

LANGUAGE ANALYSIS OF WNBA AND NBA DRAFT
NEWS COVERAGE FROM 2001-2021

by

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A 2015 study found that the coverage of women’s sport is at its lowest point in history (Cooky, “Women Play Sport, But Not on TV”). A particularly egregious discrepancy occurs in basketball, where WNBA games are rarely televised and placed on secondary networks while NBA games are voraciously promoted. While some say coverage naturally gravitates toward what viewers are interested in, further analysis shows that journalistic coverage of women’s basketball reflects existing societal biases in the ways it centers men. Printed coverage of a sampling of 10 of the 22 televised WNBA and NBA drafts to date shows journalistic coverage of the WNBA draft differs from journalistic coverage of the NBA draft in its quantity and language. Articles on the WNBA draft are shorter than those on the NBA draft, include gender markers, and use descriptors in line with hegemonic femininity. The majority of articles are written by men, and this is not improving over time. As we better understand these disparities in news coverage, we can focus efforts to make coverage more equitable in tandem with existing efforts to improve wages and highlight the great players in the WNBA.

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I would like to thank my parents and brothers for sparking my interest in basketball and cheering me on endlessly. I would like to thank my girlfriend, Maisie, for interrupting my thesis work with an encouraging hug, and my friends for being the "life" part of my work/life balance. I would also like to thank my former teammates and all the women's basketball players I've seen over the years for making basketball one of the great joys of my life, and always proving that women athletes deserve great things.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Background	7
The NBA and the WNBA	7
Basketball Drafts	8
Chapter 2: Literature Review	11
Orthodox gender understanding	11
The subjugation of women in sport	11
Media's contribution to subjugation	12
The role of basketball	13
Societal implications	14
Where my research sits	15
Chapter 3: Methods	16
Chapter 4: Results and Discussion	20
Length and authorship	20
All years: 2001-2021	20
2001-2004	23
2008, 2011, 2012	25
2018, 2020, 2021	27
Gender marking	30
Hierarchy of naming	32
The ratio of praise to criticism / Type of praise / Character portraits	35
Overall	35
2003	37
2008	40
2021	42
Chapter 5: Conclusions	45
Bibliography	47

List of Figures

Figure 1: Genders of authors of (a) NBA articles and (b) WNBA articles	21
Figure 2: Average length of all articles year by year in a scatterplot	22
Figure 3: Median length of all articles year by year in a scatterplot	23
Figure 4: Histogram of article lengths from 2001-2004	24
Figure 5: Stacked bar chart of author genders from 2001-2004	25
Figure 6: Histogram of articles lengths for 2008, 2011, 2012	26
Figure 7: Stacked bar chart of author genders for 2008, 2011, 2012	27
Figure 8: Histogram of article lengths for 2018, 2020, 2021	28
Figure 9: Stacked bar chart of author genders for 2018, 2020, 2021	29
Figure 10: Number of gender markers by year	31
Figure 11: Average number of gender markers per article	32
Figure 12: Number of full names by year	34
Figure 13: Number of full names per article per year	35

List of Tables

Table 1: Top draft picks in sampled years.

17

Chapter 1: Background

The NBA and the WNBA

The Federation of International Basketball Associations (FIBA) estimates that 450 million people play basketball worldwide. The sport is accessible and widely beloved. James Naismith invented basketball in 1891 and the first professional league, the National Basketball League, emerged eight years later (Toole). It only lasted five years but reemerged in 1937 after decades of small local leagues running professional men's basketball (Toole). In 1949, the National Basketball League and the Basketball Association of America, which was founded in 1946, merged to create the National Basketball Association (Toole). The NBA remains the powerhouse of professional men's basketball today.

Though women have played basketball recreationally since its invention, women's professional basketball leagues emerged later than men's. The Ladies Professional Basketball Association and the Women's Professional Basketball League were the first professional women's leagues, emerging in the late 1970s, but they struggled to stay afloat (Edelman and Harrison 4). The leagues offered high salaries, but lacked sponsorship revenues, investment income, and television contracts (4). Both leagues disbanded in 1981, and America was without a professional women's basketball league for nine years thereafter (5). Several smaller leagues emerged in the 1990s, but none were able to stick until Steve Hams formed the American Basketball League (ABL) in 1995 (5). The ABL quickly met competition when the NBA commissioner David Stern announced that the NBA would create a women's league of their own called the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), which included a five-

year contract with NBC (5). Both leagues found initial success and existed in tandem for a few years, with the ABL season in the winter and the WNBA season in the summer (7). But the WNBA had no interest in coexisting, and its deeper pockets beat out ABL by 1998 (7). Both the ABL and the WNBA initially prevented their teams from drafting players with college eligibility, and the WNBA's eligibility rules still promote players to college for all four years of their NCAA eligibility (10).

In 1972, sex discrimination was explicitly prohibited in public programs through Title XI, which reads: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." Title XI had great impact, especially on opportunities in public schools, including secondary education institutions. Though the NBA and the WNBA are private, they pull players from these schools, so it is important to consider Title XI's role in this history.

Basketball Drafts

In professional basketball, a draft is a yearly event in which teams select members for the upcoming season. The pool of players comes from young American athletes, typically in college, as well as international athletes. The structure and rules of the draft differ between the WNBA and the NBA and have changed over time. Across both leagues, the current general structure is that each team selects one player per round. The WNBA draft has three rounds, and the NBA draft has two. The order in which the teams select players is determined by their success the previous year, with less successful teams making selections earlier. There are some mechanisms in place,

like a draft lottery, to ensure teams don't lose on purpose to get better picks. Players who are interested in playing professionally but are not picked in the draft can try out later.

There are a few notable differences between the WNBA draft and the NBA draft structurally, which will be important to keep in mind as I examine their coverage. First, the WNBA has 12 teams total while the NBA has 30. The NBA also has more players per team: NBA teams are allowed 15 players at maximum while WNBA teams are allowed a minimum of 11 and a maximum of 12. The eligibility requirements for draft selectees are also different. The WNBA requires domestic players to be at least 22 years old with no college eligibility left, or, if they have remaining eligibility, they must renounce it. This is a remnant of early professional women's basketball leagues that encouraged college education. International players must be 20. The NBA's rules are opposite. It requires domestic players to be 19 years old and "more than a year removed from high school," while international players must be 22 ("NBA Frequently Asked Questions").

How teams select players is more complicated than these structures suggest because a team can trade one of their players for another team's player(s), future draft pick(s), money, or some combination of the three. That's why one team might make three picks in a round and another team might make zero. The draft is a point of interest for understanding the role of gender in basketball coverage because it is a social event that is highly speculative. Journalistic coverage of a draft is different from journalistic coverage of games. Where a journalist might describe an athlete's performance in an article about a championship game, a journalist describes an athlete based on all past

performances, both in and out of basketball, when discussing a draft. This makes the coverage a gold mine for understanding how WNBA athletes and NBA athletes are viewed in society.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Orthodox gender understanding

The dominant gender ideology in American sports as defined by Coakley consists of three tenets: human beings are either male or female; heterosexuality is the foundation for human reproduction — other expressions of sexual feelings, thoughts, and actions are seen as unnatural, abnormal, deviant, or immoral; and men are physically stronger and more rational than women and therefore more naturally suited to possess power and assume leadership positions (Coakley 180). While these tenets are rejected by some of today's social groups and in scientific understandings of gender, they have been instrumental to the formation of social systems, including sport. This thesis will refer to this ideology as "orthodox," after Coakley, to indicate both antiquity and immutability. Simone de Beauvoir says, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," (de Beauvoir 283). For this paper, gender as social construct is crucial. Also crucial is the understanding of sport as a product of social relations and contributor to them.

The subjugation of women in sport

Historically, men developed sport in the mid nineteenth century with the understanding that sports would be men's territory and women would be too weak and frail to handle physical activity (Coakley 184). Sport has evolved but remains male-dominated ("male" characteristics are desirable for sporting success), male-identified (what men value is assumed to be valued by all mankind, women's sports must be qualified), and male centered (men's lives are the center of attention, women are rarely

recognized), (Coakley 184-185). When women excel in sport, it is attributed to masculine characteristics that set them apart from other women (185). This is true in the media but also in the minds of players and viewers.

Media's contribution to subjugation

Cooky writes, “a commonsense assumption is that the lack of news media coverage is primarily the result of audience demand,” but, it is just as likely that the lack of news media coverage influence’s the social appetite for information about sports (Cooky, “Women Play Sport, But Not on TV” 204). The way the news media covers sport is greatly disparate between men’s and women’s sport, and this shapes an audience’s interest (204). Between 1989 and 2019, the amount of coverage of women’s sports increased from approximately 5% in 1989 to almost 9% in 1999, but the coverage was often sexually objectifying, and the amount of coverage decreased following 1999 (205). The WNBA was founded in 1996 and included a contract with NBC, one of the outlets included in these findings. Scholars have found the same patterns of objectification and trivialization when studying coverage of NCAA tournaments, Sports Illustrated magazines, and ESPN’s SportsCenter. White men are overrepresented in news production roles, and especially sports news roles, which contributes to these problems of framing and attention (207). Cooky followed up on these findings in 2019 as part of the broad “Gender in Televised Sports Study” and found no major changes. From 1989 to 2019, “80% of the televised sports news and highlights shows we watched for this study included zero stories on women’s sports,” (Cooky, “One and Done” 348).

The role of basketball

In the early 20th century, women made some strides in claiming space in the sports world. The respected women's sports, however, were individual and not considered sports where masculine traits would be desirable, anyway, like figure skating, gymnastics, and other "grace and beauty sports," (Coakley 185). Outside of these sports, women earned some respect in tennis and track, but dainty womanhood was still important. Women's basketball, on the other hand, has historically been labeled "unladylike," (186). In any case, praise in women's sport is related to orthodox masculinity — women are either praised for graceful, beautiful womanhood or proximity to manhood.

The "big three" of sports coverage are men's football with 17% of coverage, men's baseball with 19% of coverage, and men's basketball with 39% of coverage (Cooky, "One and Done" 354). Of these three, basketball is the only one with an explicitly named women's counterpart. Women's basketball, by comparison, receives 2% of coverage (354). Coverage of the NBA greatly outpaces coverage of the WNBA. In July 2009, SportsCenter, KABC, KNBC, and KCBS offered a combined eight stories on the WNBA for a total of 5.5 hours of coverage (Cooky, "Women Play Sport, But Not on TV" 213). On the same networks in July 2009, the NBA received a total of 81 stories for 50.25 hours (213). This discrepancy came even though the WNBA was in season and the NBA was not. In July 2019, the coverage discrepancy was even worse, timewise. The WNBA received nine stories for 4.5 hours of coverage while the NBA received 72 stories for 102 hours of coverage (Cooky, "One and Done" 355). Cooky claims that, especially in recent years, televised coverage of women's sports is "one and

done:” one short story about women’s sports surrounded by several longer stories about men’s sports (366).

Societal implications

Today, “sports remain one of the only activities in contemporary liberal cultures in which sex segregation is expected, accepted, and mandatory in nearly all competitive events” (Coakley 189). This segregation is expected, accepted, and mandatory in part because of the understanding that “representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth” (de Beauvoir 162). Because sport has been constructed and maintained not just by men themselves but by systems of orthodox masculinity, gender roles are largely accepted as absolute truth.

Elizabeth A. Daniels has conducted studies on how young girls respond to representations of women athletes and how young boys respond, showing them images of athletes in performance settings and sexualized settings, as well as images of sexualized models. They found, “Girls and women attributed a range of instrumental characteristics to the performance athletes including determination, focus, pursuit of a goal, and commitment to one's passion,” but these attributions were almost never expressed in response to sexualized images, (Daniels, “Sexy versus Strong” 87). Young girls noted that women performance athletes were succeeding in challenging orthodox masculinity and found them inspirational (87). They also reflected positively on themselves, their body images, and their interests after viewing performance athletes, but responded oppositely to sexualized images (87). Young boys commented more on a woman’s appearance when viewing sexualized images and more on “play-by-play”

statements about what the athlete was doing when viewing performance athletes (Daniels, “Sexy versus Strong” 574). In reflecting on themselves, though, young boys responded mostly positively regardless of the imagery (575). These findings suggest the ways that sport coverage influences gender understandings, including understandings of the self. Sarah Wolter found that espnW.com primarily presents women as what Daniels would call “performance athletes,” and that the photographs of women on the site are not significantly different from photographs of men on espn.com (Wolter 186). Wolter says, “espnW represents the potential for digital media to more positively portray female athletes than traditional media outlets” (187).

Where my research sits

My study fills in gaps of research on women’s basketball and applies a standard framework of understanding. Longitudinal reviews of women’s sports media like Cooky’s have not considered the framework and labeling used by Halbert and Latimer (described in the Methods section) nor have they placed particular focus on women’s basketball. Because women’s basketball receives the most coverage of any women’s sport, it is a particularly important area to delve into. As previously mentioned, the NBA and WNBA drafts are a great opportunity to understand how women’s basketball players are seen socially as compared to men’s basketball players.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study will analyze a sampling of 10 years of draft coverage since the WNBA draft was first televised in 2001. While I am analyzing news coverage circulated online and in print, I am starting the year it was televised because television brought drafts into social focus and expanded the amount of coverage media outlets provided. The sample years were selected based on a few factors. The first four years of the WNBA draft were sampled to get a solid understanding of the early coverage. Early coverage may vary more from year to year as the style of coverage was established. I also considered the historic success of the top overall draft picks. With the hindsight that many of these players went on to become the face of their respective leagues, how they are covered in their early careers has less to do with innate athletic ability than the viewpoints of the commentators. The sampling of years with their corresponding top draft pick is listed below.

Year	First overall WNBA	First overall NBA
2001	Lauren Jackson	Kwame Brown
2002	Sue Bird	Yao Ming
2003	LaToya Thomas	Lebron James
2004	Diana Taurasi	Dwight Howard
2008	Candace Parker	Derrick Rose
2011	Maya Moore	Kyrie Irving
2012	Nnemkadi Ogwumike	Anthony Davis
2018	A’ja Wilson	Deandre Ayton

2020	Sabrina Ionescu	Anthony Edwards
2021	Charli Collier	Cade Cunningham

Table 1: Top draft picks in sampled years.

This table shows the names of the players selected first overall in the WNBA draft and the NBA draft for the 10 years studied in this paper.

I found news coverage using NexisUni, a search engine with archives of news articles, company documents, legal documents, and people. I looked up the date of the televised draft for each league in each year and used the date range filter in NexisUni to limit my results to news pieces from five days before the draft to five days after it. My search terms were simply “WNBA draft” and “NBA draft.” I then selected between 10 and 20 articles per league per year based on headlines. I tried to find articles from both before and after the draft date that gave insight about the players involved. I also selected articles with more straightforward headlines, including simple lists of all picks and headlines like “____ picked first in draft” for comparison. These 10 to 20 pieces were saved as a single PDF and archived for later review.

I first catalogued the length, which was always given by NexisUni, and the author where given. I looked up the writer to determine their gender, and tracked this, as well. Not all articles had an author listed, but all listed authors could be found online with a clear description of gender. Then, I looked for the factors outlined by Halbert and Latimer in “‘Battling’ Gendered Language: An Analysis of the Language Used by Sports Commentators in a Televised Coed Tennis Competition,” a paper analyzing the 1992 “Battle of the Champions” between Martina Navratilova and Jimmy Connors. They looked at gender marking, the hierarchy of naming, the ratio of praise to criticism,

type of praise, character portraits, and gendering the athletic event. These terms are defined below.

1. Gender marking
 - a. When a commentator notes the athlete's gender, often in qualifying remarks like "that's what set her apart in women's tennis for so many years."
2. Hierarchy of naming
 - a. This refers to naming an athlete at all as well as how the athlete is named: first name only, first and last name, etc.
3. The ratio of praise to criticism
 - a. This is a simple count of how often an athlete is praised versus criticized by a commentator.
4. Type of praise
 - a. This is an assessment of the kind of praise a commentator is offering. Examples could be praised based on athleticism, accolades, or intelligence.
5. Character portraits
 - a. This is a category for comments made about an athlete that are not explicitly praise or criticism but help a reader better understand the player's character.
6. Gendering the athletic event
 - a. This refers to making the event representative of overall gender issues or ideology.

For the first two categories — gender marking and the hierarchy of naming — data will be cataloged by a simple count, tallying each time I see a gender marker, first name, last name, or full name. The next three categories — ratio of praise to criticism, type of praise, and character portraits — require more qualitative analysis. I cataloged each descriptor, not marking for praise or criticism, in an excel sheet. Stripped of

context, I evaluated common trends and did a side-by-side analysis of descriptors in the WNBA and NBA for 2003, 2008, and 2021. I did not perform this analysis for each year simply due to time constraints. Instead, I used a random number generator to select one year from each of the three time periods (2001-2004; 2008, 2011, 2012; 2018, 2020, 2021).

With this data, I noted trends in each category and compared data from the men's and women's NBA draft coverage in clusters of years and across all 20 years.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

Coverage of the NBA draft is more accessible than coverage on the WNBA draft. As I searched for news coverage in NexisUni, there were usually around 150 results per year for the WNBA. The greatest number of results appeared for the 2020 draft, at 288 results. This year was notable because the WNBA draft was the first major televised athletic event since COVID-19 precautions halted professional sports. For the NBA, 2001 had 877 results compared to the WNBA's 159. Even assuming all 159 of the results for the 2001 WNBA draft also appeared in this search, the NBA draft has 4.5 times the coverage available through NexisUni for the WNBA draft.

Length and authorship

All years: 2001-2021

The overall percentage of male writers for all NBA articles sampled is 94%, which is at the high end of the three period percentages of 95.8%, 96%, and 89.5%. Conversely, of course, the percentage of female writers is low: 6% overall compared to 4.2%, 4%, and 10.5%. Though the percentage decreased in the final period measured, the NBA articles sampled never had more than one female author in a year. On the WNBA side, however, the percentage of articles with male writers increased over time, and the total number of named female writers decreased. The percentages of female authorship dropped from 30.4% to 22% to 17%, with the number of female authors dropping from 7% to 6% to 4%. However, two years of sampled coverage had 4 articles written by women, which is higher than any year for the NBA. Trends suggest that strides are being made to make discourse about the WNBA draft more like discourse

about the NBA draft, at least in demographics, but it does not show that coverage of either league offers good opportunities for women. Economic motivations also play a role in this. It is possible that as the WNBA grew in profitability, more economic stakeholders in sports, who are primarily men, influenced who covered the events.

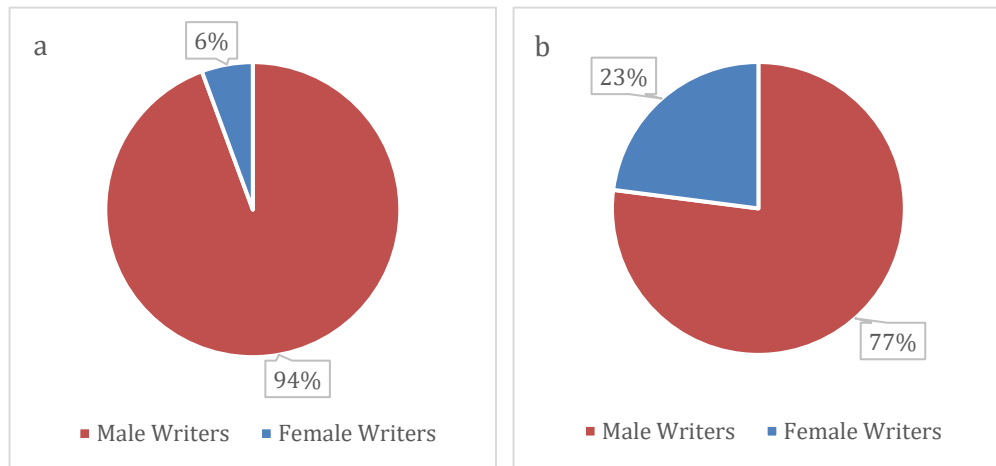


Figure 1: Genders of authors of (a) NBA articles and (b) WNBA articles

Of the named authors, the NBA sample data showed 84 male writers and 5 female writers of articles, with men representing 94% of all authors. Of the named authors, the WNBA sample data showed 57 male writers and 17 female writers of articles, with men representing 77% of all authors.

The average length of articles on the NBA draft and the WNBA draft have followed similar trends since 2012 and have grown closer in recent years. However, the median lengths for each year are much more sporadic.

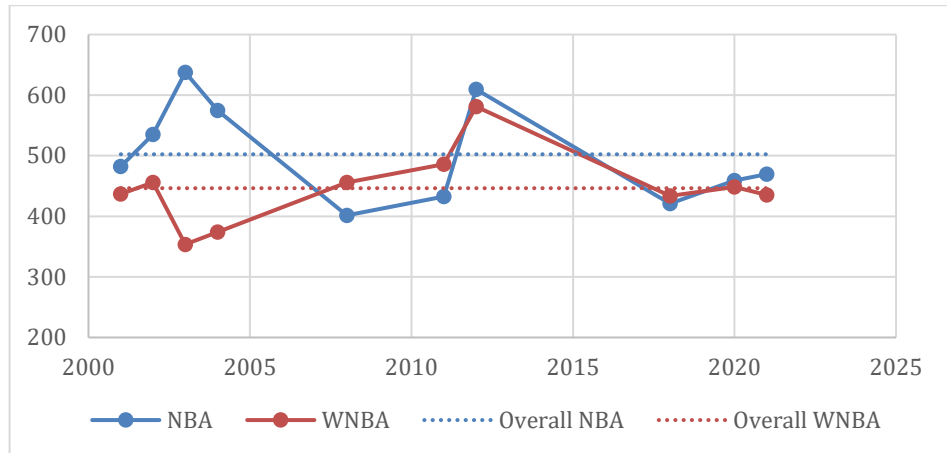


Figure 2: Average length of all articles year by year in a scatterplot

On average, NBA articles are 12.5% longer than WNBA articles. The length averages have grown closer together over time. Articles are growing more similar in length in recent years, though the overall average for the NBA is 55.8 words longer than the overall average for the WNBA.

On average, NBA articles are 55.8 words, or 12.5% longer than WNBA articles.

Assessing medians to ensure that no outliers are influencing the average counts, our data is not as clear. The median length of all NBA and WNBA articles sampled is different by just 21 words, as compared to the difference in average of 55.8 words. In both cases, though, articles on the NBA draft are longer. The median length for articles on the WNBA draft changes more from year to year than the median length for NBA articles, indicating that coverage of the WNBA draft is more dependent on the events of the draft than coverage of the NBA draft.

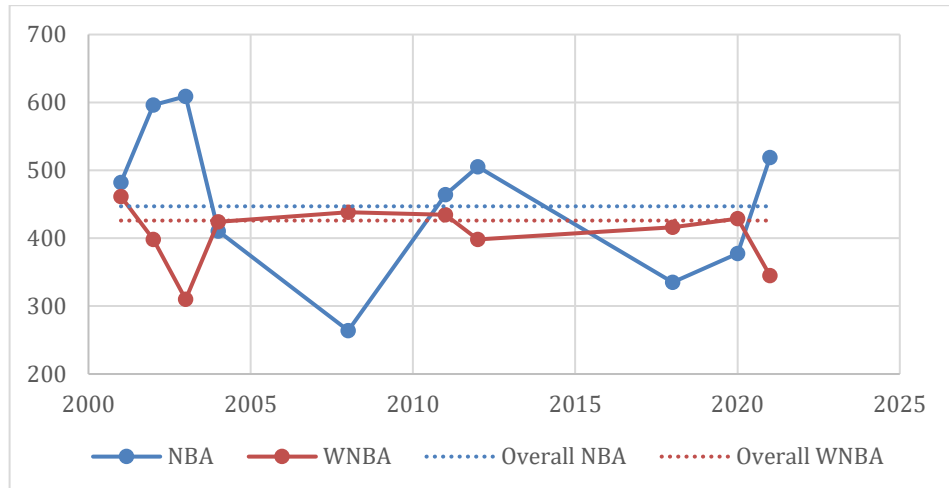


Figure 3: Median length of all articles year by year in a scatterplot

NBA articles' median length is greater than the WNBA by 5%. 2003 marked the year with the greatest difference, and there is no clear trend over time.

2001-2004

Data from 2001-2004 is key in establishing a baseline for news coverage following the first televised WNBA draft. In this cluster of years, articles on the NBA draft were significantly longer, with average lengths of 482.4 (2001), 535.3 (2002), 637.6 (2003), and 574.7 (2004). On the WNBA side, average lengths were 436.7 (2001), 456.1 (2002), 353.6 (2003), and 373.8 (2004). The longest per-year average in this period for the WNBA is shorter than the shortest per-year average in the NBA. Further information on average article length by year can be found in Figure 8. As Figure 1 shows, the WNBA and the NBA have similar numbers of shorter-length articles, but the NBA has more longer-length articles. Three WNBA articles are longer than 600 words compared to the NBA's 27. Zero WNBA articles are longer than 800 words compared to the NBA's 10. These longer articles are likely bringing the average

word count of the NBA up. Longer articles generally indicate more attention paid to analysis and effects of the draft rather than simply relaying the news. Some longer articles listed a bit of information about each player that was drafted, including information like their school, their stats, and a short blurb about their strengths and weaknesses. Neither form of these longer articles was present for the WNBA at all, indicating less overall depth.

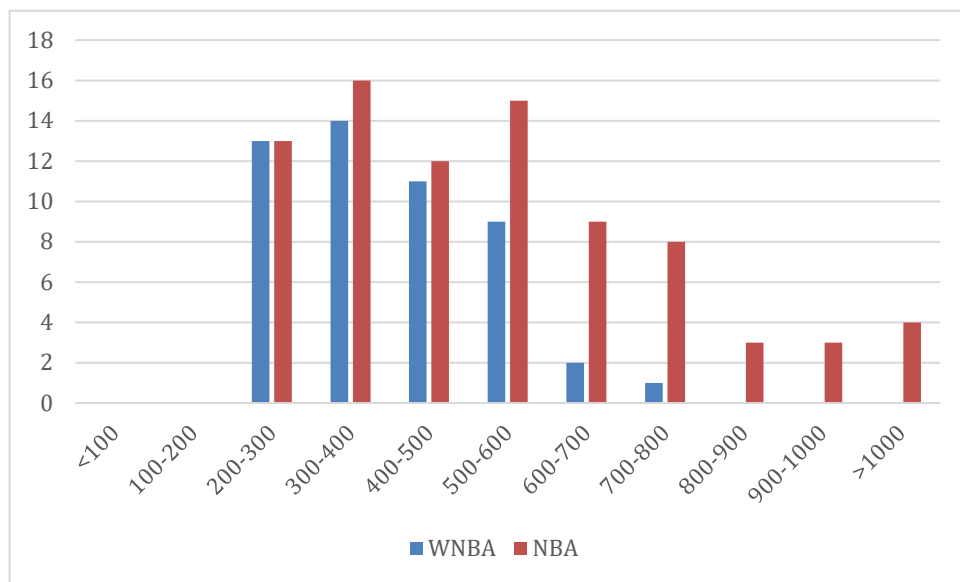


Figure 4: Histogram of article lengths from 2001-2004

Of the WNBA articles from 2001-2004, only three are greater than 600 words long and none are longer than 800 words. Of the NBA articles from the same period, 27 are longer than 600 words long and 10 are longer than 800 words.

In journalism, some articles are not credited to any one person. Sometimes they are credited to a whole staff or organization, like the Associated Press. Other times there is no official byline at all. Using this study’s methodology, there is no way of knowing how many articles written by uncredited authors have a dominant women’s influence or men’s influence, so those authors who are named are the most important. The

authorship of articles in this period is dominantly male, with 95.8% of authors of NBA articles being men and only 4.2%, a total of two authors, being women. These numbers are not as stark on the WNBA side, but it is still dominantly male. 69.6% of WNBA authors are men and 30.4% are women.

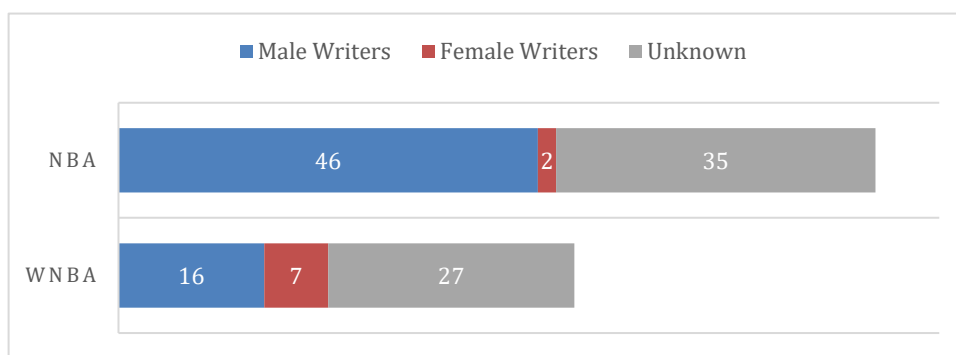


Figure 5: Stacked bar chart of author genders from 2001-2004

Excluding those unknown, 95.8% of writers of NBA articles are men and 4.2% are women. For the WNBA, 69.6% of writers are men and 30.4% are women. Including those unknown, 55.4% of writers of NBA articles are men and 2.4% are women; 32% of writers of WNBA articles are men and 14% are women.

2008, 2011, 2012

Data from 2008, 2011, and 2012 shows change. In this cluster of years, articles on the NBA draft averaged 401.57 words (2008), 432.40 words (2011), and 609.39 words (2012). For the WNBA, averages were 455.86 (2008), 485.79 (2011), and 581.07 (2012). For 2008 and 2011, the WNBA articles averaged over 50 words longer than NBA articles, making them unusual years. In 2012, NBA articles return to being longer on average.

Figure 3 shows that the NBA and the WNBA had similar numbers of articles in most ranges of 100 words. However, there is an unusually large difference between the

number of short articles, from 200 to 300 words long, on the WNBA draft and the NBA draft. The NBA has 22 articles in this category compared to the WNBA's four. This is likely bringing down the averages and can help explain why WNBA articles are longer on average in two of these three years. There are only four articles in the 200–300-word range for the WNBA, which is much lower than the other two periods studied (13 and 15). There is no obvious reason why this change occurs, but we can take this as an indicator that coverage of the WNBA is quite variant. However, another possible reason for this is selection bias. The median length in 2011 is similar, with a median of 464 in the NBA and 434.5 in the WNBA. In 2008, however, the medians differ greatly, with 264 in the NBA and 438.5 in the WNBA.

For this period,

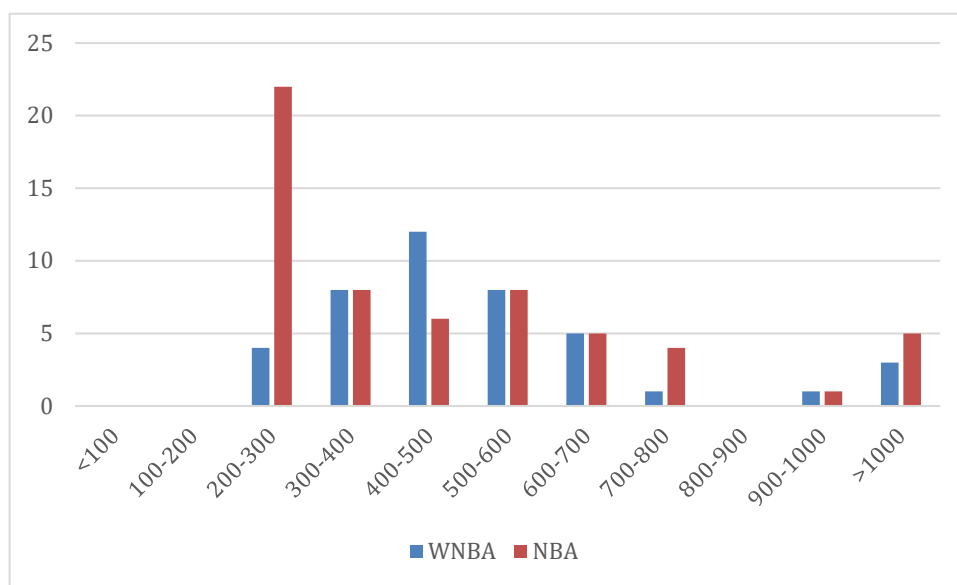


Figure 6: Histogram of article lengths for 2008, 2011, 2012

The article lengths begin to grow more similar in these years. For the ranges of 200-300 words and 400-500 words, there is more of a difference.

Authorship in the WNBA is more male dominated in this period than the previous, with 78% of articles written by men and 22% written by women. Only one article on the NBA side was written by a woman in this period, representing just 4% of all articles. Men wrote the other 24 articles representing 96%. It is worth noting a correlation between length and authorship. The articles in this period are longer, on average, than the previous, and the percentage of male authorship is greater than the previous period.

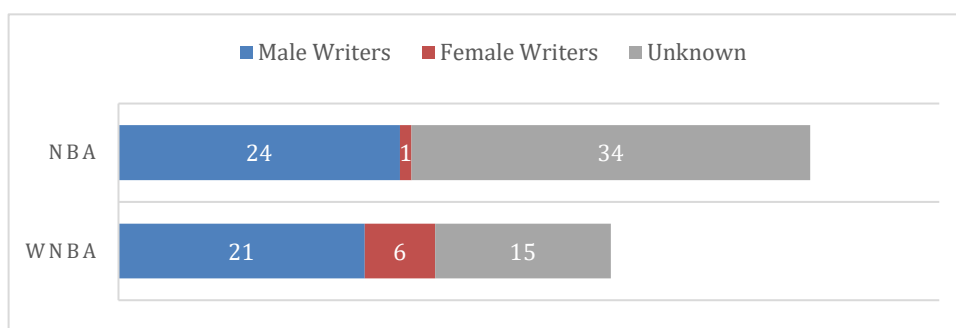


Figure 7: Stacked bar chart of author genders for 2008, 2011, 2012

There is little change from the previous grouping of years in this area. Excluding those unknown, 96% of NBA articles are written by men and 4% were written by women; 78% of WNBA articles were written by men and 22% were written by women. Including those unknown, 40.6% % of NBA articles are written by men and 1.6% are written by women; 50% of WNBA articles were written by men and 14.3% were written by women.

2018, 2020, 2021

The lengths of articles in this period are the most similar of the three periods examined. NBA articles averaged 421.10 words (2018), 458.81 words (2020), and 469.60 words (2021), while WNBA articles averaged 433.79 words (2018), 448.35 words (2020), and 435.14 words (2021). The numbers of articles in each length

category are also approximately equal, indicating that the lengths of articles on the NBA draft and the WNBA draft are similar overall. The histograms for each league have a right skew, which makes the most sense when considering the news landscape. On any given topic, it makes sense that there are more shorter articles and fewer longer articles because it is easier for news organizations to allocate resources for a short article than a long one. In several categories, the NBA has more articles than the WNBA, but this can be attributed to the greater overall number of NBA articles published and therefore sampled.

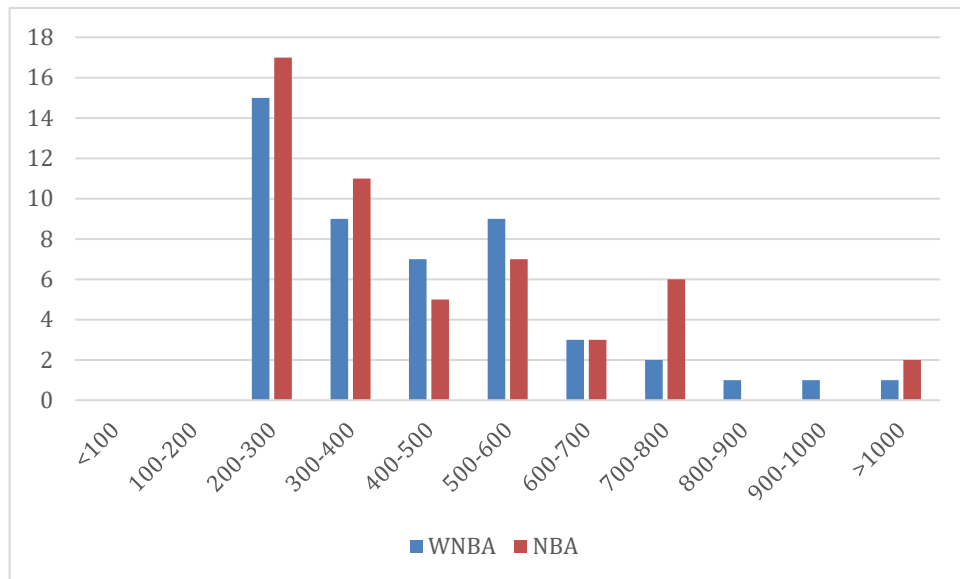


Figure 8: Histogram of article lengths for 2018, 2020, 2021

This set is the most similar in lengths yet and shows a reasonable trend of more short and fewer longer articles.

The percentages of male authorship in this period are also the most similar, with 89.5% of NBA articles written by men and 10.5% written by women, and 83% of WNBA articles written by men and 17% written by women.

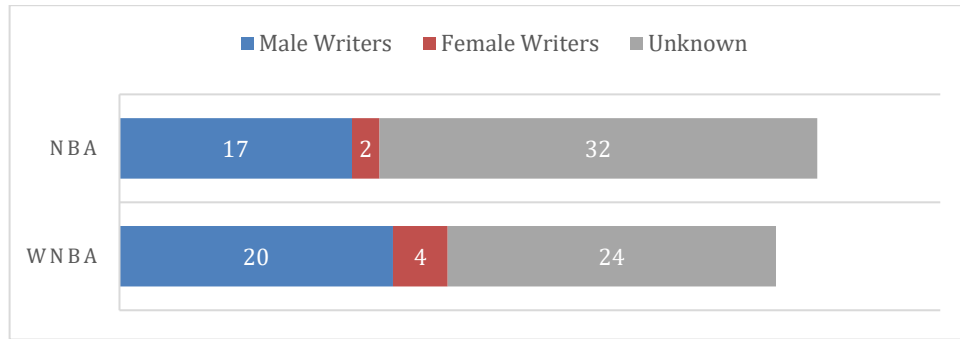


Figure 9: Stacked bar chart of author genders for 2018, 2020, 2021

Excluding those unknown, 89.5% of NBA articles were written by men and 10.5% were written by women; 83% of WNBA articles were written by men and 17% were written by women. Including those unknown, 33.3% of NBA articles were written by men and 3.9% were written by women; 41.7% of WNBA articles were written by men and 8.3% were written by women.

In both length and authorship, the NBA articles did not change much over time. They are overwhelmingly written by men and have medians and averages in the 400-500 word range most years. On the WNBA side, the overall trend in length and authorship are bringing the coverage closer to those standards set by the NBA. By the final years, the average, median, and percentages of male writers are similar. This points to a greater issue of attempting to make women's sports coverage more like men's sports coverage without considering the unique histories and needs of each league, and without thinking critically about why men's sports coverage is the way it is.

While longer articles written by men may mean that the WNBA is growing more culturally respected in recent years, this progress is undermined by the patriarchal view that women need men's attention to be respectable. This coverage and its changes over time reinforce the orthodox gender understanding and delineate the WNBA as secondary to the NBA.

Gender marking

The most common gender markers in articles about the NBA were from phrases like “big man” (a term to describe a post player) or from colloquial terms like “guys” in quotes from players and coaches. Gender markers in WNBA articles were more frequent and wide ranging. In coverage, some college women’s basketball teams are called the “lady ___” (for example, the Baylor University Lady Bears came up in 2001 and 2020). The most blatant marker is adding the word “women’s” in front of nouns where those markers are absent in men’s coverage. The word “men’s” was never found in any of the NBA articles studied.

In 2001 and 2021, the NBA drafts included a focus on post players, otherwise known as “big men,” which brought the total number of gender markers up for that year. In total, there were 139 gender markers in NBA coverage and 197 gender markers in WNBA coverage, which is surprising because there is more coverage available for the NBA. Gender markers occur 29.4% more frequently in articles about the WNBA than articles about the NBA.

Journalists covering the NBA and WNBA drafts feel it is more necessary to qualify women’s sports experiences than men’s sports experiences, which suggests that women’s sports are seen as secondary to men’s. When a woman athlete holds a record across men’s and women’s leagues, that is qualified. For example, “the most points ever in the NCAA tournament, men’s or women’s.” However, when a men’s basketball player holds a record across leagues, it is not qualified, because the assumption is that men are inherently better than women at basketball, and a woman holding a record is an anomaly.

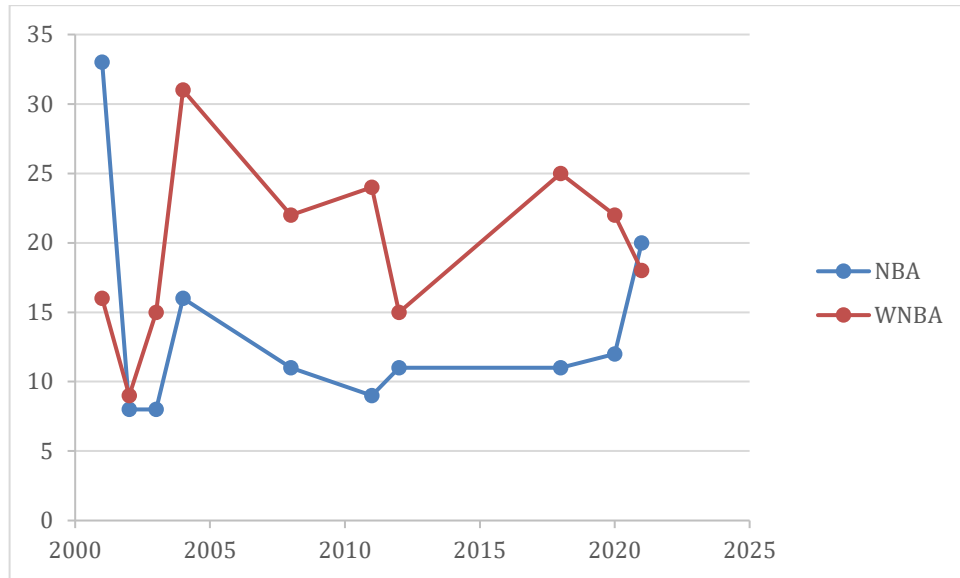


Figure 10: Number of gender markers by year

The number of gender markers in NBA coverage was higher for two of ten years: 2001 and 2021.

In Figure 11, we can see that the average number of gender markers per article was greater for articles on the WNBA than on the NBA in most years. The average accounts for the greater availability of content about the NBA draft. It also shows that gender markers are unusual in an article on the NBA draft, as the average is only greater than one per article in two of the ten years. Neither Figure 10 nor Figure 11 show an obvious trend over time.

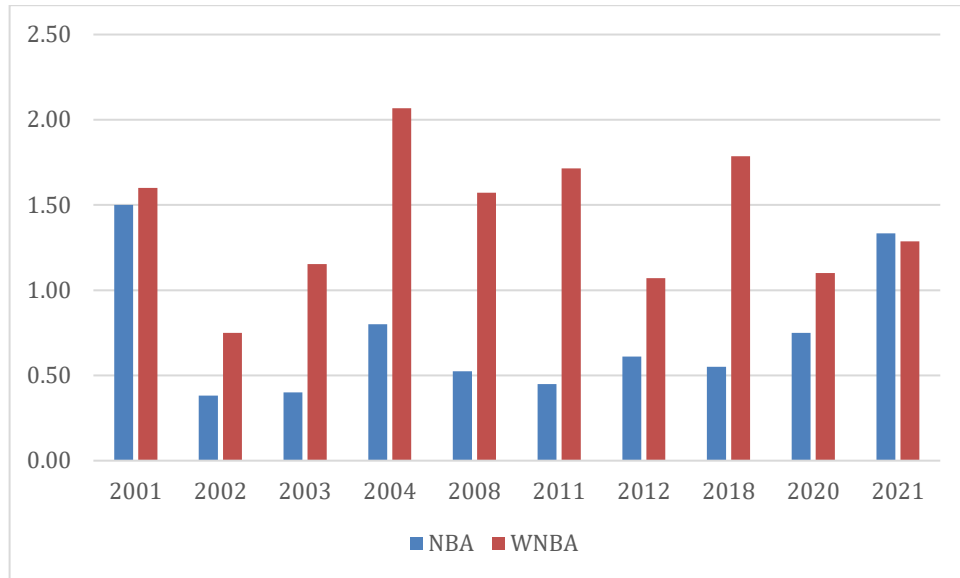


Figure 11: Average number of gender markers per article

This bar graph shows the average number of gender markers per article each year. The average was only greater for NBA articles than WNBA articles one year out of ten.

Gender markers were more common in WNBA coverage than NBA coverage.

This contributes to the impression, created by sexism and the consistent devaluation of women, that women’s basketball players are inherently worse than men’s basketball players and the idea that women aspire to meet men’s standards. The “W” in WNBA is a consistent gender marker that I did not count. In journalism, clarity is important, so using “men’s basketball” or “women’s basketball” when the statement concerns a single gender and “basketball” when the statement concerns the sport in general would be sufficient.

Hierarchy of naming

The original framework presented by Halbert and Latimer proved less applicable in this section due to journalistic naming practices. Typically, a journalist will use first

and last name to describe a person on first use and last name only from there on out.

This was overwhelmingly the case in the study's sampling of coverage. Rarely, a player would be called by their first name only, typically in a quote from another player who knew them personally. Therefore, tracking differences in naming would not be a beneficial statistic for this study.

One area that did differ was how many times a first-and-last-name pair appeared in an article. This is an indicator of how many people are introduced in an article. At the highest end of the first-last spectrum were articles that simply listed each draft pick for the year. For the NBA, 60 players are picked a year. For the WNBA, 36 are picked a year. At the lowest end of the first-last spectrum is an article with 1 name, typically focusing on a player from the geographic area in which the article was published. These articles explore a player's experience and feelings leading up to or in the wake of the draft rather than exploring the draft as a whole. One short article about the WNBA draft's high viewership included 0 names.

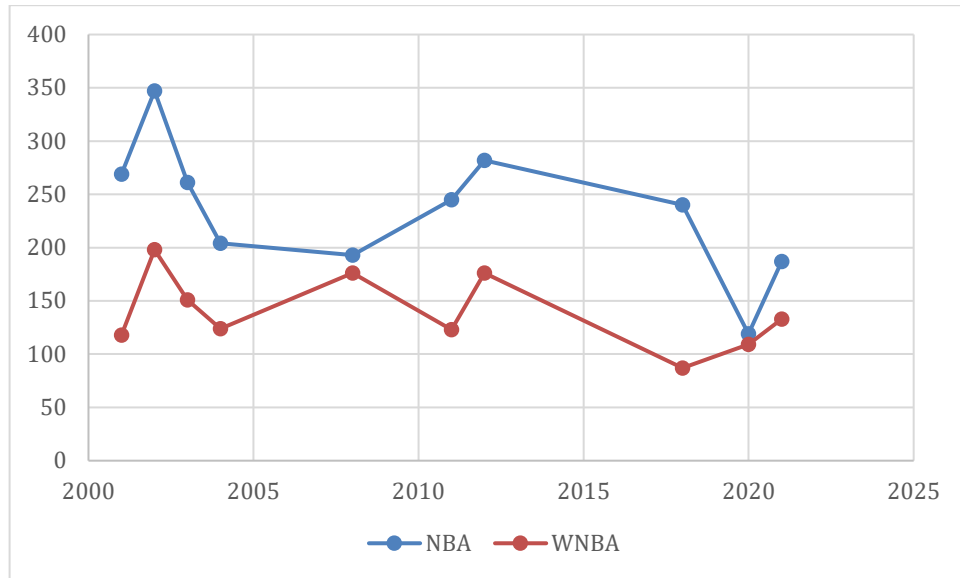


Figure 12: Number of full names by year

Articles about the WNBA draft never had as many names as articles about the NBA draft, likely due to the greater number of selections per year in the NBA.

Using an average rather than a total shows that there is little difference between the full names used in the WNBA and the NBA each year. Overall, the average number of full names used in an article on the WNBA draft is 9.96 and the average number of full names used in an article on the NBA draft is 12.16, for a difference of 2.2. This is not a significant disparity.

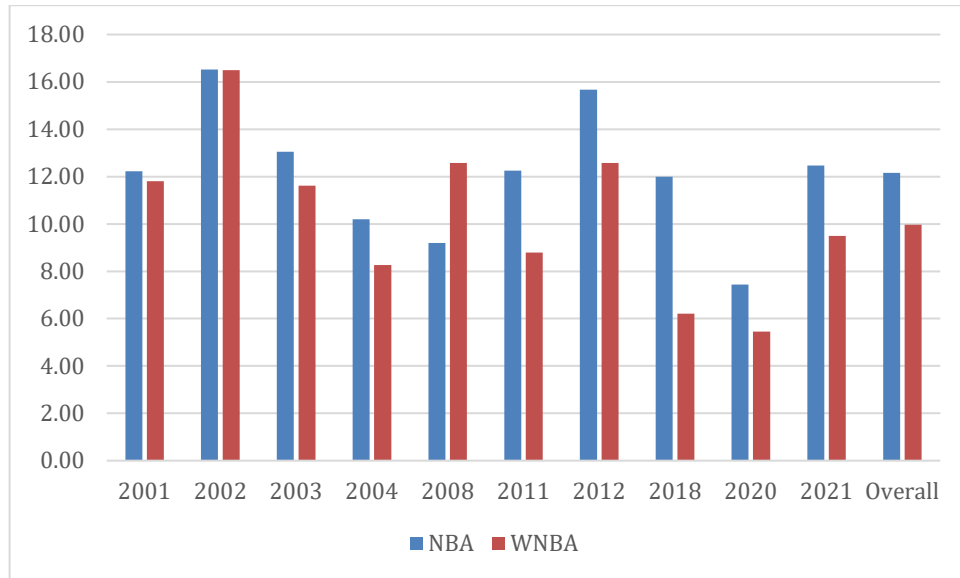


Figure 13: Number of full names per article per year

The number of full names per article is less variant than the totals.

The standard journalistic practice of using a full name on first mention and last name thereafter made naming conventions essentially a null category for this study, which encourages the idea that implementing journalistic standards can be an effective tool for equitable coverage.

The ratio of praise to criticism / Type of praise / Character portraits

These areas required more qualitative analysis. For each year, I identified major categories of descriptors.

Overall

Across all years, orthodox gender understanding is visible in the descriptions used. Physical attributes such as height and weight were mentioned with similar frequency across the WNBA and the NBA. Weight is mentioned less frequently for

WNBA players than NBA players, reflecting the idea that weight is a taboo subject for women.

The descriptions of WNBA players are more likely to mention their college affiliations than those of NBA players. One important factor is the differing age and education requirements in the WNBA and the NBA. The WNBA has always promoted college education and players must be at least 22 or graduating from a four-year institution within the calendar year to be eligible for the draft. In the NBA, players must be 19, with no collegiate requirements. However, it is worth noting that more articles on the WNBA came from publications in college towns, which made collegiate careers of greater import.

The descriptions of NBA players are more likely to mention their accolades and achievements than those of WNBA players. This is likely because the NBA features more high-profile prospects who have already made a name for themselves in the sport. For some particularly impressive players, high school games are widely televised. In contrast, the WNBA may feature more players who are relatively unknown outside of the college basketball scene. NBA prospects are much more likely to be compared to former players, again suggesting that WNBA prospects and players alike are not well known.

There are more personal anecdotes and background information included in the descriptions of WNBA players than those of NBA players. Many stories were framed more like a human-interest story than event coverage. Articles introduce the player to the public and tell a heartwarming story of the player achieving their dreams, which is still touched on but not as central in NBA coverage.

There is a greater emphasis on tactical and strategic descriptions of NBA players, such as their shooting abilities and their defensive skills. In contrast, the descriptions of WNBA players are more likely to focus on their athleticism and their speed.

Overall, the descriptions of WNBA players tend to have a more personal and narrative tone, while the descriptions of NBA players tend to be more focused on their technical abilities and achievements.

While most of the coverage focuses on players, there are a few notable differences in the types of descriptions used for male and female coaches. Male coaches are often described in terms of their tactical acumen and leadership skills, while female coaches are more likely to be described in terms of their “pioneering” or “trailblazing” status as women in a male-dominated field.

Descriptors of players in each league showed a discrepancy in image where NBA players are strong, dominant, and mythic, where WNBA players are talented, athletic, and approachable. These descriptions reflect common sexist conceptions of men as stoic and dominant and women as submissive and giving. There is a lot of overlap in the descriptions of players, but they differ in their assumptions of interest: WNBA prospects must be introduced to the world whereas everybody should already know NBA prospects. If coverage of the best young basketball players in a given year were equitable, these introductions wouldn't be necessary.

2003

For coverage of the 2003 NBA draft, descriptors focused on physical attributes, skill level, position, comparison to other players, and personality traits.

Many of the descriptions focused on the physical attributes of the players, such as their height, weight, and wingspan. For example, several players were described as “athletic,” “strong,” or “explosive,” while others were described as “slender,” “lanky,” or “rangy.” Explicit height and weight are given very frequently. Other physical attributes included “tattooed” and “slick haired.”

Descriptions of the players’ skill levels were also common. For example, many players were described as “skilled,” “talented,” or “gifted,” while others were described as “raw,” “inexperienced,” or “undeveloped.” The draft focuses on potential, so being underdeveloped is not inherently negative. The word “star” was used 9 times.

Descriptions often included the player’s position, such as “point guard,” “shooting guard,” “power forward,” or “center.” This is purely informational and standard terminology across leagues.

Some of the descriptions compare the players to other NBA players, such as “the next Michael Jordan,” or “a taller version of Allen Iverson.” This shows that authors expect some level of background knowledge from readers and trust that they will understand the reference.

A few of the descriptions also mention the players’ personality traits, such as being “charismatic,” “confident,” or “reserved.” LeBron James was often described as charismatic, and this was said to give him an extra edge. James was also called a “savior” four times and a “phenom” five times.

For the 2003 WNBA draft, physical attributes, skill level, position, and personality traits were still prevalent. There was also a strong focus on accomplishments.

Physical attributes such as “athletic,” “strong,” “quick,” “tall,” “agile,” “explosive,” and “solid” were used to describe the players. These descriptors were used similarly across the WNBA and NBA coverage. Height and weight were given less frequently in the WNBA. Weight was given once in 2003 coverage of the WNBA and nine times in 2003 coverage of the NBA. Descriptors of physical appearance unrelated to basketball did not occur.

Another common type of description used was related to the players’ skills on the court. Words like “sharpshooter,” “playmaker,” “defensive specialist,” “rebounder,” “versatile,” “dominant,” and “fundamental” were used to describe the players’ abilities. This is a different description of skill than the NBA. These descriptions focus on a specific ability while the NBA descriptions focused on if the players were skilled overall or not. The word “star” was used five times, though one of those times was to say, “the daughter of NBA star Karl Malone.”

Just as in the NBA coverage, words like “guard,” “forward,” and “center” were used to identify the players’ roles on the team.

When describing players’ personalities, writers used words like “confident,” “humble,” “determined,” “hardworking,” “tenacious,” and “competitive.” These descriptors are more directly related to basketball where the NBA personality descriptions moved off the court with words like “charismatic” and “reserved.”

The biggest difference in the coverage was the strong focus on accomplishments of the players in college or other leagues. Words such as “All-American,” “Player of the Year,” “champion,” and “record-breaker” were used to highlight the players’ achievements. Though the NBA coverage included accomplishments, as well, the

WNBA descriptions in all are more fact-based whereas the NBA coverage includes more opinion-based descriptors. This is not to say that the opinion-based descriptors are incorrect, only that authors do not need to back up the claim that a player is skilled with an objective accomplishment as frequently as they do in WNBA coverage.

2008

Like the coverage in 2003, coverage of the 2008 NBA draft highlighted physical attributes, skill level, comparison to other players, and personality traits. The assessment of players' collegiate careers was more prevalent this time.

As before, descriptions of height, weight, and wingspan were common. For example, "D.J. Augustin is a quick, athletic point guard with excellent speed and agility," and "JaVale McGee is an extremely long and athletic big man."

An assessment of skill level can read like a scouting report, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the players. For example, "Derrick Rose is a dynamic playmaker with excellent ball-handling and passing skills, but he needs to improve his outside shooting," and "Russell Westbrook is an explosive athlete with incredible speed and quickness, but he needs to improve his decision-making and shooting." Where the 2003 coverage had a more positive skew to descriptions, with heavy use of words like "star," "savior," and "phenom," 2008 had more balance.

Comparison to NBA players continued. For example, "Joe Alexander has been compared to a young Shawn Marion because of his athleticism and versatility," and "DeAndre Jordan has been compared to Tyson Chandler because of his size and shot-blocking ability."

While personality was discussed, many descriptors emphasized a player's work ethic, leadership, and character rather than charisma. For example, "Brook Lopez is a hard worker and a team player who brings a great attitude to the game," and "Darrell Arthur is a high-character player who is well-liked by his teammates and coaches."

In 2003, many players drafted came from high school. This year, more descriptions mention the players' statistics, awards, and achievements in college. For example, "Michael Beasley led the nation in scoring and rebounding as a freshman at Kansas State," and "Kevin Love was the Pac-10 Player of the Year and a consensus All-American at UCLA."

For the 2008 WNBA draft, coverage highlighted skill level, personality traits, and college accolades were important, just like coverage of the NBA. Rather than explicit physical descriptions, this year's coverage focused more on athletic ability. The word "potential" also came up a lot when describing players.

Descriptions of skills were like descriptions of athletic ability, focusing on capabilities rather than descriptors like height, weight, and position. For example, "Elena Delle Donne is an excellent shooter and ball-handler who can create her own shot," and "Skylar Diggins is a skilled point guard who can distribute the ball and score from anywhere on the court."

Personality descriptions focused on the players' leadership and character traits, such as work ethic, teamwork, and perseverance. For example, "Chennedy Carter is a hard worker who is willing to put in the extra effort to improve her game," and "Napheesa Collier is a team player who is willing to do whatever it takes to help her team win."

Like the descriptions in the NBA draft articles, many of the descriptions in the WNBA draft articles highlight the players' accomplishments in college, such as awards, statistics, and achievements. For example, “Maya Moore was a two-time NCAA Player of the Year and a four-time All-American at UConn,” and “Tina Charles was the Big East Player of the Year and a two-time All-American at UConn.”

Many of the descriptions in the WNBA draft articles focus on the players' potential to develop and improve in the future. For example, “Brittney Griner has the potential to be a game-changing player in the WNBA with her size, athleticism, and defensive skills,” and “Chiney Ogwumike is a versatile player with a high basketball IQ who has the potential to become a star in the WNBA.”

The descriptions frequently focused on athletic ability, such as speed, agility, and jumping ability. For example, “Candace Parker is an athletic forward with great size, strength, and quickness,” and “Courtney Paris is a dominant post player who uses her size and athleticism to control the paint.”

2021

For coverage of the 2021 NBA draft, descriptions fell into the following categories: athletic ability, skill level, shooting ability, physical descriptions, and potential.

The most common adjective used to describe NBA draft prospects was “athletic.” This term was used to describe 70% of the players on the list, showing that it was an important factor in the 2021 NBA draft.

The second most common adjective used to describe NBA draft prospects was “skilled.” This term was used to describe 50% of the players on the list. This is the first year that two adjectives were so ubiquitous.

Shooting ability was singled out over other qualities. Terms like “sharpshooter,” “knockdown shooter,” and “deadly from deep” were used to describe several players on the list.

Physical descriptions centered around size. Many articles referenced the height and weight of draft prospects. Terms like “long,” “lanky,” and “solid frame” were used to describe the physical build of several players.

Potential was a big topic again, with terms like “upside” and “potential” appearing frequently in descriptions. The descriptions in this year’s coverage were much more similar to each other, allowing for more specific categories than other years.

In 2021, physical descriptions, college accolades, accomplishments, and personal background were prominent.

Physical descriptions based on height, weight, and wingspan were more prevalent in this year than those previous ones.

There are more mentions of the players' college affiliations in the WNBA draft articles than the NBA draft articles in 2021. Many descriptions included comparisons to other players from the same college. For example, “the Tigers' leading rebounder with 8.4 rebounds per game and was the team's third-leading scorer with 11.5 points.”

Many honors and accolades were mentioned. For example, “ESPN Player of the Week,” “Big 12 Sixth Woman of Year,” and descriptions of this nature were prominent.

There is a higher emphasis on personal anecdotes and background information in the WNBA draft articles than the NBA draft articles, with discussion of family, geographic background, and personal ties to the effects of the draft.

Discrepancies in descriptors reflect existing sexist ideologies of women as personable and submissive. Their bodies are described differently than men's are, with less use of weight as a characteristic. This could reflect the societal taboo of discussing women's weight, or show that author wish to describe women's bodies more qualitatively and subjectively.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Analysis shows that coverage of the WNBA draft differs significantly from the NBA draft and perpetuates orthodox gender understandings of both men and women. Men's basketball players are strong and inherently worthy of attention. Male writers are best suited to comment on basketball. Women basketball players are softer; they must earn the audience's attention not through their high skill level in their sport, but through some other factor. The ripple effects of this disparity are hard to quantify.

However, understanding these disparities categorically is an important step toward reaching equitable coverage. The analysis of authors of articles over time is an important reminder that equitable coverage does not mean attempting to mirror NBA coverage standards when covering the WNBA. Instead, women in journalism and women in basketball should be seen as an untapped pool of knowledge and perspective.

Editors are responsible for assigning reporters parameters for their stories. Using the results of this study, editors should assign similar word counts across leagues to enhance equitable coverage and ensure the reporter understands the angle of the article — analytical, standard feature, listicle, etc. Difference in descriptors of players could be a product of implicit bias, and parameters could guide writers away from assumptions that women's basketball players are not inherently interesting or worthy of analysis.

Analysis of naming practices shows that journalistic norms are a powerful tool. The disparity of gender markers shown in this study contributes to an understanding of women's basketball as secondary and men's basketball as the standard. Standardizing the use of "men's basketball" and "women's basketball," is not only more fair, it is more clear, and clarity is a key tenet of journalism.

Quantifiable discrepancies in length, authorship, gender marking, and descriptors can serve as a foundation for necessary ideological changes in the field of journalism. Focusing on changing any one of the factors with the most disparity could potentially have ripple effects on the other areas. It stands to reason that a woman writer may describe women athletes differently than the mostly men writers in this study did. Implementing a style guide for gender markers, just as many publications do for other identity categories, may influence other descriptors in the article. Better articles about women's sports may encourage women to pursue the career. A study of this kind could be applied to other sports, other topics within basketball, or any news coverage that exists within a gender binary.

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