-status individuals are not experts on the topic of COVID-19, audiences may be influenced through inclusion of their arguments.

Discussion

In a critical discourse analysis, one way to analyze data is to find the perceived social wrong of the event then find an approved way past the obstacle (Fairclough, 2010). The most apparent social wrong in this instance was Rodgers telling the media he was "immunized," which truly meant he used alternative medicines in an attempt to reach immunization standards. The protocol included ivermectin, hydroxychloroquine, and a medley of vitamins. Hence, while believing himself to be immunized, this protocol did not consist of an actual approved vaccine, leading media outlets to construct discourse that called him a consummate liar in many cases. In this situation, media members constructed the social wrong to be Rodgers' misleading statements about his vaccination status and advocating for an alternative immunization protocol.

The discourse of dishonesty forges Rodgers' arguments for his alternative vaccination protocol to be an incorrect way for someone to perform their masculinity. As argued by Saint-Amour (2018), a socially "right" version of masculinity in the modern era is the "warrior"—one who sacrifices themselves for the greater good of their business, country, family, and/or team (Do & Samuels, 2021; Saint-Amour, 2018; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). The concept of warrior masculinity relates to Hughes and Coakley's (1991) idea of the "sport ethic." The sport ethic has four key components, the most important for this theme being athletes are expected to make personal sacrifices for the greater good of the game (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Adams et al. (2010) found that in contact sports, like football, cultural expectations identify sacrificing oneself for the greater good of the game as an essential part of men establishing their masculinity. In mediated texts, Rodgers does not live up to this version of masculine performance. By putting himself, media members, teammates, and other NFL athletes at risk, writers construct Rodgers as one who is socially irresponsible for jeopardizing the health of those around him. Journalists create discourse that situates his lack of responsibility by lying to media outlets about his personal health status as something to which audiences should be appalled. In essence, Rodgers failing to follow COVID vaccination protocols, not representing an accepted version of masculinity, and misleading the public constructs taking FDA vaccines for the safety of society as a commonsense notion rather than championing his alternative immunization cause. By not presenting himself as a warrior and abiding by the norms of the sport ethic, Rodgers fails to live up to culturally appropriate masculine expectations.

In framing Rodgers as a liar who fails to live up to the expectations of sport, media members present the authority of the NFL and public health officials as absolute and unquestionable. Though Rodgers presents information to contrast protocols, media members construct authority to be all knowing by very few outlets questioning protocols in place. Only conservative leaning outlets, like *Fox News* or *Outkick*, questioned if the protocols were truly reducing the spread of COVID. Without following governing entities' rules, one cannot participate in their sport. If one cannot play, then they are not a true leader doing everything they can to be a part of their team, as argued by Tony Dungy's statement (Weisholtz, 2021). In media coverage criticizing Rodgers, a true leader is one who sacrifices themselves for the greater good of the team. Failure to not follow NFL COVID policies positions Rodgers as failing to adhere to the norms of the sport ethic and expectations of warrior masculinity. For media outlets, one is responsible when they follow the rules and regulations of sporting authorities. While research finds that the prevalence of warrior masculinity may be declining in certain representations in sport media (Anderson & Kian, 2011), warrior masculinity discourse is prevalent throughout the data examined in the current study. Including critics with substantial sporting capital, such as Terry Bradshaw and Tony Dungy, prioritizes sacrificing oneself for the greater good of the team as part of being a leader. In this case, Rodgers' individualistic actions were cause for criticism. A leader/warrior is a man who does whatever they can to help their organization, not one who takes a stand against socially accepted policies instituted by controlling entities. By critiquing Rodgers to this extent,

subtly, media members portray Rodgers as not being a “real” man due to not meeting dominant masculine expectations.

When it comes to a public health crisis such as the pandemic, in this situation, media outlets favored a masculinity that was more in touch with communal endeavors like putting aside your personal feelings of the vaccine for the greater good of the general public. Rodgers’ vaccination decision was constructed as placing his own interests above the team and those he may encounter. As such, thinking about the impact one’s choices can have on the greater community is in line with the “new man” masculine ideology (Crowe, 2019; Malin, 2005; Whannel, 2001). Rodgers’ masculinity was much more individualistic in nature by thinking about how he should serve his own self-interests. With this masculine performance in mind, the media constructed Rodgers’ stance as the social wrong, one that denies accepted scientific arguments for combating the spread of COVID. A new man is one who is honest about their positionality, fights for the greater good, and recognizes some of the privileges he has experienced along the way (Crowe, 2019; Malin, 2005). Though the dominance of the new man has been less emphasized in recent masculinity studies, many of its masculine sensibilities hold relevance for contemporary analyses, but not necessarily this one. Media members cite Rodgers as recognizing his privilege only 18 times throughout the articles when he apologizes for his potentially misleading statements, but even this slight acknowledgement is followed by Rodgers “standing by his comments” from his first McAfee interview (2021b). Despite the lack of new man discourse in Rodgers’ comments, some orthodox masculine

sensibilities were heavily critiqued. However, there are notable strands in the media coverage where certain versions of orthodox masculine ideals were portrayed positively.

Orthodox Masculine Sensibilities

Although media coverage of Rodgers was most often critical of his comments related to COVID vaccines, in some instances discourse supported Rodgers' actions as an appropriate performance of orthodox masculinity. While not all forms of orthodox masculine sensibilities are depicted, some accepted orthodox masculine sensibilities within media discourse include displaying heterosexuality, toughness, risk-taking and some forms of individualism. Allowing Rodgers' and others to voice their concerns or defend Rodgers' stance on government approved vaccinations constructed discourse elaborating each of the aforementioned orthodox masculine sensibilities. Some outlets simply allowed space for Rodgers to discuss his feelings toward vaccinations without offering any critique. Others emphasized different orthodox masculine ideals through an expected masculine performance by Rodgers. All in all, orthodox masculinity was present through inclusion and context of Rodgers' comments and comment defenders.

One defender of Rodgers whose voice was included several times throughout the articles was Rodgers' then fiancé, Shailene Woodley. Although Rodgers' sexuality or masculinity was never explicitly called into question throughout the articles, Woodley was given space to defend Rodgers' status as a heterosexual man. Amidst Rodgers' quarantine period following his positive COVID test, news circulated of Rodgers breaking quarantine in Los Angeles, California, where Woodley calls home. Defending

Rodgers and commenting on the picture of a man who was supposedly Rodgers, in *Page Six* (Bacardi, 2021), Woodley states

“i know aaron’s body. VERY well. first off, his feet, ahem and no offense to this rando dude, are a LOT bigger. ;)”....“literally y’all [media journalists] need to calm the f–k down,” she added. The “Fault in Our Stars” actress didn’t stop there. She next pointed out the fact that the innocent bystander had bald hands. “also, for those of us who know aaron beyond the worlds of obsessed sport and s–tty media, it’s no secret he has the hairiest hands on the f–king planet.” Woodley even mocked the man’s car, saying Rodgers “would never” drive those wheels.

In the same article, Bacardi (2021) noted how Woodley “slams” *Daily Mail* for misidentifying Rodgers and “blasts” the outlet for their negative coverage of Rodgers’ vaccination comments. Additionally, by “mocking” another man who does not live up to Rodgers’ heterosexual masculinity (e.g., not having large feet, having “bald hands,” and driving an effeminate car), media outlets provide space for orthodox heterosexuality to be approvingly constructed. Furthermore, when framing Woodley’s defense of Rodgers, journalists would often include her a quote from her Twitter page that read “Calm Seas May Bring You Peace, But Storms Are Where You’ll Find Your Power” amidst Rodgers’ vaccination debacle (Bacardi, 2021). Many articles, such as Bacardi’s article above, frame this quote as referencing Rodgers, though Woodley never directly states its true meaning. Overwhelmingly, media outlets frame Woodley’s defense in a positive manner through a high-status woman defending her man’s individualism and masculinity. In this way, Woodley’s argument almost always reinforces Rodgers’ heterosexuality and his

ability to overcome harsh media criticism. Woodley and her defense of Rodgers is mentioned 54 times, the fourth most-frequently mentioned person through the articles examined in the current study. This explicit heterosexual emphasis included in the articles displays how this orthodox masculine ideal is relevant in mediated discourse.

Toughness is another relevant component of orthodox masculinity, particularly in the last 11 days of the timeframe (November 21-December 1). At this point in coverage, media outlets shifted topics to discuss Rodgers' toe injury rather than focusing solely on his vaccination stance. Writers, such as *CBS Sports*' Cody Benjamin (2021) highlight the pain Rodgers was suffering,

Aaron Rodgers left the Packers' Week 11 loss to the Vikings with a "very, very painful toe injury," and now we have a diagnosis for the ailment from the best source of all ... Rodgers himself.

The reigning MVP ended speculation that he was dealing with "COVID toe."

Rodgers told -- and showed -- reporters on Wednesday that he suffered a fractured toe working out at home during his quarantine and that is could eventually require surgery.

Later in the article, journalist Benjamin made a point to discuss Rodgers' accomplishments despite his "painful" injury, "Even with the painful injury, Rodgers still managed to complete 23-of-33 passes for a season-high 385 yards and four touchdowns against the Vikings." A description of Rodgers having a "painful injury" was found in nearly all articles related to his toe, followed by listing his achievements while

experiencing this injury. By media outlets discussing the injury as “painful,” then following up with his accomplishments, they construct him as self-sacrificial for the team, demonstrating a toughness by playing through an injury that is nagging and “worse than turf toe” (Benjamin, 2021). While he was never explicitly labeled as tough, the concept of toughness was implied through continuous talk of overcoming pain to participate. Importantly, although this section of Rodgers’ timeline was included because some media outlets proclaimed Rodgers to have “COVID toe” during his COVID recovery, the tone of articles were more focused on injury/pain discourse rather than COVID toe symptoms, though this did differ depending on which media outlet was analyzed.

While not generally explicit, discourse of Rodgers taking a risk by not being appropriately vaccinated was implicitly constructed in the texts. Whether media emphasized the potential punishments or fine amounts for not following NFL policies (89 codes), included scientific evidence that refuted his claim (more in a later theme), or discussed the sponsorships he lost or could potentially lose through his vaccination stance (59 codes), the risk-taking mentality of going against the grain when it comes to publicly accepted vaccination efforts was prevalent in the texts. Another strand of risk-taking discourse was the inclusion of Rodgers attending a Halloween party hosted by a teammate. The Halloween party is a clear violation of NFL COVID policies that states athletes should not attend house gatherings of more than 15 people if they are vaccinated and no more than three people if they are unvaccinated when no one is wearing PPE (NFL & NFLPA, 2021). The Halloween party was mentioned 60 times in total

throughout the articles, typically cited as the reason Rodgers was fined \$14,650 for breaking COVID rules. The risk-taking behavior is clearly articulated in an article from *NBC Sports Chicago* writer Bryan Murphy (2021),

Rodgers, as well as wide receiver Allen Lazard, were each fined \$14,650 for attending a maskless Halloween party, according to NFL Network's Mike Garafolo. Rodgers and Lazard are both unvaccinated, and protocols prohibit unvaccinated players from attending gatherings outside of the team facility in a group of more than three players.

Due to Rodgers taking a risk by attending a Halloween party and choosing an “alternative” route for vaccination, he received a negative consequence, a \$14,650 fine. The risk-taking masculinity emphasized in media texts was almost always followed up by stating that he violated NFL protocols or discussed how he was unmasked at NFL events. Leading into the quote, Murphy highlighted the “Packers received a \$300,000 fine for violations,” later noting that the Packers received such a large amount due to “failing to penalize Rodgers” for not wearing a mask in facilities. Risk-takers, like Rodgers, are not penalized to nearly the same extent as the franchise they represent. Rodgers’ risk-taking is not negatively discussed to near the same extent as the Packers’ inability to follow protocols. Although the risk-taker version of masculinity was critiqued more than heterosexual or tough masculinity, it still was marginally approvingly discussed in media construction of events, as outlets labeled him as a “critical thinker” or “marching to the beat of his own drum” (Kacala, 2021).

Furthermore, Rodgers attempted to emphasize his own individuality throughout his McAfee interviews. Media allowed dense inclusion of individualistic phrases such as “I march to the beat of my own drum” and “what ever happened to my body, my choice?” (McAfee, 2021a). Media members’ inclusion of Rodgers’ claims that he can find an alternative route to address a viral pandemic heightens ideas of individualistic masculinity. Though not as frequent, there were media outlets that approved Rodgers’ individualism in subtle ways by not critiquing his statements. One example of this occurred with *Outkick* writer Armando Salguero (2021) when he outlined reasons why Rodgers did not take a vaccine accompanied by criticism of the CDC,

He [Rodgers] didn’t take one [a vaccine]. He said he was allergic to the mRNA shots and concerned about the blood clotting and other problems that have been reported with the Johnson & Johnson jab.

(I’m not calling it a vaccine because it isn’t. The CDC has actually changed the definition of “vaccine” on its website to no longer mean that it immunizes one from a disease. Big Pharma made the request and this rigging of words to fit the corporate agenda of selling more shots, thus enriching the corporation, is utter poo this space will not abide.)

So let’s recap:

The media was outraged Rodgers used a play on words, saying he was “immunized” to suggest he was vaccinated. But they’re not outraged the CDC has literally changed the definition of vaccinated to no longer mean immunized.

By seeking to justify Rodgers' decision, the quote implies outrage for not allowing Rodgers to make an individual choice due to biases toward government entities. Although this may seem counterintuitive to the previous theme, depending on the outlet, some space was dedicated toward construction of pro individualistic sentiments.

Discussion

Anderson (2009) advocates for understanding sports through the theory of inclusive masculinity, which states that contemporary sporting masculinity is more open to same sex tactility, increased emotional bonding, and adoption of orthodox feminine mannerisms. Anderson's examinations utilize survey, observation, and case studies over years (Anderson, 2009; Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Anderson & White, 2018) to develop this idea. In media texts about Aaron Rodgers, notions of inclusive masculinity were almost entirely absent. Media outlets, in contrast, utilize Rodgers' own rhetorical strategies to construct a discourse supportive of some orthodox masculinity components. Rather than inclusive masculinity being demonstrated, traditional versions of masculinity like heterosexuality, acting tough, risk-taking, and some versions of rugged individualism were emphasized.

By allowing space for Shailene Woodley to discuss Rodgers' sexuality, the discourse of orthodox masculinity through heterosexuality was emphasized. While simultaneously defending Rodgers' abiding by his isolation protocols, she also feeds into hegemonic masculinity by stating Rodgers has hairy hands (a sign of masculine prowess), claiming Rodgers is too manly to drive an effeminate car, and commenting on his large foot size which is colloquial for possessing a large penis. In the sports world,

heterosexual performance is a part of hegemonic masculine expectations (Anderson, 2008). Rodgers' heterosexuality was never directly challenged, yet media outlets allowed space for the norm of heterosexuality to be constructed through inclusion of Rodgers' then partner's social media posts. Rodgers' heterosexual status has been questioned by media members in the past (Buzinski, 2015; Chiari, 2014) and the overt attempt to highlight Rodgers' sexuality may be a direct response to the previous reports. The emphasis on Rodgers' sexuality feeds into a larger narrative of the expectation of men athletes in contact sports being heterosexual and marginalizes those that do not fit dominant standards.

Scholars find that a typical component of sporting masculinity is coaches, peers, and fans expecting athletes to be tough (Anderson, 2008; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Messner, 2002). Demonstrating toughness involves playing through pain, especially in contact sports, to help the team achieve success. In his media comments, Rodgers emphasized how his toe injury is “really, really painful”—a description included in every single article that mentions his injury from November 21-December 1. Media outlets create discourse surrounding pain that correlates with another aspect of the “sport ethic.” Injuries may hurt, but an athlete is expected to continue playing their sport to give their team the best shot at success (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The discourse of pain stands in contrast to critics like former coach and current sport personality Tony Dungy who claimed Rodgers was selfish for missing games due to being unvaccinated (Weisholtz, 2021). Injuries are the general reason why athletes miss games, but Rodgers is expected to play through his toe injury to give the Packers the best shot of winning every game.

When it comes to COVID, doing all you can to participate in games is expected like following the league's protocols. I argue the discourse of doing all one can to avoid a positive COVID diagnosis as being consistent with the norms of the sport ethic in COVID era sports. One needs to determine the best possible route to continue playing, whether that is through consistent negative COVID tests or playing through an injury. Though some sport personalities criticized Rodgers for not giving his all for the team and labeled him as selfish, playing through pain is expected and not highlighted by sport personalities in a similar manner. Playing through pain seems to be a routine, everyday expectation for sport analysts, media, and those who overconform to the norms of the sport ethic. The pain discourse highlights Rodgers' ability to perform orthodox masculine expectations, yet not following vaccination protocols means he is not truly giving it his all for the team. The contradictory value constructs which ideas associated with the sport ethic are commonsense, which are new in a unique COVID period, and which are acceptable masculine performances.

Being a risk-taker, which can be seen as part of individualism, is a major component of orthodox masculine discourse throughout the texts. An example of taking a risk is constructed through Rodgers attending a Halloween party even though it is in clear violation of NFL COVID policies. Outlets offer pictures of his appearance at times and some demonstrate that risk-taking may lead to punishment. Part of U.S. culture is manifesting one's own destiny while hampering collective action and advocating for anti-statism, otherwise termed "rugged individualism" (Bazzi et al., 2021). The concept has roots stemming back to when Europeans were first colonizing the U.S. shielded behind

the mantra of “manifest your destiny” (Bazzi et al., 2021). In modern times, the notion of rugged individualism is often correlated with conservative ideology (Willems, 1992), emphasizing the idea that one should pull themselves up by their bootstraps and get to work, not expecting free handouts (Leonard, 2017). A rugged individualist takes risks, especially when it comes to doing things by their own volition to be sure to enact their freedom as they see fit. Rugged individualism has existed heavily in white masculine mediated depictions throughout U.S. existence (Giaccardi et al., 2016; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Kimmel, 1996). Rodgers attempts to avoid politicization of the vaccine in his first interview with McAfee, but is cited by the podcast host as a “poster boy for conservatism” (McAfee, 2021a). Constructed as a rugged individualist by media outlets through emphasis on his vaccination rhetoric, Rodgers does not accept government dictated vaccination protocols that restrict his individual freedom. The construction of Rodgers’ views on the vaccine without critique by some media outlets allows the acceptance of rugged individualism to be implied. However, only certain versions of rugged individualism are accepted and only in specific outlets. The concept of freedom of choice that is a selling point in conservative ideology (Willems, 1992) plays an important role in conceptualizing some outlets’ decision to construct vaccination freedom discourse. Some media outlets emphasize that men should be concerned with a pandemic by giving up some freedoms for public health and taking a risk is not appropriate when it jeopardizes others’ health. Bazzi et al. (2021) argued Americans’ predilection for rugged individualism is a major reason for the weak public response to COVID, epitomized through Rodgers’ own arguments. As mentioned previously, it is important to note that

this discourse occurs less often than the previous discourse that criticized his stance, but for a subsection of articles, the implied acceptance of some versions of individualism is still present. As a rugged individualist, Rodgers sees his vaccination prerogatives as being overly criticized by the media; he views himself as the true victim of social stances advocating for him to follow sporting officials' vaccination protocols. In his perception, Rodgers, and some media outlets, view him as a victim of social efforts.

White Victimization

Another form of discourse that was prominent in media coverage of Rodgers was white victimization, established through inclusion of Rodgers' statements about being a victim of social justice efforts. Media members were split on whether or not to critique his COVID sentiments or simply report his issues without critique. When media outlets reported his issues without critique, a sense of white victimization discourse was constructed. White victimization rhetoric emphasizes the idea that white men are losing social favor to traditionally marginalized communities (Bloch et al., 2020; Kusz, 2001; Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998). As such, white men perceive victimization as an adequate way to regain their "white male omnipotence" (described in Kusz, 2019). By doing so, victimization rhetoric allows audiences to perceive white men as suffering from marginalized groups' social ascendance. The victimization discourse occurs through Rodgers' statements related to his defense of not receiving an approved vaccine. Even though Rodgers is a high earning athlete playing in the most visible position on the football field, media outlets rarely emphasize this high-status privilege (n = 6). Instead,

including Rodgers' criticisms toward media construction of his persona emphasizes how he, and, in turn, some media outlets, view him as a victim of progressive movements and the "liberal" (Burack, 2021) media landscape.

Rodgers used what I label as "buzzwords" to connote the sense of victimization during the first McAfee interview (2021a). Buzzwords refer to jargon based on political ideology generally used to unite voters in a party (Zeruto, 2022). Liberal and conservative sites included buzzwords; however conservative sites were more likely to include Rodgers' actual spoken words during his first McAfee interview. Conservative leaning sites were also more likely to frame political jargon in a positive sense, whereas liberal leaning outlets were more likely to criticize Rodgers' usage of political jargon. The most used buzzwords from his interview that were stated within the analyzed news articles were "woke mob" (74 codes), "cancel culture casket" (45 codes), and "witch hunt" (31 codes). Ryan Glasspiegel (2021), from *The New York Post*, citing Rodgers' words, writes,

"I realize I'm in the crosshairs of the woke mob right now, so before my final nail gets put in my cancel-culture casket, I think I'd like to set the record straight on some of the blatant lies that are out there about myself right now," Rodgers began.

Rodgers said he didn't "lie" during a late-August press conference when he said he was "immunized" and there was a "witch hunt" going on in the media over who was unvaccinated.

"It wasn't some sort of ruse or lie, it was the truth," Rodgers said.

Inclusion of Rodgers' defensive sentiments toward media criticism paints a picture of victimization at the hands of media outlets. Rather than provide criticism, Glasspiegel framed the inclusion of buzzwords around "factors that went into his decision to not be vaccinated." Following the inclusion of buzzwords, conservative news site like *The New York Post* typically discussed other factors Rodgers noted, without critique, that highlights his perceived victimization by the "coercion and collusion" from the NFL and media outlets' treatment of his positive test. Here, it is important to emphasize that criticism of Rodgers' statement represented in the "Dishonest/Irresponsibility" theme were more abundant, but there was a significant strand of only including Rodgers' sentiments without critique. Often, victimization rhetoric came from conservative leaning sites, which constituted 164/302 articles in the analysis. When media outlets did not critique Rodgers, they influenced the audience to perceive Rodgers as a victim of society rather than an opponent of public health efforts. While on the defensive, Rodgers chose to utilize several key buzzwords commonly associated with conservative rhetoric that criticize the political left for attempting to be "politically correct." Later in media coverage, media members reported Rodgers' second McAfee interview (2021b) in which he states that he "takes full responsibility" for potentially misleading reporters, though to a lesser extent than covering his use of buzzwords (76 articles covered "buzzwords," 18 covered him taking "full responsibility"). The emphasis on buzzwords instead of Rodgers' apology demonstrates the prominence of white masculine victimization discourse. Some outlets emphasize him as a victim of social efforts rather than being apologetic.

Some media members, like Bobby Burack (2021) of *Outkick*, proclaim Rodgers to be victimized by other media personnel. In the quote below, Burack predicts that Rodgers was going to be a victim in MVP voting (which is partly determined by media members' votes at the end of the regular season),

The list of NFL MVP voters is basically comprised of the same blue-checks who spent more than seven days painting Rodgers as the football equivalent of the BTK Killer. The voter list, which you can find [here](#), includes Peter King and writers from *USA Today*, ProFootballTalk, and NBC...

These NFL MVP voting journalists are an extension of the mainstream press, a group as shallow and unimpressive as they are. So you can expect them to work tirelessly with their resources on social media to re-shape the narrative so that they can avoid voting for Rodgers for MVP...

Rodgers used the word *draconian* and (gasp) cited MLK. Bring out the guillotine.

The explicit inclusion of victimization rhetoric helps conservative audiences relate with Rodgers and feel empathy for his supposed “victimization” by “liberal” media outlets. The sarcastic tone presented shifts attention away from the controversial statements Rodgers made to emphasize the potential “unjust” consequences he may face from a politically correct media culture.

Another strand of victimization discourse comes in the form of being upset at the media for “leaking” information about his vaccination status. This discourse perpetuates Rodgers as the victim of media prerogatives to release breaking news stories without thinking of the effects on the person in the story. For example, in *Cal Sports Report*’s Jake Curtis’ (2021) writing,

The Green Bay Packers star is "upset" at the response to his recent admission that he is not vaccinated against COVID-19 after previously saying that he had been "immunized" against the virus, a source close to the NFL star tells PEOPLE.

To further emphasize Rodgers’ feelings, Curtis included a “source close to the NFL” to “explain” Rodgers’ perspective, which invites readers to feel sympathy for the ways in which media outlets treated Rodgers. Some media journalists felt the need to include Rodgers’ personal feelings toward journalists’ construction of his vaccination stance. Including Rodgers’ feelings toward his vaccination disclosure constructs Rodgers as the victim of media outlets. Overall, these three strands of victimization rhetoric potentially leads audiences to perceive Rodgers as a victim of progressive movements in society.

Discussion

Victimization rhetoric seeks to portray white people, specifically white men, as oppressed. As a result, that population feels like they are losing status in society (Banet-Weiser, 2021; King, 2015; Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998). White people may attempt to portray themselves as victims, as some perceive marginalized people have done so for years, to ensure social affairs promote the reclamation of their status instead of helping

traditionally marginalized communities. Kusz (2019) argues that Trump's recent presidential campaign enacted the revitalization of white male omnipotence that bleeds into the sports world through athletes like Tom Brady. Though his recent examination argues that white male omnipotence is garnered unapologetically through Trumpian rhetorical tactics, a historical strategy of regaining white male power is through victimization rhetoric (Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998). In an effort to overlook the privilege white men experience, social victimization is a key component that centers white men's prerogatives in the public sphere.

The first strand of victimization rhetoric emphasizes the buzzwords media included in their construction of Rodgers' vaccination stance including woke mob, cancel culture, and witch hunt. Semantically speaking, a woke mob is a group who attempts to "cancel" people (e.g., ostracize individuals from social or public spaces) because they did not follow politically correct culture. Rodgers and some journalists perceive the woke mob (e.g., liberal media outlets) as unjustly attacking him because he chose to not receive a COVID vaccination. Sometimes, media outlets constructed discourse focused on Rodgers relaying his side of the story rather than offering critiques of his stance, especially in the November 5-8 timeframe, which constitutes the highest percentage of articles in any three-day period. Historically, minority communities have been marginalized for failing to uphold the white social status quo. The term "cancel" stems from Black Twitter as a way to moderate misogyny and toxic masculinity (Sailofsky, 2022). When someone like Rodgers says this term, he is usurping any form of rhetorical power that marginalized communities gained from crafting the phrase in the first place.

“Cancel culture” is generally a negative phrase responding to the perceived cancellation people may experience when they express their feelings outside of socially appropriate context. In a similar note, historically the term “witch hunt” was used to refer to women who were persecuted because high status men thought they were practicing witchcraft in devout Christian communities. Currently, “witch hunt” is typically used in a political context in which people feel harrassed for possessing oppositional views. Although attempting to avoid politicizing his words (McAfee, 2021a), Rodgers’ rhetorical choices are brimming with political jargon that correlates with recent conservative vernacular. The victimization rhetorical strategies marginalize non-dominant social groups who were the original victims of oppression and places white masculinity in the center of discussion. Media outlets emphasizing these phrases over others used in Rodgers’ interview is important for understanding discursive relations.

For the next victimization subtheme, media outlets report Rodgers is “upset” for criticizing him and leaking his vaccination information. The criticism becomes so evident in media construction of the event that journalists, like *Outkick*’s Bobby Burack (2021), feel the need to discuss how supposedly politically left leaning news outlets are overly critical of Rodgers for his thoughts. The rhetoric perpetuated by journalists like Burack are part of a larger discourse of white male victimization where they feel like the political left is challenging traditional privileges white men experience (Kusz, 2019; Savran, 1998). In this case, COVID is seen as a government attempt to “control” lives, which goes against rugged individualist freedom ideology. Victimization discourse through Rodgers’ own criticisms of media portrayals centers his representation as one of the

victims of social efforts to lessen the spread of COVID. Victimization rhetoric allows the recentering of white male dominance in social affairs attempting to resecure power.

Despite outlets criticizing MVP voters, Rodgers did end up winning MVP at the end of the 2021-2022 season. Part of the victimization rhetoric is an imagined crisis that does not actualize the privileges experienced by white men. Some white men might feel it necessary to create a masculine “crisis” related to COVID vaccinations to continue cementing their privileged status in the U.S (Koo et al., 2022). In this way, by constructing rhetoric that views Rodgers as a victim of societal affairs, white men imagine an ongoing crisis that takes away their freedoms and rights. Over time, white men have claimed victimization such as when the workplace was industrialized (Lechner, 2014; Williams, 2013), through perceptions of boys becoming effeminate through a feminine dominated home (Buchbinder, 2013; Kimmel, 1996; Lechner, 2014), the dawn of the “new man” ideology becoming popular in media depictions of masculinity (Beynon, 2002; Crowe, 2019; Kusz, 2001a; Whannel, 2005), among other perceived “crisis” moments that detracted from masculinists’ idealized masculine performances. Perceived victimization is simply another example of an imagined crisis in a different form. Rather than fighting for/with minority communities' efforts to shine light on social issues, white men construct their own version of victimization that continues to center controversy on how their prerogatives are being threatened. Furthermore, the “woke mob” attempting to “cancel” Rodgers was symbolically led by sport personalities such as Terry Bradshaw and Tony Dungy who are well-known in sport spheres and scientists. The imagined crisis Rodgers and some media outlets argue to exist through media

coverage consists of media outlets, top scientists, and sporting figures. It is important to mention that white victimization discourse was produced the strongest through conservative sites, such as *Fox News*, *Fox Sports*, *The New York Post*, and *Outkick*. As a reminder, these sites were responsible for over half of the articles under analysis.

Victimization rhetoric centers Rodgers' arguments on white prerogatives that are stifled through advocates following recommendations to lessen the spread of a deadly virus.

This strand of discourse on Rodgers' rhetoric falls in line with historical strategies that center white masculinity as the most important identity in the American landscape. On the other hand, some media outlets offered space to counter Rodgers' claims through institutionally backed evidence.

Scientific Evidence

Part of the criticism constructed through media discourse on Rodgers comes from reporters citing scientific evidence to refute Rodgers' reasoning for his vaccination stance. In the first McAfee interview (2021a), Rodgers argues that COVID being a pandemic of the unvaccinated is a lie, that the Johnson and Johnson vaccine is not safe because it was pulled from use due to blood clotting issues, having to wear mask around people who are unvaccinated "makes no sense," among other controversial statements. Many journalists cited studies from scientific institutions or included statements from doctors to criticize Rodgers' ideas surrounding the COVID pandemic. Scientific evidence or voices were included 72 times throughout the articles. The main goal of such inclusion was to rectify claims made by Rodgers that media outlets argued to be "spreading misinformation" about the vaccine (Wolf, 2021).

Some media outlets emphasized socially approved scientific voices and institutions after Rodgers' November 5 interview with McAfee. For instance, an article from *Politifact* writer Gabrielle Settles (2021) stated:

Dr. Daniel B. Fagbuyi, emergency room physician and former Obama administration appointee to the National Biodefense Science Board, disputed a claim that vaccinated people were the ones responsible for spreading the COVID-19 variants.

"If that were the case, based on all the other (COVID-19) cases, we wouldn't have seen all these variants before we got the vaccines," Fagbuyi said.

Dr. Fagbuyi directly responds to the propagation of individuals who claim the virus is spread at the same rates between people who are vaccinated and unvaccinated. Including a public health figure to counter Rodgers' claims constructs discourse to be reliant on medical professionals who study this information for their careers rather than individuals who believe in alternative perspectives related to COVID. The entire premise of Settles' article is dedicated toward disproving Rodgers' perpetuation of misinformation, specifically about unvaccinated versus vaccinated people spreading COVID. Settles used statistics from the CDC and FDA to emphasize the lowered likelihood of vaccinated individuals spreading COVID. Settles even ends the article with information and links stating "how and where to receive a vaccine," influencing the audience to receive a vaccine rather than following Rodgers' alternative vaccination route. The overall commitment of utilizing scientific studies and voices throughout her entire article demonstrates some media outlets' commitment to disprove Rodgers' misinformation.

Others, like Tom Schadt (2021) from *USA Today*, write in depth about other misinformation perpetuated in Rodgers' comments. His headline, "Fact check: 6 of Aaron Rodgers' false or misleading claims about COVID-19 vaccine" makes it clear that the purpose of the article involves discussing six different claims with scientific evidence to disprove Rodgers perpetuating "false news."

Rodgers sought advice from podcast host and personality Joe Rogan. Rogan is a highly influential media personality that recently signed the largest podcast deal in history with Spotify (Bissada, 2022). Rodgers even went so far as to thank him for standing up and speaking his mind on the vaccination issue (McAfee, 2021a). Media outlets frequently lambasted Rodgers for taking advice from Rogan, epitomized through columnist Dean Obeidallah writing for *CNN* (2021). Obeidallah leads into his criticism by stating "Rodgers' reaction to the fallout has been more akin to the Trumpian tactic of refusing to take responsibility for past wrongs and instead attacking one's critics." First Obeidallah related Rodgers' arguments to Trump talking points by attacking media following their criticism of his misleading "immunized" claim from August 2021, then his argument pushes the reader to critically analyze where Rodgers received his vaccine information. The *CNN* writer argues that

There is so much wrong with what Rodgers said on the McAfee show... For starters, Rodgers shared that he's taken medical advice from a comedian. And not just any comedian, but Joe Rogan – the same person who was slammed in April for his inaccurate comments that 21-year-olds shouldn't get vaccinated if they are a "healthy person."

The examples demonstrate a typical media criticism of spreading misinformation and listening to individuals who are not experts in their subject matter. The Op-Ed piece from Obeidallah is the most salient example to demonstrate the critique of Rodgers' alternative claims from a scientific standpoint, especially in terms of critiquing how Rodgers received medical advice. Obeidallah notes another COVID related issue with Rogan in which he advocates for "healthy people" to not take the vaccine. Whether it was through medical practitioners or criticism of who Rodgers received his information from, journalists often identified Rodgers' claims as misinformation that needed to be corrected.

Discussion

By including scientific evidence to refute the claims Rodgers perpetuates in the first McAfee interview, media outlets construct Rodgers' spreading of "fake news" to be a social wrong. Fake news is defined by Tandoc et al. (2018) as an instance of misinformation (p. 141). Including medical experts' opinions and other scholarly information creates a discourse of trusting scientific entities. Scientific evidence discourse helps media outlets seem credible while simultaneously contradicting those that believe alternative methods are safe for combatting COVID. Identifying reliable sources also helps counter "fake news" perpetuation that is a hot topic in academia and political news (Tandoc et al., 2018).

The spread of misinformation related to COVID is something that has caused great concern among many doctors and government officials. Inclusion of scientific studies that emphasize the inaccuracies of Rodgers' approach to COVID critique the

white athlete “brains” stereotype that is typical in sport media coverage. As a white athlete, especially in the quarterback position, sports literature points toward white representatives being perceived as intelligent (Buffington & Fraley, 2011; Lambert et al., 2019). By presenting evidence that counters Rodgers’ claims, media outlets positioned discourse opposed to the typical “brains” ideology that commentators, media members, and personalities attach to white bodies. Michael Rosenberg (2021) from *Sports Illustrated* even jokes that “Now we know why Aaron Rodgers wanted to host *Jeopardy* [a trivia show]! He is always sure he has all the answers” in reference to Rodgers’ vaccination assertions.

Media outlets utilizing top government board members, like Dr. Fagbuyi, or scholarly medical reports construct discourse that positions audiences to trust specific entities. Rodgers’ alternative vaccination rhetoric does not fit socially accepted vaccination plans. As such, Rodgers’ ideas are constructed as the social wrong enabling the social right to be trusting government based initiatives. Rodgers not abiding by the social right allows some media outlets to cast him as a villain perpetuating an inappropriate version of masculinity amidst a health crisis. Furthermore, his conspiratorial claims can be seen as a form of individualism through the lack of trust and anti-statist masculinity (Ebin, 2021). Critiques occur often with Rodgers’ vaccination claims and there are only a few outlets that question claims made by scientific entities. In the case of COVID discourse, trusting the U.S. government and funded science to determine what is best for society goes against the orthodox masculine prerogative of rugged individualism and finding one’s own way without outside assistance. Media

reports often position a more accepted version of masculinity as sacrificing one's own prerogatives for the greater good of the nation, or the warrior version of masculinity (Do & Samuels, 2021).

The inclusion of scientific studies was an important feature of media outlets stressing Rodgers' invalid vaccination rhetoric. The predominant consensus among scientists states the best way to stop a global pandemic from continuing to occur is through mass vaccinations from the three approved companies. From a political perspective, government vaccination efforts emphasizing people putting something in their bodies may seem like a control mechanism at odds with a version of masculinity that emphasizes individualism (Baumgartner et al., 2018). In this way, media members construct a discourse of communal care as the most efficient way to eradicate COVID rather than emphasizing the individualism perpetuated in Rodgers' interviews. One aspect of conservative ideology would find insistence on taking something for the greater good of society as an imposition on their freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution (Brunello, 2021). Constant inclusion of scientific voices that advocate following government recommendations for a vaccination as the best method to lessen the spread of COVID critiques Rodgers' individualistic stance that advocates for personal decisions being important for the COVID vaccine.

Connecting scientific politicization to white masculinity, Parmanand (2022) found that former U.S. president Donald Trump's speeches about COVID during his presidency constructed hegemonic masculinity to advocate for living normative lives without fear of the virus. Trump shied away from addressing COVID head on in favor of protecting the

economy through a discourse of freedom (Parmanand, 2022). This construction of masculinity encourages men to view their bodies and the economy as tough, domineering, and autonomous entities, similar to hard body ideology (Jeffords, 1994). Hard body ideology is manifested when men view themselves and the state through orthodox masculine notions. Rodgers does state that he is not “a COVID denier or any bullshit like that” (McAfee, 2021); however, Rodgers’ alternative approach for immunization constructs discourse of his body’s capabilities to ward off COVID with “alternative” drugs (some of which Trump advocated for at certain points in time, like ivermectin) that might harm other people simply by taking the drugs according to FDA research (2021). In pursuit of individualistic freedom, perpetuating hard body ideology might lead to seriously detrimental health effects for audiences sharing similar ideologies. The construction of hard body ideology amidst a COVID pandemic argues that men, the economy, and the state in general should believe their bodies to be invulnerable while mass death is occurring.

Research finds that those who support Trump are more likely to believe in COVID misinformation or “false news” than those who are affiliated with conservative politics (Koo et al., 2022). High status personalities, like Joe Rogan and Aaron Rodgers, have been made out to be “conservative poster boys” for the anti-vaccination efforts in mediated discourse. In fact, some of Rogan’s podcast episodes are required to be labeled with a “contains misinformation” note before one can listen to content (Bissada, 2022). Additionally, the Trumpist turn in politics perpetuates false news as a major political ploy for the revitalization of white male omnipotence (Kusz, 2019). Kusz (2019) argues that

contemporary white men display immense confidence in their rhetoric. Even when seemingly proven wrong by research, white men like Rodgers claim that they “stand by their comments” (McAfee, 2021b). Displaying unassailable confidence is a major aspect of orthodox masculinity. Despite research critiquing white individualism by presenting scientific research, Rodgers’ confidence is highlighted with sparse critique. A discourse of critiquing Rodgers’ spread of misinformation is presented whereas there is a lack of critiquing his confidence in false vaccination assertions. Rodgers does apologize in the second McAfee interview (2021b), but only in relation to potentially misleading reporters about his status, never to correct the claims he makes. It is worth noting that Rodgers also felt he was doing what was best for his body because he is reportedly allergic to an ingredient in the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines (though we are never told which ingredient). This statement is included often by media (90 codes) but is only told in passing each time. Rodgers’ intelligence is not questioned related to his ingredient allergy; media outlets never follow up with him about the research he has conducted on alternative protocols. Discourse was constructed to be critical of Rodgers’ words while emphasizing scientific claims as the social right. However, outlets often emphasized Rodgers’ confidence in his alternative immunization protocol despite scientific evidence suggesting his approach is not appropriate. Confidence is approved in mediated discourse while individualism through research queries is criticized immensely. All in all, scientific voices came from a diverse array of backgrounds. However, sport related information and those that defended Rodgers seemed to be dominated by white men.

Protection of White Male Hegemony

Following Rodgers' positive COVID test, reporters such as Chris Chavez of *Sports Illustrated* (2021) noted that "Rodgers expressed his disappointment with the media's coverage following his positive test." While Rodgers' own sentiments were included at times, other individuals who possessed knowledge related to or defended his disclosure were predominantly white. Those that were noted as being the arbiters of information related to sporting endeavors were predominantly white men. Accordingly, there was significant space dedicated to including people/ideas that upheld notions of white male hegemony in sports and COVID discourse. The defense for Rodgers came after criticisms from the November 5 interview with McAfee had begun to wane. Additionally, when people were commenting on Rodgers, whether positively or negatively, the majority of people included were white men commenting on another white man. Though there were exceptions, the white male hegemony in sports media was protected through the exclusion of people of color and women's voices, leading to marginalization.

There were a few people in particular who were prominently included in texts to defend Rodgers' position. A major personality that was highlighted in multiple articles was Mike Fisher, former NHL player for the Ottawa Senators and Nashville Predators and husband to country music star Carrie Underwood. Fisher defended Rodgers' words through Twitter, a social media platform, emphasized in Ryan Gaydos' *Fox News* (2021) article,

I stand with Aaron Rodgers. I believe in the freedom to choose what we put in our bodies and the freedom of conscience. I agree with him in that the science clearly shows the vaccinated spread covid at basically the same rate as the unvaccinated... #IstandwithRodgers.

Fisher articulates that freedom of choice and opinion is being taken away through a major push for government approved vaccines. This rhetoric generally falls in line with conservative COVID ideology (Lyons & Fowler, 2021), as Fisher displays solidarity for another white man who shares similar thoughts about COVID vaccinations. Following the quote from Fisher, the article highlighted direct quotes or paraphrases Rodgers' comments in his first McAfee interview (2021a), such as "Some of the rules, to me, are not based in science," and "Rodgers consulted Rogan about alternative treatments, like ivermectin, and called him a friend." The language used by Gaydos literally argues Fisher to be a "defender" and emphasizes Rodgers' defense of an alternative vaccination route. Instead of critiquing Rodgers' statements, the article constructs defense through another sporting high-status white man's statements. Others, like *Yahoo! Sports* writer Arun Srinivisan (2021), called Fisher's defense "impassioned" and critiqued his statements in a more evocative manner by stating

Fisher.... wrote that the NHL and NFL are "ignoring the science" and believes that vaccine requirements are about demanding control over people's lives — as opposed to the actual global scientific consensus that vaccines are the only effective way to reach an end to the pandemic.

For media outlets, finding defenders of Rodgers' perception of his right to freedom, whether to critique or promote their views, was important. The defenders were almost always white individuals.

Outlets that were either local to the Green Bay area, such as *Packers.com*, or were writing about Rodgers' disclosure because of his relationship with the organization, such as *Cal Sports Report* (University of California is where Rodgers attended college and played football), wrote about Rodgers in a positive light compared to mainstream media. For instance, take Bill Huber of *Packers Central* (2021a) writing about Rodgers' COVID decision to take ivermectin as part of his regiment,

So, Rodgers will stay home and wait. He's betting on his own immune system and advice from podcaster Joe Rogan, who beat COVID using alternative treatments such as Ivermectin, which was panned for being a horse dewormer but also is given to immigrants.

The type of outlet mattered in how they constructed discourse on Rodgers' comments. Huber attempted to defend Rodgers' use of ivermectin, typically used as a horse dewormer, by suggesting the government gives immigrants this medicine when they catch COVID. Huber was one of the few journalists that discussed parts of Rodgers' interview that were often ignored, such as stating how Rodgers viewed his stance as "a conversation, not a controversy," that he "followed every protocol to a T," and that Rodgers "gathered 500 pages of research" to inform his vaccination decision. Rather than counter Rodgers' statements with science like some outlets chose to do, Huber, and some

other journalists, decided that relaying Rodgers' arguments and providing follow-ups that serve his arguments, such as a link to an article that states immigrants receive ivermectin to combat COVID, is more appropriate to include than critiques. These linguistic choices situate most regional journalists to be defenders of Rodgers' statements and protectors of a white man's right to individualistic thought.

Discussion

The discourse of protecting white male hegemony was strongly displayed through white men defending Aaron Rodgers. Importantly, Vargas et al. (2021) examined information in a 2020 California health poll and found that white people, regardless of political affiliation, were significantly less likely to be concerned about COVID risks than Black or Latinx communities and were instead more concerned about their perception of freedom. The study identified white people's perception of risk being much lower than minority communities. White men dominated coverage and at times they were in favor of an individualistic vaccination choice rather than feeling as if COVID would be detrimental to their well-being. Though there were white men who were critical of Rodgers, such as Howard Stern, Mark Hamill, and Terry Bradshaw, when a defensive discourse related to Rodgers' vaccination stance was constructed, the only person of color included was Packers running back Aaron Jones a total of seven times. The rest were white men. The most prolific Rodgers supporter in terms of times mentioned was former NHL player Mike Fisher (25 times). Media included his politically charged rhetoric that called for freedom of choice to determine what goes in one's body. Fisher's defense is largely inspired by conservative talking points that feel like big government is

constantly imposing on their freedoms (Lyons & Fowler, 2021; Willets, 1992). As white men argue that they are losing their freedom due to government policies, victimization discourse is perpetuated (Robinson, 2000). Media outlets' inclusion of Fisher's defense constructs some versions of orthodox masculinity, like individualism, to be important for some men's perceived masculinity. Media members do not offer comments on Fisher's defense. Instead, they include his social media posts word for word. Through inclusion without critique, a white man is protecting another white man's ability to perform his rugged individualism during the COVID pandemic in a way that he sees fit rather than through perceived control.

Local outlets often highlighted positive interpretations of Rodgers, while simultaneously avoiding discussion on the criticisms toward his statements. In the example from *Packers Central* used above, Huber discusses immigration policies. Illegal immigration is a contentious point for U.S. political affairs. By emphasizing the government's choice to give immigrants ivermectin, Huber is critiquing claims that ivermectin is an ineffective vaccination substitute. Although the claim of immigrants receiving ivermectin for COVID has been proven false due to investigative journalists discovering refugees received ivermectin for parasitic infections (Reuters, 2021), this is one example of many rhetorical choices that some writers utilize in an attempt to defend Rodgers. While articles from regional outlets were in the minority (24 of 302 articles), if an audience was to only consume local sports reporting news from a hegemonic discursive position, they would understand the phenomenon from a biased point of view in favor of Rodgers, their star quarterback.

The individuals mentioned in the articles, whether they were providing information through reports or were athletes criticizing or defending Rodgers, were predominantly white men. Two women were mentioned throughout the articles; Shailene Woodley, Rodgers' then fiancé, defending his vaccination choice, and Molly Knight, who Rodgers wrongfully accused of writing an article stating he had "COVID toe." There were five Black men mentioned more than twice; Aaron Jones, a Green Bay Packers running back, who supported Rodgers' leadership ability, Preston Smith, a Green Bay Packers linebacker, mentioned by Rodgers for being supportive during his return from COVID, Dallas Cowboys wide receiver CeeDee Lamb, who received harsher financial penalties than Rodgers for uniform violations, former coach and sports personality Tony Dungy, who was critical of Rodgers' leadership, and athlete-activist Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who criticized Rodgers as being selfish for not taking a vaccine. In total, these five Black men were mentioned 53 times throughout all articles with 25 of the mentions about CeeDee Lamb's jersey controversy. All Black men mentioned are/were athletes. The overwhelming majority of people included in the articles were white men. Head Coach Matt LaFleur was mentioned 64 times throughout the articles, the most of anyone other than Rodgers and podcast host Pat McAfee. White men were both critical of Rodgers' comments (e.g., Terry Bradshaw, Howard Stern, and Mark Hammil), and white men were also advocates for Rodgers' stance (e.g., Mike Fisher and Joe Rogan). Almost all reporters that were mentioned by name across different outlets were white men, such as *ESPN's* Rob Demovsky or *NFL Network's* Ian Rappaport. There were some Black men, white women, and a very small number of people of color who do not present as

Black or white reporters who were mentioned by name as sources of information, but only when they were employees of the organization responsible for writing the article. The dominance of white men as the arbiters of knowledge related to sporting endeavors feeds into larger narratives of white male hegemony in sport information. This does not come as a surprise as TIDES (2021) sport media report finds that 77.1% of reporters and 80.1% of editors are white men in sport media. TIDES (2022) NFL report also finds that white men make up 84.4% of people in NFL head coaching positions (represented by Matt LaFleur). The NFL has around 70% of athletes of color. The positionality of names aforementioned are reflective of statistics; typically athletes are Black, reporters are white, and overall there is a lack of women mentioned at all. The inclusion of white personalities feeds into a larger discourse of white male hegemony in the sports world.

Teammates Aaron Jones and Preston Smith defending Rodgers in their own ways is not unusual as athletes on the same team are expected to support one another, especially when the athlete under fire is white (Crowe, 2021). Perhaps of most interest along a racial analytical line is who is shown as defending Rodgers versus who is shown as deflecting questions about Rodgers. Head coach Matt LaFleur (white) deflects all Rodgers' vaccine questions, as does former MVP and Super Bowl champion Tom Brady (white). The only Black players who are given space to voice their opinions on Rodgers' vaccination disclosure are in service of protecting him. In this sense, although there is relatively scant mention of teammates Jones and Smith in the articles (n = 10), the few times Black athletes are mentioned are to protect their white leader. When Black athletes who were not teammates were mentioned, such as CeeDee Lamb, they were in service of

further explaining Rodgers' vaccination stance or discussing NFL policies. No athlete apart from Packers teammates were depicted as having any comment on Rodgers' stance. In essence, the dominance of white men in coverage of Rodgers' disclosure and athletes defending Rodgers' stance points toward the protection of white male hegemony in sport news reporting.

Chapter Five: Evaluation of Insights

The current study's purpose was to answer the research question "What were the dominant mediated discourses related to Aaron Rodgers' white masculinity after he misled the public about his 'vaccination' status?" In doing so, a critical discourse analysis was chosen as the most appropriate methodology to determine strands of discourse related to a white sporting representative's vaccination comments. Executing a CDA identified five main themes informing the ways in which Aaron Rodgers' white masculinity was constructed amidst media coverage of his COVID vaccination comments. The themes were Dishonesty/Irresponsibility, White Orthodox Masculine Sensibilities, White Victimization, Scientific Evidence, and Protection of White Male Hegemony. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the main takeaways pertaining to the relevant themes, consider other important areas related to the analyzed articles, call attention toward the limitations of the study, discuss future considerations for sport studies literature, and end with concluding remarks highlighting the practical and theoretical importance of this research.

The most dominant strand of discourse in the data involved media members critiquing Aaron Rodgers' dishonesty after a positive COVID test. In August 2021, Rodgers stated he was "immunized" but did not disclose the nature of his perceived "immunization." Rodgers' disclosure was constructed with negative implications, as critiques of his "immunized" statement existed in more than half of the articles ($n = 156$). Media members outright called him a liar and heavily criticized his approach to discussing information dealing with vaccinations. Even after he apologized for

misleading the public (and some media outlets criticized his apology) and stood by his comments, some media outlets felt it necessary to continue including his “immunized” claim. The perceived dishonesty led the media to construct discourses of Rodgers’ irresponsibility toward his team, media members, and even society in general. Being an irresponsible liar is not consistent with accepted versions of masculinity for a white representative. Performing masculinity that does not adhere to the norms of the sport ethic and is not more in touch with recognizing his privilege allows media outlets to perceive Rodgers as not truly “being a man.” The sport ethic (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) and warrior discourse (Anderson & Kian, 2011; Do & Samuels, 2021; Saint-Amour, 2018) expect men to sacrifice their beliefs or selves for the greater good of the team, family, or nation. Though some research finds the sport ethic to not matter as much for athletes in sport media studies (Anderson & Kian, 2011; Anderson & White, 2018), the current study found conformity to some components of the sport ethic as prevalent for acceptable athletic masculine representation. During this unique COVID period, abiding by NFL protocols to do everything you can to play the game became an important part of mediated discourse. In essence, Rodgers failed to live up to masculine standards expected of a white high status sporting man.

In the next theme, some media outlets emphasized components of orthodox masculinity. Specifically, heterosexuality, toughness, taking risks, and some parts of individualism were presented as accepted versions of masculinity. A discourse of heterosexual masculinity is established through inclusion of Rodgers’ then fiancée, Shailene Woodley, and her defense of his sexuality. Theoretically, constant display of

heterosexual relations in sport literature can marginalize alternative sexualities (Anderson, 2011). Another orthodox masculine component was constructed through emphasizing toughness when journalists stated that Rodgers played through a painful toe injury. A different norm of the sport ethic, playing through pain (Hughes & Coakley, 1991), is perpetuated in mediated construction of Rodgers' "painful" toe injury. Rodgers takes risks by promoting an alternative "immunization" plan that is not consistent with NFL policy or scientific guidelines. Taking a risk on unapproved vaccination protocols is an individualistic stance when there are government funded vaccines available. Being a risk taker in relation to the COVID pandemic also emphasizes the white privilege he experiences (Vargas et al., 2021). Other races lack social autonomy to consider alternative routes for vaccination. Not all parts of orthodox masculinity were constructed in mediated discourse, however, some of the most prolific orthodox features from the 1950s until contemporary time were on full display. By presenting some forms of orthodox masculinity as dominant, the erasure of marginalized forms of masculinity, such as gay athletes or not playing through injuries, in media discourse is problematic. The proliferation of accepted masculine forms could continue to perpetuate a perceived "crisis" in masculinity considering the difficulty men have following hegemonic tropes (Pompper, 2010).

The next theme was identified through journalists framing Rodgers' opinions on COVID vaccinations without critique. This line of discourse situated Rodgers as the victim of progressive social movements that was emphasized through including direct quotes from his McAfee interviews. Rather than journalists approaching his statements in

a critical manner, some media outlets simply told his side of the story. Inclusion of buzzwords, Rodgers' feelings about the media, and some media members describing harsh media treatment evidenced different strands of perceived victimization. Research finds that white men position themselves as victims because of a perceived loss of status due to social movements for traditionally marginalized communities (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Kusz, 2001a; Robinson, 2000; Savran, 1998; Whannel, 2001). In the second McAfee interview (2021b), Rodgers stood by his comments that spread misinformation about COVID, which demonstrated confidence even when his statements were proven scientifically inaccurate. All in all, his reaction to media coverage of his vaccine disclosure falls in line with white men feeling victimized and as if they are losing status in a "politically correct" culture. Victimization rhetoric is another perceived "crisis" some white men feel they might be experiencing.

The fourth theme was identified through the space provided for scientific voices and studies in the articles. Partly to seem credible and partly to fight the spread of misinformation, media outlets constructed discourse surrounding scientific evidence to refute claims Rodgers discussed in his first interview with McAfee (2021a). Many outlets utilized scientific research or included quotes from physicians to analyze information Rodgers stated. The use of scientific evidence created a discourse of what ideas about COVID were permissible and which ones would fall into the category of "fake news" (Tandoc et al., 2018). Some outlets directly responded to misinformation outlined in Rodgers' statements, the most notable being Rodgers' arguing that "this is not a pandemic of the unvaccinated" (McAfee, 2021a). In this theme, discourse was also

constructed through Rodgers taking advice from controversial podcast host Joe Rogan who advocated for several alternative methods for vaccination, such as ivermectin. A discourse of scientific evidence exposed the misinformation perpetuated by Rodgers, Rogan, and is often part of conservative talking circles (Koo et al., 2022). Rodgers can be seen as a rugged individualist through not accepting outside assistance and forging his own path. Utilizing scientific evidence critiques individualistic standpoints on COVID matters. All in all, the most appropriate version of masculinity during COVID throughout media articles is constructed as a more communal masculinity; a masculinity that follows government recommendations, does not view their individualism as more important than social interests, and does not perpetuate false information that could negatively affect perceptions of COVID seriousness.

The protection of white male hegemony in media articles is the last discursive theme. White men were strongly represented in the positions of journalists, reporters, Packers organization members, and commentators. People of color and women were included, but at much lower rates. There were few people of color covering stories. When athletes were mentioned, they were typically Black, which correlates with TIDES (2021) report of Black athletic dominance in the NFL. Furthermore, those who defended Rodgers were either teammates or white people outside of the Packers organization, such as former NHL player Mike Fisher. The overall inclusion of white men helps protect white male hegemony within the sporting and mediated spheres of influence. Including white voices further marginalizes racial minorities as arbiters of sport knowledge.

Women were only mentioned twice throughout the articles, which marginalizes women's voices when it comes to sport information.

Aaron Rodgers' vaccination disclosure saga exemplifies the complexity of completing a critical discourse analysis over a period of time. Although the most relevant themes were identified with white masculinity literature in mind, the abundance of ideas (some contradictory) found throughout the examination show the intricacies of determining broad themes for a large number of articles. There were other articles, codes, and contexts that were not included in the final report for the sake of inundating the reader with important, yet not as relevant, information. While sports are still often marginalized within the academic sphere, sporting advocates may argue sports to be a microcosm of society, meaning that if one was to examine sports, they would understand social contexts in a given culture (Hylton, 2018). Sport discourses are inextricably tied to social contexts, and mediated information is a valuable area to understand the commonsense discourses within a culture (Hall, 1973). The current analysis of Rodgers' comments emphasizes that athletes and media have the ability to frame information in specific ways that shape narratives of social phenomena. On a theoretical note, Rodgers' discourse can largely be considered a perceived masculine "crisis," similar to the crises that were argued to occur by men looking for ways to "remasculinize" themselves and society (Kimmel, 1996; Kusz, 2001a; Robinson, 2000). However, media members framing Rodgers' discourse in a critical manner highlights how white masculine prerogatives might have lost favor in COVID era sports world.

While noting the apparent contradictions in the constructed discourse, it is also important to discuss the differences with respect to media outlets. *NFL.com* and *ESPN* were the most mentioned outlets by other outlets (71 and 59 times respectively). The next closest outlet was *ProFootballTalk* with 22 mentions. The dominance of *NFL Network* and *ESPN* demonstrate that these two outlets are largely considered the most influential and reliable sources for information related to sport matters. However, these sources generally focused on COVID policy, game statistics, and punishment information. *NFL Network* and *ESPN* directly avoided discussing Rodgers' drama related to his vaccination disclosure. Generally, these outlets' articles were coded as fairly neutral in tone. *NFL.com* essentially works as a public relations platform for the NFL organization. This means the website would almost never cover the NFL in a negative light given their role in the organization. *ESPN* receives financial benefits for positively covering the NFL due to their long-standing history and current contract which allows rights to air *Monday Night Football*, playoff games, and future Super Bowls (Belson & Draper, 2021). The neutral tone makes sense and other outlets recognized them as knowledge/rule disseminators partly because of their close ties to the NFL. The most included content creator was definitively *The Pat McAfee Show*. This makes sense, given that Rodgers chose to use his interview time with former punter Pat McAfee to discuss his feelings about vaccination protocols. The show was mentioned a total of 219 times throughout the 302 articles. With a podcast being the most utilized content creation source in the media texts, it is important to recognize other mediums apart from news articles as viable sources of analysis. CDA is an appropriate methodology for examining all mediums.

Fox News, Fox Sports (majority of articles consisted of wire service articles), *The New York Post*, and *Yahoo! Sports* were the outlets that included Rodgers' spoken words during the McAfee interviews at the highest rates. *CNN, Fox News*, and *The New York Post* offered the most space for Rodgers to discuss his apology for misleading reporters, although *CNN* and sometimes *The New York Post* also wrote with a critical eye toward his statements. Although the line of discourse was generally critical across the board, *CBS, Fox, NBC*, and *Disney (ABC)*, which are conglomerates in charge of six of the 14 outlets in this study, hold rights to airing NFL games, and are part of a contract package that is netting the NFL \$11 billion a year (Belson & Draper, 2021). It may come as a bit of a surprise that the main thread of criticism is negative given that these companies would benefit from positive promotion of the sport. However, one can attest that by negatively covering Rodgers, they are positively covering the NFL. By crafting Rodgers' alternative vaccination rhetoric as the social wrong, news outlets were positively promoting the efficacy of the NFL's policies. Not all was negative though, as *Fox News* covered Rodgers' comments the most positively across the board. Given that many conservative voices backed Rodgers and the media outlet's right-leaning tendencies (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007), this does not come as a surprise. Although Rodgers attempted to "avoid" politicization, vaccination decisions were political before he spoke a word about his alternative views. Understanding individual outlets' proclivity toward covering information in specific ways allows a more nuanced understanding of created content. This study looked to identify general themes over a large dataset, but there is

future value to be found in analyzing individual outlets to understand their perspectives and the discourses they want to promote for audiences.

A common feature in masculinity literature is that hegemonic white masculinity shifts over time (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1996). When analyzing contemporary white masculinities, remnants of previous masculinities shape current moments. COVID was (is) a unique social moment that influenced all aspects of life to some degree, the sports world notwithstanding. Aaron Rodgers' vaccine disclosure provides important understanding about how discourses of politics, sports, and gender influence one another. This study finds that Rodgers' alternative vaccination argument was generally not approved by media outlets. Instead, most media outlets emphasized a masculinity that was more communal in regard to lessening the spread of COVID. However, some parts of orthodox masculinity were still valued in media discourse. Despite space for white individualism to be critiqued, white victimization rhetoric was also implicitly emphasized by some media outlets. Concurrently, white male hegemony in sports was protected through inclusion of specific personalities over others. Overall, Rodgers' vaccination comments are critiqued more than he is championed in mediated depictions. Examination of accepted versions of masculinity in the contemporary COVID era, such as one that is more communal than individualistic, generally positioned Rodgers to be negatively covered. When his representations are analyzed through the sport ethic, the commonsense understanding of an athlete sacrificing oneself for the greater good of their team (and in this situation, nation) portrays Rodgers as not truly performing his masculinity in adequate ways. Science trumps opinions, doing what is best for the community (team)

rather than yourself is consistent with the norms of sport, and only some versions of orthodox masculine sensibilities were promoted through construction of Rodgers' masculinity but were still found. The (hopefully) unique COVID moment in sport history was an appropriate space to tease out mediated white masculinity and analyze the different forms and features it may take.

Return to Positionality

To be mindful of how my positionality impacted my analysis, a reflection on my identities is valuable to discuss. As a reminder, I identify as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, sport-loving man. I also am very critical of government interventions and do believe government entities can do much more for marginalized communities to assist in ascending to higher ranks in U.S. society. I am also critical of vaccinations, though do believe they were instituted for the best interests of helping society get back to some version of "normal," but for, more than anything else, the economy to get back to a place of "normal." I do not believe the government was directly imposing on freedoms in the way that many conservative pundits and Aaron Rodgers argued. This is the area of my positionality that had the most impact on his analysis.

Upon reflection on the analysis, the first item that jumps out is how political buzzwords were constructed in the "White Victimization" theme. I only analyzed conservative political "buzzwords" when there were liberal political buzzwords that were included in the media articles. My positionality related to left-leaning media consumption might have skewed my views to acknowledge conservative talking points in a more

critical manner than liberal talking points, especially as it related to critical interpretations of white masculinity.

Another area in which my positionality might have affected the results of the study is the “fake news” argument in the theme “Scientific Evidence.” In this theme, I make the claim that media outlets use scientific voices to quell the notion of “fake news” perpetuated by Rodgers’ stance on vaccinations. “Fake news” is a term used by both conservative and liberal leaning media outlets. However, I, again, view this term through the lens of conservative talking points and do not directly consider liberal media outlets and arguments in the same way. Due to the perpetuation of the idea of “fake news” from former president Donald Trump (Coll, 2017), I associate this term with conservative talking points, though the idea of fake news has been a talking point since at least the 1700s (Gorbach, 2018). This shortsighted bias in my analysis led the concept of “fake news” to be directed toward conservative talking points rather than all talking points in the analysis.

As a sports fan, I did not analyze ideas that were outright critical of the NFL or the policies they put in place to near the same extent that I analyzed the direct comments of Rodgers. This could potentially be an entirely different study in which researchers look to understand how mediated discourse of NFL’s implementation of COVID policies were constructed. It feels as if my positionality of viewing sports as a positive space that billions of people, including myself, enjoy regularly led to less critical emphasis on the governing body for football operated through the COVID pandemic. As a self-identified critical sport researcher, understanding discourse of the NFL should have been more

pronounced through the study. Though briefly included, this was not a major point of analysis due to the research question emphasizing Rodgers' comments. However, after reflecting on my data, this could have been a valid strand of discourse to further discuss how Rodgers' comments were constructed through the lens of NFL policies, especially when articles discussed fines for Rodgers and the Packers. Another example of this type of discourse includes media outlets discussing NFL spokespeople's reply to Rodgers' comments about speaking to an NFL doctor about appropriate vaccination routes.

Rodgers stated that a doctor told him being vaccinated meant one cannot spread COVID, which the NFL said was a lie. Though this could have been important, I felt it was not quite as worthy of the other themes to include given the research question focusing on construction of discourse via Rodgers' comments. With that said, my positionality might have been part of the reason these the NFL's statements were mostly excluded from the analysis.

Lastly, as a white man critically analyzing the ways in which another white man's feelings toward a public health pandemic were constructed in the media, I found myself struggling, at times, to be as critical as I felt I should have been. The ideas found in mediated construction of Rodgers' comments relate to talking points I have heard from people in my family and individuals I would consider friends through the years. All the individuals in mind are white, and I found it difficult to analyze talking points I argue against or advocate for as it relates to politicization of vaccines. All in all, because of my positionality and the positionality of those I have been surrounded by over the years, I

might have been able to be more critical in some areas as it relates to the (re)production and maintenance of white privilege in media construction of Rodgers' comments.

As a qualitative researcher, I recognize research to be inherently political (Brennan, 2017). As a critical researcher, I seek to unmask unjust practices that detrimentally impact marginalized communities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Despite the emphasis on politics and practices that foster privilege for specific groups, my background, identities, and overall positionality proved difficult to "soft bracket" for the research project. Through reflexivity practices, such as keeping a reflection journal through most of the study process, utilizing postmodern and critical discourse literature to be as transparent as possible about data generation, and constructing theoretical/analytical memos to provide depth to my thoughts on specific codes and categories, I feel the outcome of this project is valuable for understanding sporting white masculinity amidst the COVID pandemic despite the biases faced from my positionality on the subject.

(De)Limitations and Future Directions

While this study did analyze a large dataset, not all news articles can be analyzed within the scope of this study. The study was delimited to the most popular websites by unique monthly visitors and involved identifying general discourses that flowed throughout the body of coverage. A future study could, for example, provide a more nuanced understanding of local versus national versus international coverage of events. The different levels would help explain why some audiences may be positioned to interpret events differently depending on geographic location or specific media they consume. On top of that, analyzing content to understand the types of discourses

constructed by each individual media outlet would be valuable for communications studies. This study was limited to focusing on CDA through its critical linguistic legacy due to a focus on online news articles. A future study could analyze the podcast episodes of *The Pat McAfee Show* to make further connections beyond the spoken words with examination focusing on body language, tone of voice, etc. The value of examining acts beyond written content is seemingly boundless. Another limitation is that this study was analyzed by one researcher who comes into the world with a white, heterosexual, cisgender, sporting background. In future work, adding another researcher who possesses different identities than me would help draw new conclusions.

A CDA allows insight into dominant strands of discourse surrounding an event. One limit of CDA related to this study is the overt focus on white sporting masculinity that limits other areas of research from being identified through analysis. Future sport CDA work may look at different features of a sporting body, such as their achievement status, public perception, or focus on other sporting theories to guide their research. The methodology does leave room for personal interpretation of phenomena which means methodological rigor might be lacking for positivistic researchers. For some researchers, noting word/code frequency more than I have done in this research study might further justify the identified themes. After athletes' transgressions become public knowledge, Leonard (2017) found that white athletes are redeemed at higher rates than Black athletes in sport media. Rodgers' vaccine discourse was heavily criticized at first, but within the month timeframe, mediated discourse shifted toward him overcoming an injury. This study provided an overview of white masculinity, but continuing the evaluation of

transgressions for differently raced athletes is an important line of research that would be beneficial for future work.

Taking information from this study, I hope to create at least three publications based on initial research. First, I want to publish the strands of discourse related to Rodgers' white masculinity amidst COVID vaccination using the information discussed in the current study. Second, I want to utilize the research currently being conducted on white masculinity in a political sporting context and take the white omnipotence and victimization ideas a step further. In sport studies, there are several researchers conducting valuable research on critical whiteness (Johnson, 2019; Kusz, 2019; Leonard, 2017; Newman, 2007; Oates & Kusz, 2019, etc.) and Rodgers' rhetoric during the vaccination discourse fits exceedingly well with their arguments. In essence, this study plans to make further connections to the white victimization discourse, protection of white male hegemony discourse, and the politicization of whiteness in the sports world. Lastly, I want to sift through the data to analyze how each news outlet creates discourse specific to their prerogatives. In essence, this study would plan to take a communication approach to compare the types of discourse each outlet emphasized in their construction of Rodgers' comments. While more ideas may come from the research completed, these three are in the forefront of my mind for publishable pieces that could add significant value to the scholarly world.

Many sport advocates call for the separation of sports and politics. I, and many critical sport scholars, argue that sports are inexorably linked to politics. Furthermore, political movements should be viewed through the lens of social groups' desires for

nuanced understandings. White masculinity should continue to be perceived under parameters largely shaped by popular personalities that help construct crisis discourse. For me, a critical scholar, discourse is the most important area to continue studying in the near future. As discourse focuses on who maintains and possesses power (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak & Meyer, 2016; van Dijk, 1998), determining which ideas are perpetuated and become commonsense can help scholars track cultural shifts. I advocate for the continued study of power via discourse being an important analytical area to determine influences, constructs, and commonsense ideologies in society. As time marches on, different strategies should be employed by scholars to chart the ever fluid nature of how masculinities, racial prerogatives, and politics (re)produce dominance.

Concluding Remarks

This study possesses practical and theoretical importance for sport studies literature. First, for practical implications, content creators should be mindful of the types of discourse they perpetuate in construction of events. Discourse can be constructed subconsciously through commonsense ideologies that guide writing preferences. Being more mindful of the types of information included in content can lead to more just social outcomes through the powerful role media creators possess (Hall, 1973; Silverstone, 1996). Perceived negative aspects of white masculinity were generally critiqued, so the findings of the study lead me to suggest that perpetuation of progressive ideas may allow some room for traditionally marginalized communities to have more just outcomes in media representations. However, the dominance of white men in relaying sporting facts should be addressed in sport media. As the power of discourse can limit or influence

understandings of events/phenomena, those who have the ability to shape discourse should be mindful of the role they may possess for social outcomes and power relations.

All in all, this study is valuable for several theoretical reasons as well. The first is understanding dominant discourse constructed through a representative of the most dominant identities in the sports world: white masculinity. Sporting stars can be viewed as pillars of influence in society. Understanding how media outlets frame events in sport stars' lives allows researchers to make sense of commonsense ideologies and culturally relevant signs and context. Next, this study relates to the current work in the academy between the connections of white sporting men and conservative ideology. As some recent research finds white Division I football coaches are key conservative voices (McGregor, 2022), conservative political efforts can be found in the rhetoric of top athletes like Tom Brady (Kusz, 2019), and political officials such as Trump utilize sports as a rhetorical strategy for uniting conservative voters (Oates & Kusz, 2019), this study adds to the political struggles accentuated through sports. Relatedly, this study highlights how one can connect sports to larger sociocultural contexts. Namely, the connection between sporting masculinity, whiteness, politicization of choice, sport league protocols, the unique COVID era, and power relations. It is important to consider the utilization of white victimization rhetoric sport stars use to understand perceptions of crisis moments. From there, researchers can make sense of perceived power challenges from marginalized social groups. Last, this study argues examination of sport literature may help other fields conceptualize the complex networks of discourses always circulating. As Foucault (1970/1981) said, one must be aware that discourses may cross, juxtapose, or be unaware

of one another. Studies such as this one allows insight into which discourses overlap, relate to one another, and establish the outcomes of power.

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Vita

Patrick Crowe has a broad interest in understanding the racial and gendered processes operating within the sports world. More succinctly, he is interested in making sense of how sport media operates through discursive and ideological relations. Patrick's research lines include (a) examining sport media discourse and ideology, (b) investigating sociological aspects in sport film, and (c) exploring identity through sport media perceptions. Currently, Patrick has one research publication and multiple research projects either under review or in the editing process. Ultimately, these lines of research seek to cultivate a just sporting world for all people regardless of their social identities and understand the operationalization of power. Patrick's dedication to scholarship began during his undergraduate program at the University of Kentucky where he received his Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology. He took a sport history and philosophy and multiple film classes that made him reconsider pursuing exercise science as a career. Soon thereafter, he began a program entitled Cultural Studies of Sport at the University of Rhode Island where he received his Master of Science degree. Upon graduation in May 2023, he will receive his Doctor of Philosophy in Kinesiology and Sport Studies.