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# “Mystery Meat” and “Bulldyke:” Disciplining Gender and Silencing Women Sports Reporters on Reddit

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“Mystery Meat” and “Bulldyke.”

Disciplining Gender and Silencing Women Sports Reporters on Reddit

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**Abstract**

Most of the sports industry is a male dominated space where women are very rarely accepted. We see men in the field, whether they work or play, defend the space and tell women reporters to “stay in their lane.” This study focuses on an online news-sharing site, reddit, and examines how sports fans take it upon themselves to defend sports as a male space. Reporters, such as Sarah Spain, Jemele Hill, and Doris Burke, are subjected to hundreds of comments that silence them and discipline them based on their gender. This study emphasizes the need for gender equality in what we define as a male space, specifically sports reporting, and also how education from a young age can help erase the gender gap.

*Keywords:* reddit, gender, silencing, disciplining gender, sports, intersectionality

### **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to all the women who continuously challenge norms, breakdown barriers, and pave the way for equality and inclusion for women everywhere.

And to my mom, dad, and brother who support me unconditionally in everything I do.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Dr. Marita Gronnvoll. This study would not have been possible without your guidance and expertise. Thank you for always keeping me on the right path and for keeping me positive while reading the reddit comments. Your insight in this field is invaluable, and I am so happy I had the opportunity to work with you and add my own findings into the communications world.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Matt Gill and Dr. Sam Szczur. Your support of my study was greatly appreciated. Your knowledge of the sports industry and the suggestions you gave, allowed me to look at or for things I did not consider or think of at first. Thank you for your guidance and support in my time at Eastern Illinois.

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“Mystery Meat” and “Bulldyke:”

Disciplining Gender and Silencing Women Sports Reporters on Reddit

When I was in elementary school my mom bought me this purple shirt with the phrase “anything boys can do, girls can do better.” It was my favorite shirt to wear, and it sparked a confidence in me from a young age. I challenged the norms expected of me because of my gender. I did not settle for being just a girl. I wanted to be respected and treated just like all the boys. It was also at this time when I took an interest in playing and watching sports. I watched my brother’s basketball and baseball games every week. I joined the local softball league. I ran the kickball field at my elementary school. I challenged the idea that boys were the only ones allowed to play sports.

When I go on the internet and see posts about women athletes or women sports reporters I always avoid reading the comments. I am baffled at the words and phrases used to tear these women down. How can we live in a country that supports freedom and inclusion for all when we have such a negative perception and execution of equality? Women and sports have never gone hand-in-hand, and people are constantly defending sports as a male dominated space. Whether an organization refuses to hire or promote a woman working, players refusing to talk to women reporters, reporters refusing to cover women sports, or fans leaving crude and degrading comments online, the sports industry is constantly being defended as a male space where women are marginalized.

My curiosity in studying gender and sports piqued when I started working behind the scenes. As an athlete, I knew people were going to make comments about my athletic ability as compared to male athletes, but I never understood why women received so much criticism for wanting to work in sports. Surely, we are all capable of understanding



the rules to a game and being able to explain what is happening. My time working with the WNBA and college athletics gave me an insight to the gender inequalities I was not always aware of as an athlete.

It is important to study these inequalities in the sports industry because sports are ingrained in our culture. In 2017, ESPN had over 87 million subscribers tuning into their shows and games (Gaines & Nudelman, 2017). The messages ESPN shares are on a national level reaching many people throughout our country. To simply write off sports as being unimportant is just another way for people to ignore the inequalities. The sports industry has played a major role in our cultural evolution. Major League Baseball aligned themselves with the civil rights movement and desegregation by signing Jackie Robinson. Athletes have boycotted Olympic games in several cities due to the political climates of the country or the leaders they have. Black football players and runners hold their fist in the air to signal Black Power and rights. The truth of the matter is sports is a public platform for athletes, reporters, and organizations to challenge norms and inequalities in society.

The use of social media and gender inequalities within sports is what interested me most because I think many people feel protected by their computer. They avoid confrontation in real interactions, and since there is a screen in front of them they feel more comfortable stating their real feelings and opinions. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are arguably the most examined social media sites and have the most users. It is easy to hop on any one of these networks and see the comments left on posts and pictures, but these comments are still somewhat monitored by the employees of these organizations. Reddit opens a whole new door when looking at comments because the

user's identity is not known. Redditors are anonymous, unlike other sites that allow comments. On Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, an individual's profile is attached to what they say, and other users can see their pictures, who they are friends with, and even where they live.

I was not aware of the magnitude of reddit<sup>1</sup> until I started researching for this study. I wanted to see how sports fans used reddit and how their comments supported gender norms within the industry, specifically with women sports reporters. I cannot say I was shocked by the number of comments, but I was shocked at some of the content. I felt like the redditors [sic] were more open and blunt than they normally are on sites where their picture, name, and profile are attached.

This study is important to me because I am a woman working in the sports industry. I grew up playing basketball and hope to have a career behind-the-scenes in the NBA. Even though I have only been in the field for a few short years, I have already faced criticism and discrimination for being a woman in this man's world. One incident from last year that stuck out to me was the comments made by Lavar Ball. Ball is the father of current NBA player Lonzo Ball. Ball made comments to Kristine Leahy, a co-host for a popular sports talk show, and told her to stay in her lane after she asked how many pairs of basketball shoes his Big Baller Brand company had sold (Bonesteel, 2017). Ball's comment to Leahy makes it seem like she does not have knowledge to work in sports and ask him questions relating to the industry. He tries to put her in her place and show the dominance of men in this industry. His comments also sparked a huge debate across social media and spurred more discriminatory comments about women in sports.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the work of Adrienne L. Massanari (2015), reddit or redditors is not capitalized, unless at the beginning of a sentence, to follow reddit's trademarked name.

WNBA star Elena Delle Donne was vocal about Ball's comments on Twitter and even joked that she needed to stay in her lane and stop commenting on the NBA and Ball's shoe brand (Steinberg, 2017).

Comments like these made publicly is the reason why this study is necessary. Viewers see these people on national television trying to put women in their place, which leads to many more comments made on social media. We can analyze any platform for this study, but reddit is the most intriguing because of the nature of the site. Reddit is unlike any other social media platform, blogging site, or any other site that provides an opportunity to leave a comment. Reddit is what makes this study unique.

### **Why Reddit?**

Reddit differs greatly from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Although all three of these sites have the comment feature, reddit [sic] is not as much of a social media site as it is a news-sharing site. It was created in 2005 and made public in 2008. Reddit serves as a news aggregation site meaning "that most of the content on the site is linked to rather than directly hosted by reddit" (Massanari, 2015, p. 3). Redditors can share links to videos, articles, or any information of their choosing for other redditors [sic] to comment on. Popular comments, or those that are favored by redditors, will receive up-votes to move the comment up on the list. Redditors can also down-vote comments moving them farther down the list.

Massanari (2015) used four<sup>2</sup> metaphors in her study to describe reddit.

Understanding reddit as a performance or ritual is the most relatable to understanding how reddit helps defend sports as a male dominated space. This perspective argues that “the reddit experience and space draws on the work of performance studies to understand the ways in which redditors engage in a ritualized performance of community” (p. 21). She draws on the work of Victor Turner (1981; 2001) and Richard Schechner (1985) who highlighted the importance of rituals within communities. Schechner (1985) stated that there is a dynamic process that links performative behavior, such as art, sports, ritual, and play, with a social and ethical structure. People think and organize their lives relative to their personal and group values. All that being said, rituals “reflect cultural values, and cultures are inscribed/enacted through the ritualized performances that its members create” (Massanari, 2015, p.21). We live in a world that values the norm of men in sports. This is ingrained in our culture, and when women work in sports this ritual or habit of men being the norm is disrupted. Reddit is filled with a community of users who seem to accept these norms and go to great lengths through their anonymous comments to defend this space and its boundaries.

Reddit is also described as a community by Massanari (2015). She states that redditors are focused on sharing information via text with other users to understand and explain the world at large (Massanari, 2015). The way redditors interact and discuss women’s involvement in sports reflects their understanding of societal norms and spreads

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<sup>2</sup> The four metaphors used in Massanari (2015) are reddit as a carnival, reddit as a performance/ritual, reddit as play, and reddit as a community.

their opinions to other redditors. From there, people choose what they want to believe and continue to share their opinions for others to read and interact with.

Reddit is different than social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram because its goal is to share information that leads to discussion rather than the public presentation of an individual. The goal of reddit is to share news, unlike Facebook that shares personal status updates. Reddit also does not allow users to see who up-voted a comment like other social media networks allow users to see who liked their posts. Reddit is very much focused on the sharing of a specific topic with an article or video attached, which then leads to a discussion from anonymous redditors on their opinion and understanding of the topic.

I touched briefly above on the anonymity of redditors, which is a major factor in this study. Creating an account on reddit is really simple because all it requires is an email address. Redditors also enforce a set of rules across the site that limit the amount of personal information they are allowed to share. Massanari (2015) states that this “creates a space where individuals may be willing to disclose more information about themselves with the sense that it is not tied to their ‘real’ identity outside of reddit” (pp. 50-51). Massanari (2015) also argues that the anonymity is the fundamental reason for why redditors behave in certain ways. They do not face consequences because their identities are not publically known. They are protected from any serious backlash as a result of their views. Redditors may also create “throwaway” accounts, because they do not want something to be associated with their main reddit account (Massanari, 2015). This is usually when redditors want to share a point of view that they know is controversial or use extremely vulgar language to get their point across. Also, reddit does not have

website managers constantly monitoring what is posted. Massarani (2015) described redditors as a group of people who police each other. Redditors expect each other to understand the unspoken rules, like not posting information that gives away a user's identity, and within their community, they help police each other to follow these guidelines. The way reddit is used and the anonymity of the users is what allows redditors to defend sports as a male space, which we will see in the analysis of the data collected for this study.

### **Women Sports Reporters**

My study focuses on three nationally known broadcasters. The first woman reporter is Jemele Hill. Hill began her professional career in 1997 writing for the *Raleigh News & Observer*. She also spent several years at the *Detroit Free Press* covering Michigan State football and basketball. During her time in Detroit, she covered “five Final Fours, four college football national championship games, the 2004 Summer Olympics, and the NBA playoffs” (Barrett, 2006). Hill joined the ESPN staff in 2006 and has appeared on shows such as *SportsCenter*, *First Take*, and *Around the Horn* as well as being a college football sideline reporter for the network (Curtis, 2017). Hill later worked as a columnist for *The Undefeated*, which is ESPN's content initiative that explores the interactions of sports, race, and culture (Curtis, 2017). In this position, Hill conducted interviews and created content for digital, television, and audio platforms. She left ESPN in the fall of 2018 to write for *The Atlantic*.

The second reporter is Sarah Spain. Spain graduated in 2002 from Cornell University where she was a heptathlete and was a co-captain of her track and field team.

Following her athletic career, Spain was a popular sports blogger for *Chicago Now* and had a recurring guest hosting position for *Chicago Now's* radio station. She also spent time as a freelance writer for the *Chicago Tribune Red Eye*. Prior to joining ESPN, Spain worked for the Big Ten Network as a sideline reporter. In 2010, she joined ESPN's staff and recently signed an extension with the network. In her tenure with the network, Spain has worked on several different productions, which include being a *SportsCenter* host for Chicago's ESPN1000 station. She has appeared on *Mike & Mike*, *The Dan Le Batard Show*, *Russillo & Kanell*, *His & Hers*, *Outside the Lines*, and *Olbermann* (Chozet, 2016). Spain was also part of the first all-female edition of *First Take* as well as the first all-female panel on *Around the Horn*. She currently produces content for ESPNW and is a recurring member on *Around the Horn*.

Doris Burke is the final woman sports reporter I will focus on for this study. Burke was a four-year varsity member of the Providence College women's basketball team. She has second team all-conference honors, all-tournament honors and was named Female Athlete of the year in 1987 (Providence College Athletics, 2018). She left the program as the all-time leader in assists, which was broken in 2012 and is now second in that career category. In 1999, she was the fifth woman honored into the Providence College Hall of Fame (Providence College Athletics, 2018). Following her playing career, Burke became a radio analyst for her alma mater and began broadcasting Big East games on television that same year. In 1991, she began working for ESPN. Over her extensive career, Burke has covered the WNBA, primarily the New York Liberty, and then she started working the sidelines for NBA games broadcasted on ABC and ESPN. She was the first woman to commentate for a New York Knicks game on radio and

television and also the first woman to be a primary commentator for men's college basketball. As of 2017, Burke became a regular NBA analyst for ESPN and is the first woman to be assigned a full regular season role at the national level.

I chose to focus on these three women because they all work or have worked for ESPN. They have to follow the same organizational rules and fit into the organization's culture. They are also known on a national level. If viewers do not follow sports that often, the chances of them knowing a woman reporter from a smaller market is not very high. Before I started this study, I thought women on a national level and in such a public space, like Hill, Spain, and Burke, would be subject to more criticism and comments online.

### **Guiding Questions**

Understanding the culture of sports and how reddit works are the driving factors for this study. Patriarchy encourages a strong expectation for what is acceptable gender behavior. As a result, the sports industry, which is highly male-dominated, encourages many to instantly criticize whoever, or whatever, does not conform. Reddit is also described as a community of people who use this site as a platform for discussing the world and what rituals must be followed to uphold expectations. With this knowledge, I used three guiding questions for my study.

The first question I will address is how does reddit allow users to discipline gender in the sports industry? The second guiding question is how do redditors defend and challenge societal gender norms on the reddit boards? My final guiding questions is how does reddit allow race and sexuality to influence the comments made about women



sports reporters? To answer these questions, I will examine comments on sports specific reddit boards about Spain, Hill, and Burke and find common themes among the remarks left about the three of them.

### **Approach and Literature Review**

For this study, I used a critical approach to analyze the comments left by redditors. I based my analysis on Raymie McKerrow's (1989) work on critical rhetoric. McKerrow (1989) states that critical rhetoric "examines the dimensions of domination and freedom as they are exercised in a relativized world" (p. 91). McKerrow (1989) also argues that critical rhetoric "seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power" (p. 91). The goal of using a critical rhetoric perspective is to understand the power structures in society and how these power structures oppress marginalized and groups, while also looking for ways to change the power structures, and strategize to effect social change.

In his study, McKerrow (1989) outlines a few standard features of critical rhetoric. The first is "critical rhetoric shares the same 'critical spirit' that is held in common among the divergent perspectives" of other critical scholars (McKerrow, 1989, p. 92). The second feature he states relates to what Slack and Allow (1983) identify as the "effectivity of communication in the exercise of social power" (p. 215). McKerrow (1989) sees this as the "manner in which discourse insinuates itself in the fabric of social power, and thereby 'effects' the status of knowledge among the members of the social group" (p. 92). Basically, critical rhetoric helps explicitly connect forces in society that we do not realize are connected. It may not be immediately obvious to many how the sports industry is dominated by men, so when critical rhetoricians study discourses they

are able to make connections and make visible the relationships of power and knowledge. Women, in the case of the sports industry, are almost always the minority group, and critical rhetoricians would work to expose the dominance in power and knowledge by men in the field that can be seen in discourses such as reddit boards.

The third feature McKerrow (1985) lists is, “a critical social theory frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan though not uncritical identification” (p. 92). In other words, those studying with a critical eye are not detached or impersonal. The critique always has an object which it is against. In the case of my study, I am an avid sports fan, and I am pursuing a career in the sports industry. I cannot ignore my perspective when studying these comments. I want women to be accepted without criticism in the sports industry, so I am not detached from this study. The final feature McKerrow discusses is “a critical practice must have consequences” (p. 92). When completing a critical study, the researcher must have suggestions for improvements and offer insights to correct the power and knowledge imbalances. We have to recognize that there are oppressed groups and that we need to do what we can free them from the oppression.

In his definition of critical rhetoric, McKerrow (1985) mentions dimensions of domination, which is essential to understanding the critical eye to this study. He states that “a critique of domination is on the discourse of power, which creates and sustains the social practices” that control the dominated (McKerrow, 1985, p. 92). This is also referred to as the critique of ideologies, which is looking at power in relation to the dominant or ruling class. When critiquing ideology, researchers do not examine whether

the discourse is true or false; rather, they examine “how the discourse is mobilized to legitimate the sectional interests of hegemonic groups” (McKerrow, 1985, p. 93).

Discourse is what makes the ruling class dominant. It empowers them and contributes to their interests. The discourse does not need to be true or false because the only thing that matters is how it keeps the ruling class in the power position. The ruling class is reaffirmed when rituals are followed. Reddit is known for supporting the rituals and norms of the sports industry.

Discourse of power also “creates and perpetuates the relations, and gives form to the ideology which it projects” (McKerrow, 1985, p. 99). Foucault (1980) also states, “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (pp. 100-101). In the case of reddit, redditors are constantly using discourse to help enforce restrictions of women in sports by regulating “who may speak, how much may be said, what may be talked about, and on what occasion” (Therborn, 1980, p. 83). Redditors become regulators of discourses and support discourses of power within the sports industry. The discourses that happen via reddit helps express power functions that keep men in the dominant role and keep women in a subordinate one.

One final thing about discourse of power is it “focuses on the ‘normalization’ of language intended to maintain the status quo” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 94). I am sad to say as a woman working in sports that many of the comments degrading women for their involvement in sports did not bother me like they used to. In our society, it has become normal for this type of language to be used when discussing women in sports. Men are the ones in power in this industry and the majority of the discourses out there support this

hegemonic male space. The language used to keep men in positions of power and women oppressed is, unfortunately, normalized.

In addition to McKerrow's (1989) critical rhetoric research, John Sloop's studies of gender also play a significant role in my study. Sloop (2004) spent a considerable amount of time in the early 2000s studying gender norms in media using a critical approach. He draws on the previous work from McKerrow, but also states three of his own implications of critical rhetoric. The first implication is critical rhetoric is "concerned with public argument and public understanding about these objects" (Sloop, 2004, p. 18). A critical lens in my study would use this implication to understand how the gender of women sports reporters is understood on these reddit boards. The second implication Sloop looks at is political practice. Political practice is an attempt to "alter or shift public knowledge by illustrating how that knowledge has been constructed" (Sloop, 1963, p. 18). In this study, I hope to shift public knowledge around gender norms in the sports industry by showing how sports fans use reddit to discipline gender. If we can pinpoint how the use of this specific site enables this behavior, then maybe we can counter these statements and help shift the sports industry to being more accepting and inclusive of women. The final implication Sloop shares is concerned with the materiality of discourse. Materiality of discourse views "the discourse of power itself as material and as working within public debate" (Sloop, 1963, p. 18). Materiality of discourse leads to examining how gender is disciplined from the ground-up rather than from a top-down approach. Typically, researchers study media from a top-down approach which shows how media shapes norms and views of publics. For my study, I will be taking a ground-up approach by looking at the reddit boards and discussions happening between the users.

We will see how sports fans are taking it upon themselves to set boundaries and discipline gender norms within the sports industry.

Sloop (2004) also draws on the work of Michael McGee. McGee (1982) argued that we can discover significant findings when we focus on words used in everyday life or public argument. By studying these everyday occurrences we can see how individuals structure their identities, hierarchies, and understand other humans. All of McGee's (1982) arguments relate to McKerrow's (1989) emphasis on studying discourse. We can learn a lot about the norms, rituals, and values of the society we live in by paying attention to how people interact and the information they share. Sloop (2004) takes this a step further and says that "people take on their understanding of their 'selves' and their words from available discourses and, once taking on their identities and cultural meaning, can only work to change within those meanings" (p. 19). Sloop is stating that individuals understand themselves from reading and hearing the words used to talk about themselves and simply accept that as their identity. They can then only change things within that meaning. They will always be defined as the identity they choose based on the discourse they hear or participate in.

Most of Sloop's research examines how mass media influences and enforces gender norms. Within the discourses that he studied, Sloop (2004) saw the meaning displayed in mass mediated texts were the ones that fit the interests of those in the strongest positions of power. Relating this to my study, the texts surrounding athletes and workers in sports organizations are always going to support men. The texts could be positively praising men or degrading women in some way, but the meaning of both these situations will align with men who are in positions of power in the sports industry. These

biases portray certain “ideas and images” that critique and discipline everyone and everything working against the ruling class.

Also, in his research on media, Sloop (2004) found that people believe in a “series of binary roles and behaviors which ultimately constitute the very notions of male and female, masculinity and femininity, hetero- and homosexual” (p. 2). Our social structures encourage a binary way of looking at how gender is performed. As Simone de Beauvoir (1989) states, masculinity is tied to the male body and femininity is tied to the female body. When men and women stray from their expected performance of gender, the norms and values we support are challenged, which leads to criticism of the people breaking the expectations. Sloop (2004) emphasizes that we each learn how to protect gender norms through our language and through our behavior with others. Whether the norms are protected through public debate and discourse or on online platforms, there are individuals across the country that protect norms from being challenged.

As Sloop studied gender he found many ways in which texts disciplined women in the media. He spent time critiquing the “very persistent ways in which cultural expectations and mechanisms continue to discipline each of use to practice ‘proper’ gender behaviors” (Sloop, 2004, p. 12). Society is fixated on making sure men and women follow the proper norms and perform their gender correctly. Sloop (2004) goes on to say that deconstructing these norms is hard and limited because public representations and arguments involving gender are disciplined and contained by discussions of gender normativity. As much as we try to fight the gender stigma in the sports industry, there are representations and public discourse on why women are inferior in this field. We consistently fall into this trap that only men can perform in the sports arena.

Sloop (2004) quotes the work of Thomas Laqueur (1990) in his writing stating that Laqueur believed the “body was understood through the template of one gender (male)” and women were just the inverted version of a man (p.14). From this understanding, women are viewed as inferior because the inversion makes them different. Feminist scholars, like Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Judith Halberstam, struggle with this conception of inferiority. All three of these scholars fight gender normativity in their research and attempt to separate masculinity from the male body. Their research, along with McKerrow and Sloop’s, helps us understand the challenges Spain, Hill, and Burke all face as women reporters in the sports industry.

Through this analysis, I introduce the two recurring themes in my research, silencing and disciplining gender. In the silencing chapter, I will illustrate how redditors silence Spain, Hill, and Burke when they speak about politics in sports. They are also silenced on their appearance and knowledge of the sports industry. In the following chapter, I will explain how the comments left by redditors discipline their gender. Many of the comments focused on their appearances and personalities. I will conclude the study with summarizing the implications and suggestions for future research.

### **Silencing**

On August 26, 2016, former San Francisco 49ers quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, stayed seated during the national anthem prior to pre-season game kick-off. Following the game he said, “I am not going to stand up and show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color” (Mather, 2019). Across the country, there were several police brutality cases resulting in the deaths of young black Americans, which is from where Kaepernick’s protest stemmed. Through the remainder of the 2016 season and through the 2019 season, many players from the NFL and other sports leagues, even some high school athletes, joined Kaepernick in the silent protests, despite the backlash from several team owners, NFL league staff members, and people across the nation (Mather, 2019). Kaepernick was let go by his team at the end of the 2016 season, but he continued to praise and speak about the protests that other athletes kept alive.

Donald Trump enters the discussion at the start of the 2017 season urging the NFL to fire players that protest the anthem in a series of tweets. He stated, “If a player wants the privilege of making millions of dollars in the NFL, or other leagues, he or she should not be allowed to disrespect our Great American Flag (of Country) [sic.] and should stand for the National Anthem. If not, YOU’RE FIRED. Find something else to do!” (Mather, 2019). His reaction, however, sparked players to skip the anthem all together, continue to kneel, or lock arms with their teammates, coaches, and in some cases even the owners.

The case of Kaepernick versus the NFL versus Donald Trump helps illustrate the first theme of silencing women sports reporters that I discovered through analyzing reddit comments. Silencing is often used to isolate people who are viewed as a minority due to



their gender, race, and class (Houston & Kramarae, 1991). Minorities unfortunately have to find ways to live within the hegemony created in their community. Relating the concept of silencing to my study, the women sports reporters are the minority because of their gender. They are perceived as encroaching on a male dominated space and challenging the hegemony of male leadership in this career field. Sports fans across the world that believe sports should stay a male space help silence the women who try to work and play in this industry. In my study, we can see how reddit users help silence Sarah Spain, Jemele Hill, and Doris Burke in the comments they leave. The redditors not only have the power to silence a woman's spoken word, but they also have "the power to shape and control her talk, to restrict the things that she may talk about and the ways she is permitted to express them, to permit her to speak, but to suppress her authentic voice" (Houston & Kramarae, 1991). Some redditors seem to believe these women are threatening the hegemonic masculinity that dominates the sporting world, and they use their power to silence the women any way they can.

In the data I gathered, I found there were four main ways in which reddit users help silence these three women on various reddit boards. The first is the amount of comments each woman receives. Each woman faces different amounts of criticism, which I think is an important act of silencing that is very evident in these three women. The second silencing tactic I observed was visible when the women spoke on political or racial issues, which is why Kaepernick's anthem protest is so important to this study. Redditors felt that sports, politics, and race were not meant to be discussed about together and capitalized on this opinion to keep the three women in their place. The third silencing approach by the users was focusing the discussion on the woman's appearance and by

sexualizing them. By putting the focus on the bodies, they silenced the reporter because, once again, they feed into this idea that women are first and foremost wanted for their bodies. Knowledge and other qualities are secondary to their bodies. The final silencing method I noticed in the comments was the constant critique of knowledge. Redditors constantly reduced the women's expertise, which helps silence them by telling other readers and commenters that these women cannot possibly know what they are talking about.

I have chosen to organize this chapter into sections that focus on each women reporter separately. They are all silenced in similar ways, but are unique when compared to each other. To help set up some of the issues I am going to talk about with the three women, I need to explain one of the searches I did while on reddit. On Jan. 29, 2019, I searched each of their names and discovered three things that will relate through the analysis. Hill's top five boards were all political and race based and resulted in 2,022 comments from reddit users. In comparison, Spain only had one board on the entire site related to politics and race and she received two comments on the thread, one of which was irrelevant to this study. Doris Burke on the other hand had zero boards or comments relating to politics and race. The number of comments received is also a form of silencing, which I will discuss more in-depth with each of the three women.

### **Sarah Spain**

Spain is the first reporter that I will analyze because I feel that Hill's comments and critique is very similar, but amplified. Understanding how Spain is silenced will lay the groundwork for Hill. To begin, Spain received only two comments on the only board

mentioning her with politics and race. One can argue that based on the number of comments the woman reporter receives, the more people are trying to silence the woman and keep her in her place. Although Spain only received two comments, the comments help illustrate that redditors do not believe she knows what she is talking about, therefore silencing her. One user did not leave a comment in regards to politics or race, but the one left by Sarah9753 (2017) picked apart everything about Spain and women sports reporters,

Gosh I wonder if ESPN elevating this used tampon/snowflake and affirmative action bixnood [sic] Barbie is why they've lost 15,000 subscribers [per] day in October. Putting women in prominent roles is cancer. It's not a surprise the network's decent [sic] into irrelevance has matched up well with her (and other diversitytards) ascendancy in the network. That and putting women in the roles of men, generally. It's bad. It's always been bad...and it's not gonna change. The shrieking twats always say "nothing will change and we aren't gonna change anything!" Inevitably they do. On the shows, on broadcasts, on analysis shows, etc. A few were good... Linda Cohen, etc. But now it's "How does Y's [quarterback] respond to the increased pressure we expect X's defense to put on them?... For that analysis and break down of the complex schematic issues at play here, we throw it over to a 29 year old, mystery meat, bulldyke, who's gonna talk about her feelings. (Sarah9753, 2017)

So much of this comment about Spain silences her and other women sports reporters. First of all, the critique that Sarah9753 leaves in this comment is in response to Spain discussing President Trump, the national anthem protests, and being suspended from ESPN due to her violation of their social media rules. This redditor's overall harsh comment can be seen as a way of silencing because Spain decided to combine the worlds of sports, politics, and race. People often think that these industries do not overlap, so when they are brought together the reporters face criticism. What this overlooks, however, is the long history of politics, race, and sports. Jackie Robinson was the first black baseball player during a time that racism was at a high point, and black players were segregated into their own league. Robinson contributed significantly to the Civil Rights movement and fought segregation as much as he could. Robinson's entrance into the sports industry shows just how politics and race are embedded in the sports industry. If Major League Baseball was not segregated into white and black leagues, Robinson's presence in the MLB would have never challenged the sports industry.

The Olympics are highly politicized and always have been. Athletes recently boycotted the Olympic games set to take place in South Korea due to the ongoing conflict between North and South Korea. Even looking back a few decades, athletes boycotted the Olympics when they were held in Germany due to Hitler's rule prior to World War II. Another aspect of sports that is political and primarily seen in the Olympics is when black athletes stand on the winner's podium at the end of a race or event and hold their hand in a fist in the air. This often signifies Black Power and first appeared in the 1960s during the Black Power Movement. Black athletes in Olympic events often raise their fist, but NFL players have also started raising it in support of Kaepernick's protests

mentioned earlier. Sporting events are also the only form of entertainment that we have to stand up at and sing the anthem, which alone shows us that politics and sports have always gone hand-in-hand. Spain's comments on the Trump, Kaepernick, and anthem protests were just another way these industries crossed paths, but Sarah9753's (2017) comment is an attempt to silence Spain because he or she thinks women reporters should not discuss sports, politics, and race together.

The use of the word snowflake also relates to politics. The term snowflake first gained popularity following the movie *Fight Club*, which meant that someone is not special or unique (Bell, Chaffin, Dorsey, Linson, & Milchan, 1999). In relation to this definition of the word, Sarah9753 is silencing Spain by claiming her opinion does not matter and it is not something that is unique or giving insight. During the recent presidential election, the term snowflake made a comeback but with a different meaning than what *Fight Club* promoted. People are using this term to bash and offend liberal, or left side political parties. It is a comment used to critique political correctness and the perceived sensitivity of liberals. Spain is very vocal about her opposition to President Trump. Since Spain does not share the same views as Trump has with the national anthem protests, Sarah9753 is using the term snowflake to silence Spain's opinion. Spain is silenced because her view on politics and race does not align with Sarah9753's and the use of the term snowflake helps establish the difference of views.

Sarah9753 also uses several other names in the comment referring to Spain and women reporters. These names put a focus on something other than her thoughts about politics and race within the sports industry. The focus is now on Spain's and other women reporters' appearance and bodies, which is an extremely common way to silence

women. Calling her a “used tampon” silences her based on her gender by affirming she is a woman trying to speak in a male dominated space. Women have faced criticism for hundreds of years for having a period. We are seen as dirty people when menstruating because this blood is perceived as dirty. Calling Spain a used tampon is like saying she is a dirty feminine product that should just be thrown away. Changing the subject from her original commentary to her appearance and what her female body does silences her. If we no longer focus on the sports talk and focus on the appearance of Spain, then we silence her input in the male dominated space.

The second name Sarah9753 (2017) uses in his or her comment is “bixnood [sic] Barbie.” I thought this term was exceptionally interesting in the use of silencing Spain. For background, bixnood is a racial slur that stemmed from a comic cartoon of a black man talking on the phone (Urban Dictionary, 2019). The cartoon was essentially making a joke saying black people love talking on the phone, but no one can ever understand what the individual is saying. Within the cartoon there is a talking bubble with nonsense written in it and one of the words is bixnood, which has stuck as a racial slur. I thought it was interesting that Sarah9753 chose to use this word next to the term Barbie. Both names silence Spain. Bixnood, although it is racial, is used to silence Spain in regards to her support of the black athletes. It is almost like Sarah9753 views Spain as a race traitor because of her support for a different race. Even though she is not black, she supports the black population, so calling her this name silences her opinion on the matter. Sarah9753 also calls her a Barbie, which is interesting because Barbie dolls are often something that is associated with girls and only girls. Boys are always told not to play with dolls while growing up, and Barbie’s are a popular choice for girls. They are so popular that people

often make comments about girls trying to look and be like Barbie. Many people also use Barbie to call someone dumb or stupid, which is an attack on Spain's knowledge of the situation. Sarah9753's use of these terms silences Spain's opinion on the matter of sports and politics.

Many other users in addition to Sarah973 had comments silencing Spain based on her appearance, but one stood out as the most blatant form of silencing. Hellzkellz (2018) said, "I wanna take a nap between Sarah Spain's boobs. But she should definitely be quiet while I do so." This user is obviously making a comment about Spain's body, but also very obviously saying she needs to be silent while he or she admires it. It is comments like these that reduce women to their bodies putting the focus on something other than the words coming out of their mouth to silence them. Silencing based on appearance is widely researched. Nussbaum (2010) draws on the work of philosopher Rae Langton to suggest that "objectification that encourages a vision of the object as mere body and appearance" results in the silencing of the object in question (Massanari, 2015). Nussbaum (2010) also states, "Despite its ubiquity, objectification is a very extreme form of shaming. Shaming always involves giving someone a stigmatized, spoiled identity" (p. 73). Interpreting Spain's critique, as well as the other women's critique later on, we can see how commenting on their bodies and appearance is silencing. Redditors who leave these comments objectify, shame, and silence women because they are reduced to mere objects.

The final observation in silencing was how reddit users silence these women based on their level of knowledge. I found that Spain was challenged and silenced more than Hill and Burke because of her level of involvement in sports. Spain only has

experience competing in track and field events so redditors were very vocal about her lack of knowledge when speaking on athletes of other sports. Doctorofnothing (2017) said,

The hate she gets does stem partially, possibly mostly, from the fact that she's a woman in a space where females are largely derided for their sports opinions. It probably also relates to her strident opinions as well... However, I don't find her opinions interesting at all. I think the best guest co-hosts for this show are people who actually "did it," whether that's an athlete or someone who's been in a front office/coaching staff. (Doctorofnothing, 2017)

Spain, along with other women in the sports industry, is often critiqued based on her knowledge of the sport. I see so many people criticize women's opinions because they never played the sport before. For example, in 2017, NFL player Cam Newton laughed in a press conference when a woman reporter asked him about his receivers running their routes, and he responded saying, "funny to hear a female talking about routes" (Breech, 2017). He laughed because a woman asked him a legitimate question about the sport of football that she possibly cannot know a thing about because she never played (Around the NFL Staff, 2017). Spain is being silenced because of her alleged lack of knowledge, but why should that matter? We have men and women working as political journalists across the world who have never held a position in office on any level and they are not critiqued or silenced as are women in sports. We do not require political journalists to be a former congress member or city council member or a member of any



political staff, so why should we hold these standards for women in sports? The redditors critiquing her knowledge about sports she is just another way for them to silence her. Giving the excuse of “she does not know what she is talking about” is another way for them to protect the male domain of sports.

### **Jemele Hill**

Hill’s criticism is very similar to Spain’s, but the number of comments Hill receives compared to Spain and Burke is astronomical. Just like Spain, I searched Hill’s name on reddit on Jan. 29, 2019. The top five boards are all political and race related and generated 2,022 comments. Again, that is just the top five boards. The number of comments Hill receives is an obvious form of silencing. I think this is obvious because more redditors are going out of their way to make comments about her. The more redditors leaving comments, then the more redditors there are silencing Hill. Spain did not have it as bad, but still had a few comments. The 2,022 comments Hill received are mostly from users disagreeing with Hill and trying to silence her on these issues. The comments put the focus of the discussion on something other than what Hill has to say.

Hill, unlike the other two women, not only has the battle of being a woman, but she also has the battle of being black. According to Crenshaw (1991), social power structures often work to marginalize and exclude those who are not a part of the dominant race, gender, or other identity categories. Crenshaw (1991) describes a concept of intersectionality as “the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women’s employment experiences” (p. 1244). So for Hill,

unlike the other two women I am looking at, she not only has her gender working against her in the sports industry, but she also has her race influencing her experience.

Hill and Spain were both suspended from ESPN for violating the company's social media policy by tweeting on the same issue of President Trump and the national anthem protests. I found one board on all of Reddit on Jan. 29, 2019 with only two comments criticizing Spain, while the same search for Hill yielded the top five boards on the issue and 2,022 comments. Spain is a white woman and may have it a little easier than Hill because Hill falls in two minority categories of being a woman and being black. The number of comments Hill received as a black woman supports the notion that Crenshaw (1991) introduces. Hill is silenced because her race and gender do not match the male dominated space.

One reddit board titled, "ESPN Suspends Jemele Hill," received over 400 comments. One of those comments stated,

[To be honest], they have given her such free rein because she is black to talk about racial issues. I don't think she knows where the line is. Being black means she probably got mistreated because of her race at some point and so that makes her an expert on sociology and racial economics and politics. Just like owning a computer for the last 30 years means I've gotten viruses and lost a lot of data making me an expert on cyber security and data storage. I should get invited to speak at a tech convention. (Fanintenn, 2017)

Fanintenn (2017) makes Hill's race relevant and irrelevant all in one comment. This user critiques her by saying Hill gets away with things because she is black, which insinuates that ESPN lets her get away with things because of her race, but we should not believe her because she is a black woman. However, Fanintenn (2017) goes on to compare Hill's race and experience with racism is equivalent to his or her experience with owning a computer, getting viruses, and then being allowed to speak about those viruses. By using this false analogy, Fanintenn is trying to dismiss Hill's identity and silence her on talking about this issue even though it relates very closely to her life experience. Begging the question, who is qualified to speak to the black experience if not a person of color?

Massanari's (2015) concept of male gaze comes into play again in relation to this comment left by Fanintenn. Massanari combines her concept of the male gaze with Nussbaum's (2010) work on Internet misogyny and comes up with seven ways in which women and other marginalized groups are made into objects and silenced online.<sup>3</sup> The seventh distinct way is the denial of subjectivity. The denial of subjectivity is when "the objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account" (Massanari, 2015, p. 131; Nussbaum, 2010, p. 69-70). Fanintenn (2017) is dismissing Hill's life experience as a black woman by comparing the racism she has faced to a computer virus. This redditor is not taking into account Hill's experience and using it to objectify her and silence her on speaking about racial issues.

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<sup>3</sup> Martha Nussbaum's (2010) seven distinct ways in which women and other marginalized groups are made into objects and denied agency are instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity.

Reddit user Woostar64 (2017) left a comment calling Hill a bigot, while WooWooPete (2017) said, “Good. I never liked this bitch, always had a wack ass outlook on stuff.” These comments were in response to tweets sent from Hill’s account calling Trump a “white supremacist who has largely surrounded himself w/other white supremacists” (Vagianos, 2017). Both of these reddit comments from Woostar64 and WooWooPete are an ad hominem attack on Hill. Woostar64 (2017) calls Hill a bigot putting the focus on her opinion rather than her position. Her job is to discuss issues in sports and explaining the situation between Trump, Kaepernick, and the anthem protests is something she had to cover because it was relevant to the field she covers. Calling her a bigot is a personal attack rather than a focus on the topic being discussed. By attacking her personally, Woostar64 helped others who do not share the same opinion as her silence her. WooWooPete (2017) called Hill a bitch and attacked her outlook or opinion on the situation. WooWooPete is guilty of the same silencing Woostar64 committed. These users do not share her viewpoint, therefore they attack Hill hoping to silence her due to this difference.

Compared to Spain, Hill received by far more comments and criticism when discussing Donald Trump and politics in sports, and I do not think this is because of her opinion. I find it hard to believe that is just because of her opinion on these issues because Spain and Hill have the same outlook on it, and Spain had only two comments. In addition to Hill calling Trump a white supremacist following the national anthem protest debacle, Spain tweeted that whoever temporarily deleted Trump’s Twitter profile was a “hero” (Gwinn, 2017). Both made comments regarding the President on Twitter causing an outcry from his supporters. I think racism had a new spark in our country

since President Trump's election. He is the first president to make openly derogatory and hateful comments about people, which may give people the implicit permission to do the same. I have seen more people than ever in my lifetime embrace hate and racism, which I think sparks most of the comments in the reddit boards on Hill. In 2017, hate crimes rose from 6,121 reported crimes in 2016 to 7,151 hate crimes in 2017, which is nearly a 17 percent increase (Rubin, 2018). Hate is on the rise and it is evident in the comments left by many redditors. Not only do these threatened redditors have to defend the sports industry from a woman, but they have to defend the male space from a black woman.

One thing I found interesting when reading about Hill's suspension for tweeting Trump was a white supremacist and the comments directly related to her suspension was that in 2016 Curt Schilling was fired from ESPN for violating the social media policy. Schilling is a white male who is also a former Major League Baseball pitcher. He had two violations of the ESPN social media policy. In August 2015, he shared a meme on Twitter that compared Muslims to Nazis (Gaines, 2017). This violation resulted in his suspension for the rest of the baseball season, which is much longer than Hill's suspension of two weeks considering baseball goes until the first week of November. Less than a year later, Schilling shared an anti-transgender post on Facebook ultimately resulting in his termination with the company (Gaines, 2017). CucksLoveTrump (2017) came to Schilling's defense stating Hill violated "the social media policy not once, not twice, but three times," while Schilling "violated it once and was canned." Which is interesting when compared to Schilling accusing ESPN of a double standard when Hill was not fired following her second violation of the policy (Gaines, 2017). So not only did Hill violate the policy twice, she also did not receive the same treatment as her white,

male counterpart. This, in my opinion, is another reason why reddit users are so quick to criticize her and silence her. She is in, their eyes, getting preferential treatment by ESPN when the man was fired for the same behavior, which is another reason why the users are quick to silence her on this issue. She is already being given an excuse by ESPN in the male dominated space where the man did not receive the same treatment, so they really have to keep her in her place.

As I stated earlier, Crenshaw (1991) believes that the gender and race of black women influences their employment experiences, which is supported in the next two comments. The first comment left was,

Makes me think she has an end game. She knows she's on thin ice after the white supremacist thing. She must know that the NFL is a scared [sic] cow. Does she want to be fired so she can settle with ESPN for being racist/misogynist, then write a book and do a world wide tour of all the daytime talk shows? Is there some other way she stands to gain by poking her bosses in the eye? Or am I just a cynical bastard? (DuhSilence, 2017)

A similar comment was left by another redditor saying, "[Hill is] most likely to end up on The Real [sic] or one of the other female/minority daytime talk shows" (Stephan\_with\_a\_ph, 2017). Another user took it a step further saying, "Unless BET starts a sports channel no other network will pick her up. She is way too toxic and will be stuck writing for blogs" (Dr\_Fundo, 2017). All three of these comments silence Hill based on her gender, and Stephan\_with\_a\_ph and Dr\_Fundo take the critique a step

further by involving her race. All three comments silence her by claiming she is just like any other woman in seeking popularity and fame. A worldwind book tour, talk shows, and blogs all relate to stereotypical female-based activities, while BET ties in Hill's race.

By saying Hill is only good for daytime talk shows or blogs reduces Hill to her gender. Currently, women on shows like *The View*, *The Real*, and *The Talk* dominate daytime television. Ellen DeGeneres, Oprah, and Tyra Banks are also notable women who currently or previously hosted their own shows during the day. These shows often times cater to the women who are home during the day, too. The comments left on Reddit reduce Hill to the idea of her being like all the other women that want to be on television for the other women sitting at home.

Saying Hill belongs on *The Real* or BET, also known as Black Entertainment Television, also brings her race into the discussion. Not only are the reddit users confining her to daytime television, but they are also confining her to black television. *The Real* is a talk show with four black women hosts, while BET is an entire television station devoted to black actors, actresses, and celebrities. These comments also try to keep her in a private sphere. Women are expected to be experts on home and family, but not the serious, public sphere of the sports industry. The comments left by the three users I chose and many others that are out there on reddit, silence Hill based on her gender and race by designating her to these outlets. She can only have a voice here because this is where women, and more specifically black women, have a voice.

Dr\_Fundo (2017) also mentions that she could write for a blog, and the first thing I always think of when blogs are brought up are the mommy bloggers. Stay-at-home moms are notorious for writing blogs about their experiences, the products they use, and

just to document the growth of their babies. Statista, which is a statistics portal site compiling data from over 22,000 sources, claims there are over 456.1 million blogs on the blogging site Tumblr alone in January 2019 (Statista, 2019). The same site estimates that 31.7 million users will update a blog at least once a month by 2020 (Statista, 2019). Although studies show that bloggers are split pretty evenly by men and women writers, people often jump to the conclusion that women blog more because of the stereotype of women are more likely to keep a diary (Nowson & Oberlander, 2006). By equating Hill with blogs, I think it is very clear that this user is silencing her to another area perceived to be dominated by women. Shunning women like Hill to blogs and daytime television assumes they are not good enough for spaces that are dominated by men and help silence them when they stray from these forms of media.

Unlike Spain and Burke, the comments Hill received about her outward appearance were strictly based on her race. She was not sexualized in any way or reduced to just her body parts. None of the critique I came across got past the color of her skin, which I found as another form of silencing by the redditors. The focus on nothing but her race projects that Hill is not even worthy of being looked at in any other way. She cannot be looked at the way the redditors look at Spain. They cannot get past the fact that she is black, which is unique to black women working in the male dominated space of the sports industry. What else can they focus on for a white women other than her boobs or maybe what she is wearing? Hill and other black women reporters will always have their race take front stage. Commenters do not need to take it a step further by commenting on how she looks because acknowledging her race is enough to silence her.



Hill also had very few comments critiquing her knowledge. One user actually defended Hill in a way, but still acknowledge why others may not like her. Tallboy101 (2018) said, “I think it boils down to sensibilities. If you’re easily offended by those who offer strong opinions that you don’t agree with then she will offend you etc. I don’t agree with everything she says but I do find her entertaining and I find her journey fascinating.” Most of the comments I came across about Hill and her knowledge stated similar things. Many users felt she had strong opinions, but her opinions were factually based. Tallboy101 could have easily attacked her like Woostar64 and WooWooPete, but they chose to recognize that she has a strong opinion, but at least her journey in life can support why she feels that way. WooWooPete does not devalue her experience as a black women, he or she acknowledges her experience, which shows that not all redditors deny subjectivity that Massanari (2015) and Nussbuam (2010) discuss in their work.

### **Doris Burke**

Burke, unlike the other two women, is exceptionally interesting when looking at politics and race. When searching her name on reddit on Jan. 29, 2019, as I did the other two, not a single reddit board popped up talking about politics or race with her name attached. Obviously this means she also did not have a single comment to reflect on, so this brings up the idea of self-silencing, which Burke partakes in. It may be that Burke self-silences to avoid the backlash that Spain and Hill have received. Self-silencing refers to “what is initially an active process of withholding emotions, opinions, strengths, and capabilities perceived to be threatening” to one’s relationships (Wechsler, Riggs, Stabb, & Marshall, 2016, p. 54). Burke may not want to comment on such controversial issues

because she does not want to risk losing credibility or likability within her field whether it is from fans, co-workers, her bosses, or whoever it may be. Withholding her feelings, emotions, and opinions helps maintain the relationships she has because she is not threatening the norm.

I am a huge basketball fan and I thoroughly enjoy listening to and watching Burke when she is part of the broadcasts. I am also a fan of the San Antonio Spurs and look forward to watching her sideline interviews with their head coach, Gregg Popovich, because he is known for being a little bit difficult. Popovich, like many NBA players and coaches, is very vocal during press conferences and interviews on his hatred for and disagreements with President Trump. Whenever the opportunity presents itself, he capitalizes on it and makes a comment. I have watched games where Burke will be interviewing him between the quarters and he finds a way to sneak in a sly comment. Burke always shakes it off and keeps the conversation revolving around the game and what is happening on the court. She self-silences in these moments and chooses to stay focused on the game. It is possible that she does this because she knows people are watching the game for the sports entertainment and is mindful of the negative comments that could come her way if she, as a woman, chose to engage in political talk during a basketball game.

In 2018, NBA star LeBron James opened a school in Akron, Ohio to benefit an at-risk community. He wanted to provide kids who are growing up in a rough situation with the proper schooling they deserve by providing free tuition, uniforms, break, lunch, snacks, bikes, and helmets (Perano & Muaddi, 2018). He also promised access to a food pantry for the student and their family, and he went a step further by saying he would

help out all graduates with their college tuition (Perano & Muaddi, 2018). President Trump took to Twitter criticizing James following a television interview about his school. Trump made claims that James was not smart and Don Lemon, the person who interviewed him, was the “dumbest man on television” (Caron, 2018).

As a primary basketball color-commentator, Burke spends a lot of time filling the air with stories relating to the athletes that are playing in the game. I remember Burke spent a great deal of time talking about James and the school he started in Akron, but she only ever praised him and talked about the school. She never once mentioned Trump’s or his supporters’ negative comments. She chose to stay silent on the issue. The self-silencing that Burke does is interesting compared to Spain and Hill because while she is still being silenced, it is not at the hands of the redditors when dealing with politics and race.

In the data I collected, Burke received more comments about her appearance and body than the other two women reporters combined. Their comments relating to looks and their bodies not only discipline their gender in the sports industry, but the comments also help silence the women. Redditors want to give women reporters credit but not too much because then the male dominated space feels threatened. By bringing up their looks, they can put focus on something other than their sports knowledge, keeping them in their place, and silencing them. In Massarani’s (2015) work on reddit, she refers to this idea of male gaze. She used the example that women in movies are often desirable and the object of a man’s attraction. This can help explain why the comments Burke receives silence her.

The interesting thing about Burke's comments is many of them were left on reddit boards that were used to praise her as a woman in sports. Many redditors on these boards gave her credit for the knowledge she had and how professional she remained on air, but the comments coming back to her looks are used to silence her, so some extent, and keep her in her place. Redditors may be more comfortable with Burke entering the male space over the other two women, but they still need to silence her and remind her that sports is still dominated by males.

Cyecurb (2016) simply references Burke's appearance in a comment stating, "She had me with the behind the back in high heels and a skirt," while *Midnightsbane04* (2016a) took things a little farther by saying, "I think a lot of us watch Doris and end up going 'wait why am I so turned on right now?'" A few users went even farther by sexualizing Burke. *Yepswab* (2016) said, "Damn she got that ass too. Got me feeling some type of way over here," while *AutoFrost* (2016) stated, "As long as I have a face, Doris Burke as a place to sit."

All four of these users have taken the discussion away from Burke's knowledge and success in the sports industry and put it on her appearance just like they did with Spain. *Cyecurb's* comment seems almost like a compliment when compared to the other three, but the user is still referencing her appearance and mentioning how Burke was wearing high-heels and a skirt, which reduces her to her body and sexual attraction. These clothing items are things only women wear, and focusing on her attire distracts from what she is saying. *Midnightsbane04* and *Yepswab* mention being turned on when looking at her, once again reducing a woman reporter to her body and objectifying her, while *AutoFrost* makes things sexual by implying a sexual act. *De Beauvoir* (1989) is a

noted gender scholar and claims that women are called “the second sex” and appear to men as a purely sexual beings (p. xxii). With this understanding, not only do these comments draw attention to her body, they insinuate that Burke and other women can be used for sex, thus silencing them because that is their primary purpose. Whatever the women are talking about is secondary because they are not here for their use of voice.

Although most of the reddit comments I have analyzed have been negative, Burke received many positive comments relating to her knowledge of basketball, suggesting she is more widely accepted by sports fans. Terafuner (2018) praised Burke by commenting,

Unlike a lot of court side reporters after tough games, you can tell most players do not mind patiently answering Doris’ questions with genuine answers because she makes it clear that she not only paid attention to the game, but understands it and isn’t just wasting their time looking for a juicy sound bite. (Terafuner, 2018)

Newnowalt (2018) left a similar comment admiring Burke saying,

She was really good and super competitive at the collegiate level, so she has a strong understand [sic] of the game, and she’s also a great interviewer. Too often pretty faces with no personal experience at any level playing the sport they’re covering. She’s not unattractive, but its nice that players respect her enough to have practically lobbied her into a stronger position based purely on merit.

(Newnowalt, 2018)

Another user also said, “Her [basketball IQ] is fantastic. She understands every position very well and knows how and when things run on both side of the ball. I guess that’s what you get from playing point guard your entire career,” (DDRaptors, 2018).

These three comments help explain why Burke is not silenced, but also help us understand why other women reporters, such as Spain and Hill, are. To begin with Terafunker’s (2018) comment, this redditor praises Burke’s skill on the sideline by saying she paid attention to the game and knows what is going on. This redditor is in a way praising her for doing something that is ultimately required of her job, but questionable on whether she does it since she is a woman. Terafunker’s praise must mean she is doing what the men would do in her position, which is why she is accepted and not silenced by fans, players, and co-workers.

Newwowitz’s (2018) comment is interesting because it is a backhanded compliment. This redditor is saying Burke is pretty but is also smart. He or she really does praise Burke’s knowledge. This redditor credits her playing experience, but still somehow brings her looks into the comment, which silences her to a certain point. Newwowitz gives her credit for having a strong understanding of the game and respect from players within the NBA, while saying not all women in sports have the same credentials as her. This is the part of the comment that I think helps explain why Spain, Hill, and plenty of other women in sports are criticized. In these comments, Burke is acknowledged and respected for having experience playing the sport she is working in. She had a very successful collegiate playing career, and redditors along with fans, players, and people across the country respect that. She knows the game and understands the game because she has experience with it. Spain and Hill are open to more critique

because they have not played the sports they spend a lot of time talking about, but, again, the question needs to be asked, why do they need the experience? As I mentioned earlier, political reporters do not have to hold a political position at any point in their lives to write about politics, so why should these women have to have athletic experience to be qualified to speak about sports? DDRaptors' (2018) drives home the idea of experience in the sport makes for an ideal reporter. This user once again credits her playing career for why she understands the sport so well and why she is so widely accepted in the male dominated space.

### **Conclusion**

As we can see with the comments left about Burke and her knowledge of basketball, not all of what comes out of reddit is negative and used to silence these women. Hill received a lot of support, despite the massive amounts of negative comments that were directed towards her. In my research I found a reddit board titled "Jemele Hill Hate," which I fully expected to be negative comment after negative comment, but I was pleasantly surprised to see that she had some redditors coming to her defense.

EntertainmentPorpoise (2018) had a lot to say on this specific reddit board defending Hill to all the negative commenters. This user responded to the initial message with,

I just love how many feel the need to tell others how they have to experience the hate and blatant racism that has happened to them, that they should always experience it the same way - when many who are attacking them haven't even

experienced it themselves. That they have to see the humor in it, and always laugh about it, and it shouldn't affect them, their personality, or how they look at life.

My gosh. That is the whole point of what [Dan LeBatard Show], and what Dan has been fighting for with the show since the beginning. Take a look at it from the black or minority athlete's perspective, or how another person sees it. Try to see it from their point of view, or try to walk in their shoes for a minute to understand where they're coming from. That's kind of what's great about the South beach sessions podcast [sic].

And, if you listen to the old "His and Hers" podcast, she can be really entertaining and funny about sports, when she doesn't have to deal with the onslaught of racism when hosting a national TV program. As a person who listens to DLS, that should be pretty easy to get, let alone see. (EntertainmentPorpoise, 2018)

This user also defended Hill to a specific redditor who was negatively criticizing her within the reddit board,

Are you effing joking us??? Seriously? You have some big problems, man. If you can't see the blatant hate and racism a woman pursuing her profession would see, and how pushing back against that is just a normal human thing most would do, I feel very very sorry for you. How the heck do you listen to the show being so



blatantly blind? Your posts are getting more and more ridiculous.

(EntertainmentPorpoise, 2018)

One redditor even took to defending Spain within the “Jemele Hill Hate” board saying that Spain does not receive as much hate as Hill because she is white (Importerexporter85, 2018).

As we can see not all redditors are here to silence women, but there are many who help support the silencing and protect the boundaries of the male dominated sports industry. Spain, Hill, and Burke all receive criticism revolving around the topics they choose to speak on, their appearance, and their knowledge of the sports they speak on. The open criticism on these Reddit boards help reaffirm the male space, silence the women, and encourage others to keep protecting the sports industry from women who want to be a part of it.

Silencing is not the only theme evident in the reddit comments. Many redditors critiqued the women on the way they performed the gender leading to the women being disciplined. Spain, Hill, and Burke were each disciplined in relation to their appearance and personality. Many redditors had issues with how they looked or how they spoke on the sports shows or games they appeared in, and the redditors left many comments telling the women what they were doing wrong in their performance.

### **Disciplining Gender**

During the 2018-19 college basketball season, Oregon's Sabrina Ionescu made history with a triple-double after recording 17 points, 11 rebounds, and 13 assists in Oregon's win over Air Force. Ionescu's triple-double was the thirteenth of her career and made her the NCAA all-time leader in career triple-doubles for both men's and women's programs. Fans took to Twitter to express their thoughts on Ionescu's milestone. A Louisville fan said her record should not count because her triple-doubles did not come against "highly ranked teams" (Niesen, 2019). Since her record breaking game versus Air Force, Ionescu added five more triple-doubles to her career statistics by the end of the season. Following her last triple-double, fans took to social media and left comments on ESPN and other sports related profiles telling her to "go back to the kitchen" (Ellentuck, 2019). Ionescu did not let this bother her and responded with a post of her own saying, "Comment section doesn't phase me. They're talking about cooking?! Well I've been serving up triple-doubles lately" (Ellentuck, 2019).

These comments left about Ionescu show the extent to which some social media users will go to protect sports from women. Although these comments were made about a female athlete, women sports reporters receive comments, too. In this chapter, I will analyze the results collected from the reddit comments that support the theme of disciplining gender through socially constructed gender norms and patriarchy. Society has taught us from a young age what each gender is expected to do and how to perform our gender accurately. Society has also taught us how to protect gender norms through our use of language and behavior. The research I conducted and the data I gathered allows us to see how redditors or, as Bornstein (1994) would define them, "gender

defenders,” discipline these women based on their appearance, personality, and knowledge. The data show how redditors use of language supports the sports industry as a male dominated space that they defend. Doris Burke, Jemele Hill, and Sarah Spain’s appearance and personality are questioned to put focus on their inferiority to their male counterparts.

The unfortunate thing for women is they always have to work through the lens of being a woman before they can acknowledge anything else. Simone de Beauvoir (1989) states that a man would never have to write a book on the situation of being male or establish their gender before speaking, but a woman must always define herself as a woman and acknowledge her gender before furthering any discussion. In the sports industry, it seems unworthy of a comment when we see men sitting around the table discussing the game or current events. They are the invisible norm that we as a society accept as natural and expected. When we see a woman sitting with them and involved in the conversation, everything she says or does is judged against her gender first because she does not represent the invisible norm of men in sports. People are quick to make judgments on women when compared to men in the industry because they challenge everything we have been trained to believe. Beauvoir (1989) also states, “no one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility” (p. xxxi). Sports is a male dominated space. A place where many men feel immense amounts of power, which is maybe why women are criticized as much as they are. The people defending this space are anxious about losing the control and power they have in the field. Women are outsiders encroaching on the man’s domain. Individuals

who believe sports should continue to be a male dominated space discipline the women's gender as a defense tactic to keep them as minimally involved and respected as possible.

John M. Sloop (2004) has spent significant time looking at the rhetoric of mass media and public discourses to understand how the written and spoken word can influence how society sees and disciplines gender. Sloop (2004) draws upon the work of gender studies scholar Judith Butler when explaining how gender is disciplined. In her work, Butler argues, "gender is what we do rather than what we are," (Sloop, 2004, p. 6). This outlook suggests that gender is not something we are born with, but rather gender is how an individual identifies and expresses their gender to the world and how they are socially "marked" based on that expression of gender. Someone could have the body of a woman, but due to their identity and self-expression, she may display masculine characteristics, choosing to identify as what we are taught to believe as male. The same can be applied to a person with a male body. He can have the outward appearance and body parts to be classified as a man, but the way he chooses to express and identify himself will determine his gender.

Butler (1999) uses the word "normative" in her work to explain how gender is understood by our society. The first way normative is used is to "describe the mundane violence performed by certain kinds of gender ideals" (Butler, 1999, p. xx). In other words, normative is another way to say something abides by the norms that govern gender, which is very apparent in my study. Normative also pertains to ethical justification, such as "how it is established and what concrete consequences proceed therefrom" (Butler, 1999, p. xx). This understanding of the word "normative" can help us

understand how redditors and other critics of women in sports justify the gender norms in the industry and the consequences that result from the critique.

Beauvoir (1989) also discusses norms of both genders. She states that there were clear divisions of labor between both the genders. The man “hunts and fishes,” while the woman “remains in the home” to perform tasks such as making pottery, weaving, gardening and so on (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 54). Although these are older norms, society still expects certain activities from each gender. Many comments left online about women in sports tell them to go back in the kitchen or to stay in their lane. Comments like these show that a good portion of society believes women should still be homemakers, or at least stick to appropriate feminine roles. They may not be making pottery, but they are expected to be at home taking care of the family, doing the laundry, making dinner, and other household chores while the man goes out and earns a living. Many would argue that times are changing because more and more women are pursuing careers and breaking down those typical barriers, but women who choose to enter sports are still widely unaccepted. They face a lot of public criticism compared to other women in male-dominated spaces. The stereotypical norms are holding women back in this field, which allows redditors, Facebook users, Twitter users, and any other person in the world continue to discipline their gender.

I am applying Sloop’s (2004) critical eye to reddit boards and the comments made about Sarah Spain, Jemele Hill, and Doris Burke to understand some of the ways gender is disciplined when women disrupt gender norms and expectations. Sports have always been a male dominated space, whether or not the men are working or playing in them. From a young age, boys are encouraged to play catch with their dad, join little league

teams, or rough house with their friends and other men in their families. Girls, however, do not have the same luxuries. Halberstam's (1998) understanding of "tomboyism" can help explain why women are not accepted in sports past a certain age, unless the sports are perceived as feminine, like figure skating or gymnastics. Tomboyism is associated with the "'natural' desire for greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys" (p. 6). Halberstam (1989) explains that tomboyism is completely acceptable for girls, but only at certain ages. When girls are young tomboyism is seen as a sign of independence and self-motivation, but as they get older and reach puberty the young women must conform to their gender. By conforming to their gender, girls have to accept their roles and the norms of society by taking on their femininity. When they choose to continue with tomboyism, they generally represent female masculinity, which leads to comments referencing their sexual orientation and masculine features.

Expanding on this concept of tomboyism leads us to a discussion of female masculinity. Masculinity is something that many people believe is attached to the male bodies and cannot be separated just as it is widely believed that femininity is tied to female bodies, which can also not be separated. Halberstam (1998) introduces the idea of female masculinity, which shows us how "female masculinities are framed as rejected scraps of dominant masculinity" in order to make male masculinity to appear as the real thing (p. 1). Female masculinity is scrutinized because it challenges ideology and social structures that wed masculinity to maleness, power, and domination. Female masculinity is perceived as an attempt for woman to appear more like their male counterparts in search for more power that they will ultimately never get based on the norms of society. We can see this correlation of female masculinity and women in sports when looking at

Spain, Hill, and Burke. Their presence in sports, a male dominated space, challenges the idea that the male body and masculinity are wed together.

The lack of women playing sports leads to a lack of acceptance when they choose to work in sports. Many people feel that if a women did not play the sport, then they are not qualified to work in the sport. Spain, Hill, and Burke are a few of the women trying to make a name for themselves in this space and challenge the societal norms enforced by redditors. As I stated in the previous section of silencing, we hold unrealistic standards for women working in sports. To reiterate my argument, political reporters are not expected to have experience as elected officials. They do not have to hold a position in office or work on campaigns and so on before they are allowed to report on political matters. So why do we expect women to play in sports before they can work in this industry? Critiquing their knowledge is just another way for redditors to reinforce the sports industry as a male dominated space. Those that leave comments regarding their level of involvement and expertise seem to feel threatened that someone who is not a man can provide an insightful analysis of what is happening. Jumping back to this idea that women should have experience playing before working is a crutch for keeping sports free of a woman's opinion.

Halberstam (1998) also discusses tyranny of language, which can be defined as “a structure that fixes people and things in place artificially but securely” (p. 7). Tyranny of language is apparent in all the comments left by redditors that influence gender disciplining of the three women. These women challenge gender norms and hegemonic masculinity, and we can see how redditors use language to discipline Spain, Hill, and Burke in an attempt to keep the sports industry dominated by males.

### **Physical Appearance**

While collecting my data, it was clear that Spain, Hill, and Burke's gender was disciplined based on their appearance more than anything else in reddit comments. Redditors left comments observing the women's appearance and some even sexualized the women reporters. Spain faced comments critiquing her looks in a masculine way. Tele207 (2018) said, "she's got the bone structure of an elite roller derby athlete," while Jadtait (2019) said, "Spain looks like the older sister who puts you in a headlock and give you a noogie in front of your friends to prove she 'still has the biggest balls in the family.'" Another comment left on a Reddit board discussing Spain referenced the overall look of women in sports using words like "mystery-meat" and "Bulldyke" (Sarah9753, 2017).

The attacks and comments on Spain's body type are these users' way of disciplining gender within the sports industry. Roller derby athletes are usually very violent, tough, and muscular people and these characteristics are often used when describing men or masculinity. As mentioned earlier, Halberstam (1998) believes that most people have trouble separating the male body from masculinity, so when Tele207 (2018) compares Spain to a roller derby athlete, he or she is disciplining Spain based on the masculine qualities she is exhibiting. Although Halberstam and other scholars try to separate masculinity from the male body, there are still enforcers who believe they are tied together trying to defend this. Spain's strength in this male dominated space threatens the hegemonic masculinity of the sports industry.

The comments left about Spain relate to Sloop's (2012) study on track and field runner Caster Semenya. In July 2008, Semenya won a gold medal in the 800-meter race



as a 17-year-old South African representative in the Commonwealth Youth Games. The next year Semenya went on to win the 800-meter and 1,500-meter races. She also won the gold medal at the World Championships held in Berlin for the 800-meter race. Sloop (2012) studies how the media portrayed Semenya after news broke that she was undergoing gender testing to prove that she was allowed to compete as a woman in the woman races.

A few media outlets described Semenya to have “boyish looks” and “boyish features” (Sloop, 2012 p. 85). A few outlets criticized her appearance like saying, “Semenya is a tall, powerfully built athlete with a deep voice and facial hair. Her birth certificate states she is female but questions remain” (Sloop, 2012, p. 84). *Saturday Night Live* even poked fun at the whole situation saying that Semenya could not compete because “it’s rumored she’s suffering from an enlarged penis” (Sloop, 2012, p. 84). These are just a few of many comments made about Semenya’s gender in the media, but they are critiquing her based on her appearance. Semenya and Spain are both being evaluated on their “external and physical signifiers,” rather than their behavior to establish that they are not performing gender correctly (Sloop, 2012, p. 84). Since they are perceived as looking like a man they are not performing being a woman correctly, which is why they are disciplined.

The comments comparing Spain to a roller derby athlete and the older sister, who would exert her dominance over you in front of friends, emphasize the power she has. Redditors who believe that the sports industry is a male dominated space, like Tele207 and Jadtait, make these comments to remind Spain, and the other reporters, that they are women stepping out of their lane. The strength that these users are attributing to Spain

shows the threat to masculinity they feel is happening. In their eyes, a woman cannot have the strength and power of a man, or in these cases a roller derby athlete or someone who is capable of headlocks and noogies, which is why they used exaggerated language to emphasize women are not supposed to have these qualities. Just as in the case of Semenya. Also, Jadtait (2019) says, “she ‘still has the biggest balls in the family,’” which can be interpreted as emasculating a man and shames men for not living up to their expectations. Women do not have this body part, and saying Spain has the “biggest balls” gives her a trait of a man, which can be threatening in this redditor’s eyes. Not only does her presence in the sports industry threaten the male space, but her strength and appearing to have the “biggest balls” takes the threat a step further leading to her gender being disciplined by these redditors.

Many other comments were left on reddit to discipline Spain’s gender. Sarah9753 uses the words “mystery-meat” and “bulldyke” to describe Spain and other women sports reporters to say that the women are questionable because they do not necessarily represent the social construction of what it means to be a woman. This relates back to Halberstam’s (1989) concept and discussion on tomboyism. Tomboyism, as stated earlier, is acceptable by girls until they reach a certain age. By conforming to their gender, girls are expected to accept their roles and the norms of society by taking on their role as a woman. When they choose to continue with tomboyism, they generally represent female masculinity, which lead to comments referencing their sexual orientation and masculine features. Sarah9753’s (2017) use of the words “mystery-meat” and “bull-dyke” reference Spain’s tomboyish look and criticize her for her female masculinity. Sarah9753 is not comfortable with her breaking gender norms and the use of

this language helps assert the social structure that masculine men are favored over masculine women. The language reminds Spain and other redditors what is favorable and that Spain is performing her gender wrong.

Sloop's (2004) research also helps explain how Sarah9753's (2017) comment disciplines Spain's gender. When women classify themselves as a lesbian that identity ultimately links up with the role of a male instead of the idea of the masculinized female. Spain, and other women reporters, being called a dyke, or any other derogatory term by redditors, on these boards is a way to discipline them. These women identifying closer to men is seen as a threat because they are not men and this can be interpreted as a move for power in the male dominated space. Calling Spain and these other women lesbians is a way for redditors to once again use language to keep women out of positions of power in the sports industry.

On the opposite side of those comments are the ones left about Burke. Candidomaldonado (2018) commented, "God I find her extremely attractive," while Mighnightsbane04 (2016) left two comments. The first said, "I posted her as a WCW on Instagram and every couple of months I'll get a comment on Instagram from NBA fans like 'lol,'" while the second comment said, "I think a lot of us watch Doris and end up going 'wait why am I so turned on right now?'" Yepsawb (2016) left a similar comment saying "Damn she got that ass too. Got me feeling some kinda of way over here." TheChipiboy (2016) and AutoFrost (2016) took things a step further. TheChipiboy (2016) said, "She just makes me want to leave the nuts hanging' out, you get me?" while AutoFrost (2016) said, "as long as I have a face, Doris Burke has a place to sit." These comments go a step further than just the appearance of women sports reporters, as they

also sexualize them to help discipline their gender. Finneman and Jenkins (2018) conducted a recent study looking at how sexism plays a role in disciplining female TV broadcasters' gender. Viewers have expectations for the way broadcasters look on TV and believe there is a correct appearance they should uphold. Finneman and Jenkins (2018) found that comments left by the viewers reflected the assumptions and beliefs that help reinforce male-dominated norms in this industry. They wrote that "women too often face an additional layer of spite, insult and objectification," and also that "misogyny, racism, homophobia, etc., were not invented by the internet," but social media users uphold these cultural norms in communication via the internet (Finneman & Jenkins, 2018, p. 484; Sonderman, 2011; Shaw, 2014, p. 275).

Reddit allows redditors to openly communicate about these women reporters, in this case Burke, and objectify her based on her appearance. A study completed by Marwick (2013) also states that comments, like the ones left on reddit, treat women like sex objects, which helps reinforce "male entitlement and conventional stereotypes" (p.12). All three of these redditors objectify Burke based on her appearance. The comments insinuate that they feel Burke should look a certain way and that she upholds what is expected of a woman on television. AutoFrost's (2016) comment sexualizes Burke by mentioning a sexual act, therefore reducing her to a sex object that is mentioned in Marwick's (2013) study. Reminding Burke and the reddit community that she is a sex object, disciplines her gender. Reducing Burke to her body takes the focus off what she is there to do and reminds her and others that women are primarily sexual objects, confining her to her gender.

Unlike Spain and Burke, Hill faces a unique situation when being critiqued on her appearance. Most of the criticism surrounding the other two women is based solely on their bodies and the features they have, while the comments left about Hill cannot move past her race. Redditors are so preoccupied with the idea that a black woman is reporting on sports that they cannot comment on anything other than the color of her skin. Intersectionality is once again here to help understand why Hill's criticism is unique to her life. As stated previously, intersectionality is "the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women's employment experiences" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). Crenshaw (1991) also states that marginalized people are often those who are not a part of the dominant race and have social power structures working against them. Redditors are not only threatened by the fact that Hill is a woman, but they are also threatened by the fact that she is a vocal black woman. Hill has twice the battle that Spain and Hill have because she falls into two different minority categories. Beauvoir (1989) explained, women have to acknowledge their gender before having any further discussion about almost everything in life, and now Hill has to address everything as not only a woman, but also a black woman to which she will be compared to the invisible norm of the white male in the sports industry.

As mentioned earlier, Hill was fired for violating ESPN's social media policy when tweeting that President Trump is a white supremacist. She and ESPN faced heavy criticism from redditors on many different reddit boards. One board was created by a redditor for individual's to discuss Hill being paid while serving her suspension.

BasedMcCulloch (2017) stated,

In ESPN's defense (ew! I feel dirty saying that!), if a police officer were to roll up on some black 14-year-old and just empty a magazine into him, that cop would likely be suspended with pay during the investigation.

That said, I trust ESPN's investigation into Jemele Hill about as much as I'd trust [John] Podesta to baby-sit my toddler. We cannot let up: it's only by way of the viewer that Hill, that racist piece of shit, will be held accountable for her actions.

Before unpacking this comment, John Podesta is mentioned by BasedMcCulloch (2017). Podesta is a former political consultant who worked with both President Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. As far as what is known publicly about Podesta, there is no reason for anyone to jump to the conclusion of not wanting him to babysit their children. He has not had any allegations against him that would lead someone to think that children's well-being would be hindered. We can assume based on the nature of this comment, that BasedMcCulloch (2017) simply has a problem with the political party Podesta represents, which in fact, is the same party Hill represents thus leading to the comparison.

This is just one of many comments that Hill has received that focuses on her race over what she is talking about. Redditors are criticizing ESPN for paying her during her suspension, which leads to BasedMcCulloch (2017) comparing her suspension to a white police officer being suspended with pay for shooting and killing a black teenager. BasedMcCulloch (2017) also calls Hill a "racist piece of shit," which also puts focus on her race. Hill cannot be racist because she is the oppressed race, but BasedMcCulloch is

disciplining Hill as a black woman by putting the focus on who she is as a black woman. Racial thinking is an attitude or ideology that “implies racial superiority/inferiority” (Cisneros & Nakayama, 2015, p. 110). George M. Fredrickson (2002) takes the definition a step further stating that racism “either directly sustains or proposes to establish a racial order, a permanent group hierarchy that is believed to reflect the laws of nature or the decrees of god (p. 6). Hill cannot be racist because she is part of the oppressed race and the dominant race in America is white. She cannot make comments about President Trump or the national anthem protests across sports without her facing criticism based on the color of her skin and gender. The socialized power structure of the sports industry supports white men as the invisible ideal, so Hill is constantly at battle with being part of the marginalized groups. She is constantly being scrutinized for being a woman but also has the outward difference of skin color. Being black, gives her an extra battle to face that Spain and Burke do not have to deal with.

### **Personality**

In addition to their appearances, Spain, Hill, and Burke’s gender is disciplined by critiquing their personality and characteristics they display. Women are often thought to have positive feminine characteristics such as being caring, compassionate, sympathetic, sensitive, while qualities like being a drama-queen, insecure, hysterical, complaining, and indecisive are frowned upon. Negative masculine characteristics according to Sloop (2004) can be aggressiveness, dominance, egotistical, violent, and argumentative, while authoritative, certain, protective, and active can be seen as the positives. These masculine characteristics sound like they assign the idea of power to men, which feeds into

patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. When Spain, Hill, and Burke exhibit these masculine characteristics, redditors are quick to defend male spaces and discipline their gender.

Of the three women, Spain received the most comments on reddit boards critiquing her personality. Nrallis27 (2017) said that “what rubs me the wrong way is when she acts like she has it completely figured out and the rest of us are not on her level,” while Coveyovey (2017) uses the words “mean-spirited” and “authoritarian attitude” to describe Spain. DoingbusinessPR (2017) compared Spain to Hillary Clinton coming to her defense and commented that most people hate Spain because “the idea of an assertive, confident woman is threatening to their latent, sub-conscious view of how women should carry themselves.” Nrallis27 (2017) and Coveyovey (2017) used stereotypical masculine terms to describe Spain. She speaks her mind and comes off as a know-it-all, and she is assertive and blunt with her delivery, often coming across as mean, which are all masculine characteristics. It is only perceived as mean when a woman act this way. When a man is mean people perceived it as power. In the lens of female masculinity, these reddit users feel threatened because she is searching for power by exhibiting these characteristics. They use these words to attack her and remind readers that sports in a male dominated space and women trying to act masculine is not acceptable.

Spain was not the only woman to receive critique of her personality. Obie-two (2018) compared Hill to another ESPN host, Mina Kimes, which I did not research for this project, but I think the comment is relevant to this study. Kimes joined ESPN in 2014 and co-hosts a weekly radio talk show. She also appears as a guest host across multiple



ESPN shows much like Spain, which is why the user choses to compare the two women. Obie-two (2018) commented, “We love Mina because she is brilliant, hilarious, thoughtful, sharp and gives unique perspective. Jemele is none of those things.” Giving one woman sports reporter the praise for being thoughtful and stating that Hill is not thoughtful or any of the other characteristics described in the comment is a way for this redditor to discipline her gender. I would consider thoughtful as a feminine trait that society expects women to have. Thoughtful means someone displays care and saying that Hill is not thoughtful disciplines her because she is not acting in a way that is expected of her gender. Obie-two (2018) is saying Hill needs to be more of these things because she is not accurately representing what a woman should.

What I find interesting about these comments left by Nrallis27 (2017), Coveyovey (2017), and Obie-two (2018) is that they are chastising Spain for displaying too many masculine characteristics and chastising Hill for not displaying enough feminine characteristics in a male dominated space. This is like a catch-22 for these women. They simply cannot win in the eyes of the redditors. There is no happy medium for these women when it comes to displaying masculine versus feminine characteristics because redditors will find away to critique their levels of masculinity and femininity, which ultimately leads to disciplining their gender. If they are too masculine as a woman, they are critiqued, but if they are too feminine then they just get reduced to their gender as we have seen through the comments thus far. These redditors are so blatantly threatened by female masculinity that they discipline Spain’s gender through the comments they left, criticizing her attempt at embodying masculinity and trying to gain power. Hill also threatens the redditors because she is not displaying enough feminine characteristics,

such as thoughtfulness, which shows how gender is also being disciplined based on personality. Hill's lack of femininity means she is not acting enough like her gender is supposed to be acting. By being more thoughtful, Hill will be acting more like a woman and redditors will feel that the sports industry is less threatened by a woman.

The comments that Spain and Hill receive can also be explained by the idea of emotional labor. Emotional labor can be defined as the process of managing feelings, whether inducing or suppressing, in order to fulfill the requirements of a job. Hopper and Huxford (2015) argue Hochschild's (2003) original argument and state, "individuals striving to enhance, fake, or suppress their emotions based on the display rules or expectations for emotional expression set by their organization or vocation" (p. 26). People engage in emotional labor when they believe they have to act in a certain way at a job. Durr and Harvey Wingfield (2001) expand on this basic understanding of emotional labor and focus primarily on women performing emotional labor. They state, "doing emotional labor, women are often expected to recreate gender appropriate feelings" (p. 559). Durr and Harvey Wingfield (2011) use the examples of women paralegals are supposed to make men attorneys feel cared for, while male bill collectors are to use fear and intimidation. This can translate to Spain and Hill exceptionally well. The redditors do not like them speaking about topics that do not follow the norms of what women should be talking about. If Spain and Hill want to work in sports, they should be more nurturing and ask questions such as "how do you feel after that big win?" or "what inspired you to play the way you did tonight?" When the two of them talk about the logistics or technicalities of sports redditors view this as them performing their gender wrong. Those

questions should be left for the men to ask, while Spain and Hill should focus on displaying the nurturing qualities we expect from women.

Durr and Harvey Wingfield's (2011) research also takes the analysis of emotional labor a step further by looking at women of color and emotional labor. We often hear people stereotype a black woman who puts her foot down as a "crazy black woman," and the stereotype makes emotional labor that much harder for women of color. The authors come to a few conclusions. The first being black women must "repackage themselves in ways that are more palatable to their white co-workers" (Durr & Harvey Wingfield, 2011, p. 564). "Repackaging" leads to the black women having to be very careful in self-presentation. They always have to be self-aware of how they are coming off to their co-workers. Being direct and speaking your mind is frowned upon because it can lead to being disciplined on the basis of their gender, which we have already seen happen in the reddit comments. Hill is very outspoken and widely criticized for being this way. She does not "repackage" herself to please her white co-workers or sports fans. In fact, as racial tensions rise in sports, Hill challenges her critics even more. We have seen how her lack of engaging in emotional labor has led to redditors silencing her in the previous chapter. The silencing and critique of how she presents herself disciplines her gender. Until she stops defying these norms, Hill will constantly battle against those who are trying to keep her in her place.

Durr and Harvey Wingfield (2011) also used an example of a black professor who said,

I've dealt with people who were so dismissive, and you knew race was at the core of it. But I would have to grin and bear it, because I needed to work... very rarely do you see me expressing my true feelings, and when I do, my reaction tells me it scares the hell out of [my white colleagues]. (p. 566)

The professor went on to also say that reacting in a way that is not expected can directly impact the individual's career. Hill helps challenge these gender norms of emotional labor. She does not hold back, she airs her opinion, and she defends herself when she feels attacked for sharing her views. For example, when Hill called Trump a white supremacist and received criticism, she responded "I thought I was saying water was wet" (Bogage, 2018). Hill did not retract her statement or try to apologize. She stood by what she said and did not let the public pressure her into apologizing. But she did pay for not managing her emotion in a respectful way towards her white colleagues; she was fired from her position at ESPN. Redditors help discipline her gender by criticizing her and the emotions she displays on national television and social media on reddit boards. ESPN also disciplined her gender by suspending her and firing her. Although she did break the organization's social media policy, ESPN still expected her to manage her emotions in a way that was in line with her gender.

Burke is interesting when compared to Spain and Hill because the only comments she received relating to personality was the tone of her voice. DeMVP\_DeMar (2018) commented, "her voice her commentating is boring and really seems to lack energy," while Bentumbo (2018) says, "people overrate her cause she's a woman in a profession dominated by males, and people just go with the hivemind [sic]. Her insight isn't that

great and her voice perpetually sounds like it's slightly nasally.” The only thing that Burke is receiving criticism on in relation to her personality is a boring voice, which I think is subjective to every person. We are all going to have different opinions on the way certain people speak, but women seem to receive more criticism than men. People often ask why a woman’s voice is so high pitched or say that her voice is so deep it sounds like a man. We almost never hear someone criticize a man on the sound or tone of their voice. That being said, however, I do think there is something of value from observing Burke’s lack of critique. We can interpret this as Burke’s well-managed emotional labor. A major part of Burke’s job is sideline reporting and speaking one-on-one with coaches and players. Her job makes things personal. She may not ask questions about how they are feeling because she does have a strong knowledge of the game and will ask those technical questions, but the one-on-one interviews brings a personal aspect to her job. This can be viewed as nurturing or following the gendered norms because Burke spends time focusing and caring about one person and conversation at a time. Burke asks questions directly relating to the game, which supports her job duties and satisfies critics who may be watching to catch her making a mistake. But Burke is also making the interview personal by talking to and caring for one person at a time, which upholds gender norms of what women should do.

Redditors did not have much to say about Burke like they did Spain and Hill, but despite the critique Spain and Hill had a few redditors come to their defense. We can see that DoingbusinessPR (2017) is actually coming to Spain’s defense in his comment earlier comparing Spain to Hillary Clinton by saying people are threatened by an assertive and confident woman in a man’s space. DoingbusinessPR (2017) helps us see

that women cannot win in the sports industry just like they cannot win in other male-dominated areas, such as politics. It is a catch-22, and Spain, Hill, and other women reporters cannot escape the constant criticism that will result from any form of masculinity or femininity they represent in sports. Nrallis (2017) and Coveyovey (2017), along with many other redditors and critics, defend this male space by disciplining women's gender through the personality characteristics they represent, but reaffirm that the usual feminine characteristics are not welcome either and women should just stay out of the sports industry.

### **Conclusion**

From the selected comments discussed in this chapter, we can see how many redditors discipline the gender of women sports reporters. Similar to the story of Oregon's Ionescu, Spain, Hill, and Burke found success for themselves in the sports industry and keep challenging the normative gender and behavior of women in sports. Redditors will criticize their appearance and personality and show how the women are not performing their gender properly. Most of the redditors, as well as other sports fans, have trouble separating masculinity from the male body, which leads to Spain, Hill, and Burke struggling to fit into this space. They do not perform their gender correctly and participate in a space they were supposed leave once puberty was reached. Disciplining their gender is just another way in addition to silencing that redditors use to keep women "in their lane" and defend the sports industry as a male dominated space.

### Conclusion

Through my data and analysis, we can see that reddit allows its users to share their opinions of women working in sports. The majority of redditors' comments support the idea of the sports industry as a male space. The comments silence Spain, Hill, and Burke in a variety of ways. All three women are silenced when speaking on politics and sports. In a basic count of comments it is evident that redditors take issue with comments about politics and sports. Spain received very few comments when talking about the NFL and Colin Kaepernick, but her opinion was still ignored by redditors, while Sarah9753 (2017) silenced her by name-calling and vulgar language. Hill received more comments than either of the other reporters, and her race and gender both played a role. Several redditors focused on her gender and minority race, silencing her opinion because of these two identity features. By focusing on her experience as a black woman, she was silenced by the redditors. Burke even takes things a step further than the other two women by silencing herself. If she does not comment on political issues, she gives redditors no chance to silence her.

These three women were also silenced based on their appearance. Spain was accused of being a "mystery-meat bulldyke" and a "bixnood Barbie" (Sara9753, 2017). These phrases shift the focus from what she is speaking about to her outward appearance in order to silence her voice. If redditors focus on her appearance, then we are encouraged to discount what she is discussing. For Hill, everything comes back to her race. She faces criticism because she is black. Many redditors comment that she belongs on BET or writing for blogs, which silences her opinions. Redditors believe she is only good for these two genres because of her gender and race helping to silence her voice on

the national platform of sports media. Burke was also silenced because of her appearance, but most of the comments gave her credit in some way. Burke received praise, but redditors did not want to give her too much credit in this male space, so they would silence her by bring her appearance into the discussion. Although she received praise, redditors help remind us that she is still a woman and the focus should be on something other than what she is saying.

Spain, Hill, and Burke are also silenced based on their level of knowledge. Spain and Hill each lack athletic experience in a lot of the sports that they cover. They did not play any of the major sports, football, basketball, baseball, or hockey. Redditors silence them based on their lack of expertise; whereas Burke is praised for her knowledge because of the success she had playing college basketball. Redditors feel she is better at her job than the other two women because of her experience playing sports, which is rather unfair to women trying to work in the sports industry. As I noted earlier, there is no expectation that political journalists will have experience in office, and they are allowed to report without judgment. Women in sports are held to a standard that it may be impossible to achieve with the limitations of sports that women are allowed to play in college and professionally.

Silencing ties in with how redditors discipline gender in sports. Spain, Hill, and Burke all received critique by redditors that focuses on their appearance. Redditors tear Spain apart because of her masculine features and the strength she shows, both of which challenge the idea that masculinity is tied to the male body. She has strong features that threaten the redditors who believe that women are supposed to be pretty and weak. Hill's comments, once again, always relate back to her race. She cannot escape being a black



women, which is what redditors are fixated upon. They cannot even focus on whether they find her attractive because their attention goes no further than the color of her skin. A commonality among the comments about Burke was that she was being sexualized and reduced to her body. Redditors are reminding the public that women will always be reduced to their bodies.

These reporters are also disciplined based on the stereotypical norms it is expected each gender to uphold. When men and women stray from these expectations, they will face criticism for their failure to properly perform gender. Redditors discipline Spain because she represents female masculinity. She is strong and argumentative. She stands her ground. She is not passive like women are expected to be, so when she challenges these stereotypes, redditors feel the need to tell her how she is neglecting the correct performance of being a woman. Hill receives much of the same criticism. She does not represent the typical norms of a woman. She challenges these norms, just like Spain, taking on a dominating personality. Spain and Hill both threaten the stereotypical norms. Burke, on the other hand, does not receive as much critique. Yes, she does work in this male space, but she has a job allowing her to be more personable and engage in one-on-one dialogue with sports figures. Her personalized interviews with the players and coaches are perceived as nurturing and caring, which may be one of the reasons she is praised more than the other women.

Reddit's feature of anonymous commenting has allowed sports fans around the world to defend sports as a male space without any consequences. They never face real backlash. Other redditors can defend women in sports, but the perks of being anonymous

is no one knows who is really behind that computer screen. We get the honest opinions of users daily as they continue to defend this male space and keep women in their lane.

### **Limitations**

Although this study has broken ground in the space of reddit and understanding how redditors help reinforce the sports industry as a male dominated space, there are limitations. One limitation of this study is that it focused only on reddit. Sports fans are active across all platforms of social media, whether it is Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. This study does not analyze the comments left on those sites, so we do not know if the themes of silencing and disciplining gender are apparent in those comments.

A second limitation is the choice of women sports reporters I concentrated on for this study. There are plenty more women working in sports on all different levels. Spain, Hill, and Burke are all nationally known reporters. Reporters from smaller markets, such as local news stations, may not receive as much criticism or they very well may receive more criticism. Since this study used national reporters, we cannot assume that women reporters in other markets and on smaller levels receive the same criticism.

The final limitation of this study is that the comments analyzed were strictly on women reporters. A comparison of comments left about men reporters versus women reporters in the industry have the potential to illustrate the inequality even more than what I have already done. That being said, focusing on just the women I think was the first step to seeing the discrimination of women in this field.

### **Implications**

Through this study, we can see that there is still a huge issue with accepting women's involvement in sports, specifically for those working in sports media. Spain, Hill, and Burke are just a few of the reporters that receive criticism because they are women in a male dominated space. After completing this study, I think there are a few steps we can take to begin erasing this idea of sports being for men only.

The first thing we need to do is continue making strides towards gender neutrality. We need to stop being so fixated on what little girls should wear or the toys that girls and boys are allowed to play with. It is perfectly okay for a girl to wear pink, but we also should not force them into it or criticize them for wearing blue. These stereotypical actions and norms need to be erased. If we stop seeing the "proper" way to perform gender at such a young age, equality at older ages will be easier to accomplish. Target, the department store, has done a great job with blurring the lines between girls and boys. They combined the toy department and no longer use the signs "girl toys" and "boy toys," which helps younger kids learn that it is okay to play with whatever they desire (Hains, 2015). Starting this at a young age is great, but it cannot stop.

We need to continue this education as the kids grow. When they get to middle school and high school, I think they should be required to take classes that focus upon intersectionality and diversity issues. We cannot expect things to change if we do not expose people to things that may make them uncomfortable. Education is the key to narrowing the gap. We can emphasize that women are just as capable as men in these roles and show the success women have had. Sharing studies on inequalities can also help because, in all honesty, many men do not even realize how privileged they are. Showing

the privilege they have and the struggles that women face can help open a lot of eyes and perhaps spark a change of getting more people behind the fight for equality.

Education focusing on social media is also needed. Social media is booming, and younger generations are surrounded by it. We do not have the proper education about the consequences people can face by using the internet as often as they do. Implementing social media education courses in schools can help educate today's younger generation on how their words online enforce stereotypes and hurt the progress towards gender equality. If we help educate the people who are going to be using these sites, then we can take steps towards erasing comments degrading women in all areas, including sports.

In addition to education, we need women in these roles, like Spain, Hill, and Burke, to continue to defy norms and expectations. The more we have powerful women reporters making a name for themselves and their voices heard, then the less unusual it will seem. The more we see it then the more normal it becomes, which helps society rethink the norms that are enforced. As more women come into this male space, we will come to think of women in sports as more common and this may lead to more social acceptance of women in these roles. It will not be out of the ordinary to see three or four women included on a show or a broadcast because we will respect their opinions more as norms are continuously challenged.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

As stated briefly in my implications, I think a comparison between comments left about men reporters and women reporters will really help illustrate the gap in acceptance. We see how women are treated in my study, but the comparison will offer a more in-

depth understanding of the challenges that women still face. We may even be surprised to see that the gap is narrowing. For example, I discussed Hill and Schilling both being suspended from ESPN for violations of their social media policy. In this comparison, we were able to see that Schilling actually faced harsher suspensions than Hill following the violations. Even though both violated the same rule on multiple occasions and were eventually fired, Hill faced shorter suspensions and not as much criticism as Schilling. By doing a study comparing comments of men and women reporters, we may actually be surprised to see men facing large amounts of criticism as well.

Also relating back to the implications, looking at smaller markets or women reporters that are not as widely known on a national scale would be an interesting study. I feel like these women may receive more criticism because they are not in the “big leagues.” Redditors or general sports fans may feel like they are not good enough at what they do to be working for a bigger organization like ESPN, so then by default their opinions are not accepted. These are all assumptions, but I feel based on the criticism the women on the national platform received, women on smaller platforms would receive more because they are not anywhere close to measuring up to the women who already take a lot of heat.

Another suggestion would be to compare Hill to her black male counterparts. We got a glimpse at how Hill is treated by redditors because of her race, but I think seeing how redditors critique black men in sports reporting would be an interesting expansion on this study. Stephen A. Smith is a well-known sports personality with ESPN who works on many of their talk shows, and he is known for being outspoken on certain issues just like Hill. It would be interesting to see how Smith is treated by redditors when talking

about political issues in sports in comparison to the comments left about Hill. Her gender plays a big role in her critique, but with both of these reporters being black, we would be able to see if their race plays a bigger role in criticism rather than gender.

### **Final Thoughts**

It is very obvious that the sports industry is still a male dominated space with fans working across the internet, especially reddit, to help keep those lines defined and keep women in their place. Spain, Hill, and Burke are just a few of the women reporters that face criticism used to silence them and discipline their gender. With education to help erase these gendered stereotypes and to show the implications of social media, we can hope to see the gender gap close. If these three women, and others working in the industry, can continue to challenge the norms on their public stage, then women will be more widely accepted in the industry. Redditors and other sports fans may not feel the need to defend the male space as we erase the norm of sports being for men only.

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