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This paper examines the issue of media exploitation of Black athletes and its detrimental impact on their lives, careers, and public perception. It explores the historical context, underlying factors, and consequences of this exploitation, while also providing empowerment strategies and potential solutions. Through an analysis of media representation, athlete experiences, stereotyping, endorsement deals, and social media influence, this paper aims to raise awareness about the issues impacting Black athletes. Media exploitation of Black athletes is a problem that needs immediate attention, and this paper provides a detailed look into the athlete experience to better understand the issues at hand, in the hopes of creating a more inclusive and safe space for athletes to perform in.

Keywords

Media Exploitation, Black athletes, empowerment, stereotyping

Disciplines

Africana Studies | American Popular Culture | Sports Studies

Comments

Written for AFS 250: Black Bodies in American Sport

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Media Exploitation of Black Athletes: Challenges, Consequences, and Empowerment

Spencer Myler

Black Bodies in American Sporting

Professor Ty Redden

Abstract

This paper examines the issue of media exploitation of Black athletes and its detrimental impact on their lives, careers, and public perception. It explores the historical context, underlying factors, and consequences of this exploitation, while also providing empowerment strategies and potential solutions. Through an analysis of media representation, athlete experiences, stereotyping, endorsement deals, and social media influence, this paper aims to raise awareness about the issues impacting Black athletes. Media exploitation of Black athletes is a problem that needs immediate attention, and this paper provides a detailed look into the athlete experience to better understand the issues at hand, in the hopes of creating a more inclusive and safe space for athletes to perform in.

Introduction

Black athletes endure endless struggles in American sporting, whether it is through consistent racism, stereotypes, and/or exploitation. One of the many challenges that Black athletes face is media exploitation. Media exploitation can have a detrimental impact on the lives, careers, and public perception of Black athletes. Media plays a significant role in terms of how athletes are talked about and portrayed in the public space. There has been a significant history of exploitation of Black athletes, and there are certain stereotypes that have been perpetuated by the media. Media portrayal influences public perception, and media outlets can create specific racial narratives in sports coverage. It is easy to create a narrative about players based on what is heard in the media, and this can be severely harmful for many reasons. To best illustrate this, it will be important to compare the differences in media representation of White and Black athletes to get a better understanding of the disparities. This media exploitation can also lead to Black athletes being exploited economically, with disparities being seen in both endorsement opportunities and contract negotiations. It will also be essential to analyze abuse and harassment that athletes face on social media to see how that can impact mental health and performance. There are many consequences to exploitation, including, but not limited to, negative impacts on psychological health, career trajectory, and financial success. Through examining these consequences, we can look at potential empowerment strategies and solutions that can help Black athletes navigate the exploitation.

Historical Context of Exploitation

There is a long history of athletes in many sports being exploited in media with specific stereotypes consistently being perpetuated. Before media exploitation is discussed, it is important

to look at the general exploitation of Black athletes. Fortunately, athletes in the NCAA have started to receive money for their efforts in their respective sports. Before this, they were being used to create a billion dollar brand, while receiving no profits. The system that was historically in place was often compared to slavery because Black athletes create so much revenue for the NCAA without receiving compensation. One of the many problems with a lot of these college institutions is the vision they create about becoming a professional athlete. Athletes cited the lack of emphasis placed on academic achievement and career development as problems. Division One sporting requirements restrict the choices of majors student-athletes can choose, so it limits their ability to grow academically. To go along with these problems, athletes felt like they were being taken advantage of and also felt as if they were “used goods” (Beamon, 2008). In 2021, the NCAA created and implemented the name, image, and likeness policy (NIL), which allows athletes to make money from things like sponsorships and public appearances. Although this was a step in the right direction and viewed as a victory, the system does not significantly help Black athletes financially. The billions of dollars created in revenue a year are still going into the pockets of “coaches, athletic department officials, and university presidents” (Kalman-Lamb et al, 2021). The majority of athletes don’t make anything from NIL and have little information on how to market themselves. Even with NIL in place, it is still seen by former and current athletes as a system of “white guys getting paid on the back of black folk” and also as “a slave mentality” (Kalman-Lamb et al, 2021).

Black athletes have also been subjected to significant stereotypes throughout history while participating in sports that are perpetuated by the media. One of the stereotypes that needs to be addressed that relates to Black college athletes is the stigma that follows them as students. Universities need to do their part in correcting misinformation spread about the “dumb jock

stereotype” and provide instructors with more accurate student information (Simiyu, 2012).

There is a common misconception that athletes don't care about their work in the classroom. The reality is most athletes, especially at the Division One level, will not play professionally and success in the classroom will be vital to their future. Black students who are not even involved in athletics are also being severely impacted by this. There is this message being sent that Black students must only be at these higher institutions of education because of athletics and not their intelligence (Given, 2020). Black students around college campuses are asked if they are a part of athletics solely because of their skin color and height. Another very common stereotype that plagues black athletes is one that views them as naturally athletic and superhuman. Within the same stereotype, there is also the belief that black athletes have a “distinct physicality that allows them to endure extreme amounts of pain” (Cooper, 2018). These were the same excuses used to justify slavery and poor treatment of black people from before the Civil War. These stereotypes also take away from the achievements of Black athletes because their success is accredited to their natural ability instead of their hard work. This discussion of Black athlete exploitation and common stereotypes will lead us into the conversation of how Black athletes are represented in the media.

Media Representation of Black Athletes

It will be important to analyze how media portrayal influences public perception and dive into the stereotypes, biases, and racial narratives in sports coverage that impact Black athletes. We can also gain a better understanding of these issues by comparing the way that Black and White athletes are discussed in terms of media representation. Media portrayal of Black athletes can have far reaching consequences that can impact careers and personal well being. Studies have shown that Black athletes were more likely to be associated with criminality or negative

behaviors outside of sports compared to their white counterparts. For example, “media stories on African-American athletes focus primarily on criminal actions while stories about White athletes are overwhelmingly positive” (Hurst, 2015). These negative portrayals can contribute to the marginalization and dehumanization of Black athletes. Another significant issue in media is the choice of words that announcers use when describing Black athletic performance. In March Madness transcriptions, White players can often be seen being described as “crafty” for certain plays they make. For the same exact play, Black players will be described as sneaky or have references made about their natural athletic ability (Given, 2020). The term “sneaky” ties back to the criminality that is used in a lot of writing about Black athletes. Russell Westbrook has been a specific athlete who has had his well being and family life impacted by his media depiction. After tallying his ninth assist in a game in 2018, announcer Brian Davis said that Westbrook was “out of his cotton-picking mind” on a broadcast (Neuharth-Keusch, 2018). This type of behavior sets back any progress made towards positive change because it reminds people of the unfortunate history of our country. These media portrayals of Black athletes including biases and stereotypes can heavily influence future opportunities.

Economic Exploitation: Endorsement Deals and Contracts

Exploitation of Black athletes through media can further increase the disparities seen in endorsement opportunities and contract negotiations. Russell Westbrook is an example of an athlete that has been used to create stories for big media companies such as ESPN. Russell has often been called “Westbrick” and fans have recently been extremely disrespectful towards him and it is impacting his family. Westbrook mentions how he doesn’t mind fans critiquing his game, but it has got to the point “where my family don’t even want to go to home games” (Koons, 2022). Westbrook is a future hall of fame player who has bounced around the league in

recent years due to lowered performance, but his portrayal in the media has certainly had an impact on his playing career. This type of negative media portrayal can impact his future ability to support his family because it may make teams less inclined to sign him or companies less likely to endorse him.

Westbrook is one standout example of how media exploitation can impact Black athletes, but more of these disparities can be seen in the new NIL system and professional tennis. The traditional beauty standard of women includes having blue eyes and blonde hair with a skinny frame. Athletes like Paige Bueckers, Maria Sharapova, and the Cavinder twins all fit this standard and make more money than their black counterparts on endorsements. Bueckers and the Cavinder twins are women's basketball players and Sharapova is a professional tennis player. One problem with this has to do with social media and the posts that are spread on apps like Instagram. Instagram feeds are filled with white, blonde women who use photoshopping tools to perfect their bodies. Super successful athletes like the Williams sisters in tennis and Aliyah Boston in women's college basketball have not seen the same success with endorsements. These successful athletes do receive endorsements, but they are not on the same level as their white counterparts. Historically, being a white woman is "a key factor in how companies decide to promote their products" (Moore, 2021). These Black athletes that are extremely successful don't see the same success financially because societal standards of women make it impossible to. Serena Williams has been referred to as masculine and manlike because of her incredible ability on the tennis court. Media plays a major role in how these standards are spread and it makes it increasingly difficult for Black athletes to see similar financial success as White athletes. With all the celebration of the new NIL system, it has actually shined an even brighter light on

economic disparities, and these problems will continue to perpetuate without efforts to reduce them.

Social Media Exploitation and Online Harassment

Social media exploitation and online harassment have become prevalent issues faced by Black athletes. The rise of social media platforms has provided a space for individuals to express their opinions and engage in dialogue. However, it has also facilitated the spread of racial abuse, hate speech, and harassment targeting Black athletes. The anonymity afforded by social media often encourages individuals to engage in discriminatory behavior without consequences. The impact of social media exploitation and online harassment of Black athletes is profound. It affects their mental well-being, performance, and personal lives. Constant exposure to racial abuse can lead to feelings of anxiety and vulnerability. This can have a severe impact on their confidence, focus, and overall athletic performance. The negative psychological effects can extend beyond sports, impacting their personal relationships and overall quality of life.

Social media platforms also play a crucial role in addressing online exploitation. They need to take more proactive measures to combat harassment, such as implementing stricter content moderation policies and providing more robust reporting mechanisms. Athletes, organizations, and fans are advocating for increased accountability and consequences for individuals who engage in online harassment. After the Euro 2020 championship in soccer, athletes Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho, and Bukayo Saka all were racially abused on Twitter and Instagram. Monkey and banana emojis were used to target these athletes and posts containing this content remained up on the platforms for hours. Removing anonymity and using more human moderators are examples of potential solutions to help reduce racial abuse (Perrigo, 2021). The development and enforcement of comprehensive policies can help create a safer

online environment for Black athletes and foster a culture of respect and inclusivity. In response to online exploitation, some Black athletes have chosen to use their platforms to confront racism and promote positive change. They have become outspoken advocates for social justice and have used their voices to raise awareness about racial discrimination, both on and off the field. Their resilience and determination to fight against online harassment inspire others and encourage a broader conversation about the need for equality and respect.

Consequences of Exploitation

The consequences of media exploitation of Black athletes are far-reaching and have profound implications for individuals, the sports industry, and society as a whole. Some of these consequences include the perpetuation of stereotypes, limiting future opportunities, and the reinforcement of systemic inequalities. One of the significant consequences is the perpetuation of stereotypes which has been discussed previously. Media exploitation often portrays Black athletes through narrow and one-dimensional lenses, allowing reinforcement of stereotypes such as the “natural athlete.” These portrayals not only fail to capture the complexity of Black athletes' experiences but also contribute to the continuation of racial biases and misconceptions. Such stereotypes can limit the public's understanding and appreciation of the full range of talents, skills, and achievements of Black athletes. Furthermore, media exploitation reinforces systemic inequalities and hampers progress toward racial equity. Biased portrayals contribute to the underrepresentation of Black athletes in positions of power and influence within the sports industry. Former Dolphins coach Brian Flores recently sued the NFL and three teams, alleging that they had racist hiring practices. The Giants were believed to have hired another candidate before interviewing Flores which means he wasn't even given an opportunity to win the job. (Louis-Jacques, 2022). Limited representation in coaching, management, and executive roles can

create barriers for aspiring Black athletes to enter leadership positions and have a say in decision-making processes. Consequently, this perpetuates a cycle where Black athletes face hurdles in breaking through traditional power structures.

Another consequence of media exploitation is the psychological impact on Black athletes. Constant exposure to negative portrayals and racial biases can affect their self-esteem, confidence, and mental well-being. Internalizing these harmful narratives may lead to increased stress, self-doubt, and identity challenges. Moreover, the pressure to combat stereotypes and prove oneself may take a toll on their overall mental health and personal development. One specific player who has dealt with these identity challenges and problems with mental-health is Ben Simmons. Simmons is a former all star who has received tons of hate on social media and it has had a clear impact on his playing career. Simmons no longer has any confidence to shoot the ball and rarely resembles the player that he used to be. He is one of many Black athletes that have been psychologically impacted by media exploitation. The consequences of media exploitation extend beyond individual experiences and impact broader societal perceptions. Biased portrayals contribute to the reinforcement of racial biases which can lead to continued discrimination and unequal treatment. These portrayals can also shape public opinion, affecting how Black athletes are perceived and valued within society.

Empowering Strategies and Solutions

Empowering strategies and solutions are essential in addressing the issue of media exploitation of Black athletes. By promoting diversity, combating stereotypes, and fostering inclusivity, it is possible to create a more equitable and empowering environment within the sports industry. Several key strategies and actions play a crucial role in effecting change.

One empowering strategy is the promotion of diverse and inclusive storytelling in sports media. Media outlets have a responsibility to present a more accurate and multifaceted representation of Black athletes. This involves highlighting their achievements, personal stories, and contributions beyond athletics. By showcasing the diverse backgrounds and experiences of Black athletes, media can challenge stereotypes and promote a better understanding of their contributions to the sports world. Athlete-led initiatives are also vital in combating stereotypes and exploitation. Black athletes, as influential figures, have the power to reclaim their narratives and challenge biased portrayals. They can use their platforms to speak out against stereotypes, advocate for racial equality, and promote positive change. By sharing their personal stories, experiences, and insights, they can raise awareness about the issue of media exploitation and engage in conversations that challenge harmful narratives.

Sports organizations, sponsors, and media outlets play a crucial role in effecting change. These entities can adopt policies and practices that promote diversity, equality, and fair representation within the sports industry. Sports organizations should prioritize diversity and inclusion in their leadership positions, coaching staff, and decision-making processes. Sponsors should be endorsing athletes based on merit, rather than perpetuating racial biases. Media outlets should also constantly seek out diverse voices and perspectives to foster a more inclusive media landscape. Sports organizations, sponsors, and media outlets should work together to create guidelines and standards for responsible media coverage. By establishing industry-wide practices that encourage accurate representation, challenge stereotypes, and provide equal opportunities, they can contribute to a more empowering environment for Black athletes. Education and media literacy also play a significant role in empowering both athletes and audiences. By promoting media literacy programs, athletes can develop critical thinking skills and navigate media

narratives effectively. Audiences can also benefit from understanding the power of media representation and engaging in critical discussions about the impact of biased portrayals.

Education can create a more informed public and promote demand for responsible and inclusive media coverage.

Conclusion

The issue of media exploitation of Black athletes is a concern that requires attention and action. Throughout this discussion, we have examined the historical context of exploitation, how Black athletes are represented in media, and how Black athletes are both exploited on social media, as well as economically. This opens up the conversation as it relates to the specific consequences of this exploitation and what solutions can be offered to empower Black athletes. It is clear that addressing media exploitation is crucial for the empowerment of Black athletes and the promotion of a more equitable and inclusive sports industry. Key findings have highlighted the detrimental effects of media exploitation on the well-being and identity formation of Black athletes, as well as its impact on their career trajectory, endorsement potential, and financial success. We have also recognized the implications of media exploitation, which contribute to society's perception of Black athletes and reinforce racial biases. By challenging biased portrayals, promoting diverse and inclusive storytelling, and combating stereotypes, we can create a more accurate representation of Black athletes. This empowers them to be seen and valued for their full range of talents and skills both on and off the field.

Furthermore, addressing media exploitation is crucial for fostering equal representation and opportunities within the sports industry. By advocating for diversity in leadership positions, challenging discriminatory practices, and creating fair policies, we can create a more inclusive environment where Black athletes can thrive. Additionally, the empowerment of Black athletes

through addressing media exploitation has broader societal implications. By dismantling racial biases and promoting equality in sports media, we challenge systemic inequalities and contribute to a more inclusive society. It is imperative that media exploitation of Black athletes is confronted and overcome. By recognizing the consequences, implementing empowering strategies and solutions, we can create a future where Black athletes are properly valued and provided with equal opportunities. This will lead to a more equal and empowering landscape for all athletes, and create a sports industry that truly reflects the diversity and talents of its participants.

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