Sports Media Influence on NFL Concussion awareness and player safety

James A. Best

Pace University: Dyson College of Arts and Sciences

Abstract

This research paper examines the role of Sporting media in perpetuating a traditional notion of masculinity within the National Football League (NFL) and portraying injury as something outside of maleness. Sports Journalists hold a certain control over the way the public views athletes. When it relates to injuries, Sports Journalist reify hegemonic masculinity and promote the “masculine warrior narrative”, a disposition that forces athletes to suppress injury and pain and view them as feminized emotions that should not be displayed in public. This way of thinking leads to a decrease in injury awareness around the National Football League (NFL) and hinders the development the sport and the culture that resides within it. As the brutal effects and the physical nature of the game of football is brought to the forefront with the NFL under litigation for contributing to brain disease the issue of injury awareness is prevalent in American Society. This paper analyzes examples in sporting media that reflect both an “iron man” perspective that places victory over player health and changes in the way certain players handle brain injuries and the journalists that report on them.

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# Methods

I wanted to look at the way the media views injury and concussions in the National Football League. Through my research I discovered that the media promotes a masculine warrior narrative and likes to show football players as heroes for playing through pain and injury to support their own hegemonic masculinity. I proceeded to take 3 steps in order to support this claim. The first step was finding effective scholarship. I went to scholarly journal databases like Google Scholar, Pace University’s Library Database, and JSTOR. In each of these databases I pulled out information and other scholars literature reviews that were relevant to my topic. I studied Anderson & Kian’s (2012) chapter in Men and Masculinities called “Media Contestation of Head Trauma in the National Football League” This source was where I was able to lay the foundation of what I wanted to talk about. The media portraying a masculine warrior narrative intrigued me and I wanted to know more about it. After reading through Anderson and Kian’s (2012) work I decided that the most important information to add to my analytical research was the definition of the masculine warrior narrative and how it effects modern day media coverage of the NFL. In this literature review I found some very effective scholarship, so great that I decided to bring the topic up as a introductory piece in my Analytical Research.

Next I found a great chapter from Katie Rogers (2014) titled “I am a Gladiator: Pain Injury and Masculinity in the NFL” In Rogers’ (2014) work I found something interesting called the “pain principle”. Rogers (2014) stated that the “pain principle” is the need for men to view their bodies as machines to be worked and to repress pain and emotion. This was a very important factor in why media professionals tend to portray athletes as physically impenetrable. Rogers (2014) also stressed the need for media professionals to portray the sport of football as a gladiator sport, and essentially dehumanize the men who play the sport. These topics were interesting and directly related to my research question which deals with the media promoting the idea of traditional masculinity and the warrior narrative. Rogers’ (2014) scholarship represented something I could build my research and analysis off of and provide clear examples of why the media has these underlying motivations to portray men as such.

Another piece of scholarship that supported my research question was Petrie, Deiters, and Harmison’s “Mental Toughness, Social Support and Athletic Identity” study, where they show how injuries are viewed differently by athletes starting at the youth level throughout college and the pros. The main information that stood out the most to me and that I found necessary for my analytical research was their work on the two different types of athletes. They state that some athletes perceive injury as overwhelming and pay close attention to their injuries while others tend to see injury in a more adaptive manner (as challenge that can be overcome) due to the understanding of injury within the culture of the sport that they play. This information directly relates to my research topic. While studying masculinity and injury awareness, I realized that cultural background plays a huge factor in the way we perceive different things, and injury I no different. If athletes were told from a young age to see injury as a challenge that can always be overcome they will carry that with them throughout their lives. Petrie, Deiters, and Harmison prove that point nd I needed their work to realize that this was a very important topic I couldn’t forget to include when talking about the way we see men in society and how it relates to the way the media portrays athletes to the public.

The second step in the process was to find media examples to support my claims. Writing is a process and writing analytical research in a new pattern was a challenge for me. I decided to do what I know how to do best. Because I am constantly reading articles about the topics important in my discourse community I know a lot of examples about media perpetuating a traditional notion of maleness. I took a prime example of a player I myself know stands for a man whose identity within the sport of football is defined by their ability to play through injury. Pittsburg Steelers Quarterback Ben Roethlisberger embodies what it means to be tough. I used ESPN Staff Writer Jeremy Fowler’s article “The Toughness rep: 5 reasons why Ben Rothlisberger has it.” as an example. Fowler praises Roethlisberger for being able to withstand punishment and fight through injuries. He looks at injury as a challenge that is easily overcome by the “elite” players in the league. Fowler perpetuates that the fact that Roethlisberger is able to till play while injured and not take himself out the game as reason he is so respected around the league instead of shedding light on the disservice Roethlisberger is doing to himself by not seeking treatment. I then turned to the scholarship I had researched within the field and Anderson and Kian’s (2014) work fit perfect with the purpose of the article. Their scholarship was supported by the media example of Fowler. He clearly stated that the fact that Roethlisberger was able to fight through his injuries added to his “legend” as one of the best players in the league and Anderson and Kian stated the reason sports media professional do this is because they themselves believe that the players should not show pain and they glorify the athletes who push through pain such as Rothlisberger.

Next I turned to Rogers’ scholarship on the “pain principle”. I led off with this information to inform my reader of the definition of the pain principle and why it is important to my research. I used an example of CBS New York Writer Jeff Kidal stating in his article that the NFL is a barbaric and gladiator-like sport “where military ethic endures” as a “next man up” attitude is spread around the league. I used the pain principle and information from Rogers’ scholarship that directly correlates with Jeff Kidal’s article. In essence the point I was attempting to get across was the fact that media professionals believe that the sport is such an a aggressive and brutal gladiator-like sport thy tend to dismiss information about concussions and injury and pain and focus on these players who literally are replaced over and over again. This leads to a deceptive view of the NFL to the public who now sees the players who play the sport as replaceable by the next man willing to sacrifice himself for ultimate sporting victory.

I bring up my third and last media example toward the end of my analytical research, stating that in the NFL players themselves also believe that hiding injuries such as concussions is acceptable. I use players like Former Jacksonville Jaguars Running Back Maurice Jones-Drew who stated that if it came to playing or hiding a concussion he would hide it. He stated that taking himself out of the game meant that he wouldn’t be able to provide food for his family and it would devastate him to believe he let his family, coaches, and teammates down. This adds to the notion of traditional masculinity portrayed in sporting media. Jones-Drew looks as the sport as part of his masculine identity. The very things that make him a man in American Society, like putting food on the table, being a provider for his wife and his kids, leading the team to victory and being an example on and off the field lead him to play through his injuries. In the end the players know they may suffer long term damage to their health down the road but essentially they are saying the momentary victory now is worth the years of brain and body damage down the road. Media professionals capture the culture within the league and display it to the public so now we also see that NFL players think this way so now we begin to believe it is acceptable because the players themselves see it acceptable. It all leads back to that cultural understanding of awareness and the fact that as Petrie, Deiters, and Harmison (2013) said, some players perceive injury as overwhelming and others view it in an adaptive manner. Jones-Drew would be an example of a player who views injury as a challenge that can be overcome with just a different state of mind and represents the culture within the NFL as one of its most prominent players in the 21st century.

**Discussion**

After going through the steps of my Analytical Research I began to understand that writing is a recursive process, its constantly changing and as your ideas change, your papers change too. I’ve done so much research I feel confident that I am one of the most knowledgeable student on the sports media’s relation to the NFL concussion crisis. If anyone even attempts to get into a debate with me I can state, all of this work I did and the tons of media examples and scholarship that support my claim. In essence it is the very process of writing this Thesis paper that has made me want to continue with this topic for my Honors Thesis. I know I can delve deeper into this topic and truly discover more about the underlying motivations of the media when it comes to information about injuries and concussions. Much like how this paper was constantly changing, the topic itself of masculinity, football, and media perception is also constantly changing. There are so many examples out in the world that you can take a look at and have a sophisticated dialogue on. I feel it is essential to go through a process like this in order to understand your writing. It will make you feel more confident but also help you in understand more beyond what is stated in your sources or in your scholarship, but your own view and opinion on your topic and why it is valid. If I learned anything from this project, it is that if you take the necessary steps to build a solid research project you will understand the topic more than anyone you know and you can build off of it for years and years to come. I sure hope to as I continue my academic career at Pace University.